

Too Close to Hide

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Too Close to Hide

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Summary

Shane is hiding something that could end his career.

Ilya is the kind of person who doesn't stop until he finds it.

What starts as rivalry turns into fixation.

Because something about Shane doesn't make sense,
his control, his scent, the way he reacts.

And Ilya doesn't like unsolved patterns.

He likes breaking them open.

Even if it breaks Shane with it.

Not instinct. Not luck. Not being an alpha.

Control.

So when he watches Shane play, he sees it immediately, something precise, something careful, something just out of reach.

Something hidden.

And Ilya has never been good at leaving things alone.

Chapter 1

Shane - 15 years old

Shane Hollander dropped into the back corner seat of the human studies classroom, shoulder bumping into his teammates as they packed in around him. Practice had been cancelled *for everyone* and that alone was enough to put the entire room on edge.

The football and lacrosse teams had clustered together across the room, louder, broader, taking up space like they always did. The air felt heavier than usual, too many alphas in one place, restless with no outlet.

Shane slouched lower in his chair, forcing himself still. Not fidgeting took effort.

His fingers twitched once against his thigh before he caught it, pressing his palm flat instead. Under two layers of fabric, the scent patch sat just below his collarbone, slightly too warm against his skin. He could feel it, *always* like something artificial pressed too close to something real.

He didn't touch it. He never touched it in public. Most of the guys just thought he had quirks. The extra layers. The way he didn't shower with the others, when he changed faster than anyone else in the locker room. How he never lingered too close when the room got crowded.

They didn't question it. Not really. He produced on the ice. That was enough.

Shane shifted his attention instead, grounding himself the way he always did. Watching, cataloging. He knew every formation their opponents ran, every weakness, every opening. It gave him something to focus on that wasn't his own body.

He glanced sideways at Jaques, the new kid. Quiet, observant, slipping into the team easier than most transfers ever did.

"I think this is the Omega/Beta lesson," Jaques murmured, voice low, accent still thick. "We had it last year at my old school. When they started letting male omegas enroll... things got complicated."

Shane went still. Not visibly. Not enough for anyone else to notice. But inside, something tightened- sharp and immediate.

"Half the school went crazy," Jaques continued quietly. "They had to start requiring scent patches."

Shane's jaw set just slightly. Marcus snorted from across the row. "You think they'd let an omega in *this* school? Our parents pay for this place because of the sports programs. No way."

“I don’t think any omega would be safe,” Hayden added from beside Shane, casual, certain. “We’re mostly alphas. Strong betas at best.”

Shane didn’t respond.

He didn’t trust his voice to come out neutral.

The room shifted as the coaches walked in, the noise cutting off almost instantly.

“Gentlemen!” one of them called. “Settle down.”

Shane sat up just enough to not draw attention. Coach Mercer stepped forward, expression harder than usual. “In case you haven’t noticed,” he said, voice carrying easily across the room, “one of your classmates wasn’t here today. Dallas Kent will not be returning for his final year.”

A ripple moved through the room.

“It was brought to light that he took advantage of an omega over the summer.”

Silence fell heavier this time. Not confusion. Not really. Something sharper. Shane felt it immediately - like pressure in the air.

Too many alphas reacting at once. The air turned almost bitter-a metallic scent rising from some of his classmates.

“Enough,” the coach snapped before the murmuring could build. “We are taking this seriously. You are all at the peak of your development. This school feeds directly into the scouting circuits. Most of you are alphas, and even betas can take on more aggressive tendencies in environments like this.”

Shane focused on breathing evenly. In. Out. Don’t react.

“We need to make something very clear,” the coach continued. “Omegas are not objects. They are not opportunities. They are people, and they are protected under the law.”

Shane kept his gaze forward, but he could feel it- heat creeping under his skin, subtle but wrong. The patch was holding, but barely. The room was too full. Too charged.

Coach Mercer stepped in beside him.

“The school has a strict code of ethics,” he said, voice lower but sharper. “You are all nearing adulthood. Any suspicion of mistreatment of an omega will cause immediate expulsion. And I will personally ensure that every scout, every team, every league knows exactly why.”

No one spoke.

“An alpha who cannot control his base instincts,” Mercer added, “is not disciplined enough to play at a professional level.”

That landed.

Shane felt it in the shift around him- postures adjusting, tension redirecting.

“Now,” Mercer said, stepping back, “you’re going to watch this video. Pay attention. In the real world, you may encounter someone newly presenting. They may not understand how to manage scent. You may find yourselves in... difficult situations.”

A pause.

“That will never excuse a lack of control.” The lights dimmed slightly. Shane didn’t move. Didn’t breathe too deep. Didn’t reach for the patch. But under the fabric, his skin burned just a little hotter than it should have.

The screen flickered to life, the school crest appearing briefly before fading into a clean, sterile title card:

Understanding Secondary Gender Presentation: Alpha, Beta, Omega

The narrator’s voice was calm, generic. Neutral. The kind of voice that made everything sound simple, even things that weren’t.

“While most individuals are aware of their designation from a young age, some may present later in adolescence. This is known as delayed presentation and requires careful medical and social consideration.”

Shane’s fingers pressed harder into his palm.

On screen, a diagram of the human body appeared- simplified, color-coded. Sections highlighted and faded in sequence.

“Omegas possess adaptive reproductive biology,” the voice continued. “Regardless of external anatomy, all omegas have the potential for gestation. Fertility is closely tied to cyclical hormonal changes commonly referred to as ‘heat.’ Some male omegas only develop a vaginal canal during heats or upon late stage pregnancy. Other-highly fertile omegas have small, permanently present vaginal canals, though they instinctively are not comfortable with usual intercourse with partners who are not their mates.”

A few guys shifted in their seats. Someone muttered something under their breath, cut off quickly when a coach cleared his throat.

The diagram changed.

“This cycle results in increased pheromone production, heightened sensitivity to external stimuli, and a temporary shift in physiological priorities. During this time, omegas may experience reduced physical control and increased vulnerability.”

The word hung there longer than the others. Vulnerability. Shane kept his eyes on the screen, even as heat prickled faintly under his skin. The patch held, but the room felt too full, too close.

Another slide. This one is sharper. “Alphas may experience corresponding behavioral responses when exposed to elevated omega pheromones. These responses can include increased focus, territorial instincts, and decreased impulse regulation.”

A low, uncomfortable sound moved through the room. “However,” the narrator added, voice firming slightly, “these responses do not override personal responsibility.”

The slide shifted again- this time to a list.

Recognizing Signs of Distress or Presentation:

- Sudden changes in body temperature
- Irregular breathing patterns
- Difficulty maintaining coordination
- Noticeable shifts in scent output

Shane forced his breathing to stay even. Don’t react. Don’t think about it.

“In the event of a suspected presentation,” the video continued, “it is critical to maintain distance and notify a qualified authority. Direct engagement may escalate the situation.”

The next line appeared more slowly, as if meant to be read carefully.

Do not attempt to intervene physically.

A pause.

Then “Failure to respect these boundaries may result in serious legal consequences.”

The screen dimmed slightly before transitioning to a final segment, real footage this time. Blurred, anonymous. A hallway. A student being guided away by staff, head down, shoulders tense.

“Proper response ensures the safety of all individuals involved.”

The narrator’s tone softened again, almost reassuring.

“Understanding these biological differences is essential for maintaining a respectful and controlled environment.” The video faded out. The room stayed quiet a second longer than it should have.

Shane didn’t move. But under the layers of fabric, the patch felt like it was burning into his skin.

Another 45 minutes of the coaches talking to the gathered students. Shane counted down every second until they could leave.

When they were dismissed, Shane forced himself to copy the relaxed pace of his friends. They joked on the way to the lockers, Shane quiet but smiling when appropriate. Hiding that he needed his parents immediately. Hiding that he felt like dying inside.

He walked home with Hayden and a few other team members, then leaving the group as they passed side streets.

When he came up on his street, he felt that he could breathe a bit better. His mother would know what to do. She would have answers.

Shane -16 years old

Yuna Hollander waited for her son by the door. At 16 years old, Shane had been her miracle baby. She would do anything for him, hence the secret trip in the middle of the night to drive for 3 hours and get what he needed. They both put on hooded jackets, and had the prize money Shane had won from the shot out competition at his hockey camp.

“Momma?” Shane came down the steps with a small empty backpack and his sunglasses over his head.

“Come on baby. We can talk on the way.”

“I’m sorr-”

“No. Absolutely not. You have nothing to be sorry for, honey.” She gave him a tight hug, holding him until the shivering stopped.

They got into the car and Yuna turned the radio on low just to fill the silence. She looked over at Shane when they were at a red light, noticing his bouncing leg. “You don't have to do this.”

“The exhibition is next week. Scouts are going to be there so I have to make it through. I have to be perfect.”

“Honey-”

“No, mom. I’ve been working towards this my whole life. Omega’s used to play all the time.” They were silent after that. Over the past decade, Omegas had began seeing a shift in public perception-they were deemed weaker, lower than beta females in the social hierarchy.

“Shane, I’ve been reading about the side effects of the blockers. What happens when you're older and want kids? When you retire?”

“I’ll schedule my heats for the off season. Others have done it so I can too. Adam Commark was an Omega and he had a great career and won 2 cups.”

Shane pulled the seatbelt across his chest, the fabric dragging lightly over the patch beneath his shirt. Even through two layers, he could feel it, warm, artificial, like something pressing his body into a shape it didn’t naturally hold.

It had been easier when he was younger. Before his body started pushing back. Now it felt like a constant negotiation, his instincts pressing one way, the chemicals forcing him another.

Yuna frowned but nodded. David and she had tried to educate themselves as soon as Shane was born and they declared that he had a high possibility to be an Omega. A few behaviors growing up solidified their suspicions and so they were determined to protect him as much as possible but still have him follow his dreams.

“Momma, thank you. I know this can't be easy. I know I'm different-”

“You're perfect, understand? Your dad and I love you so much. So very much and we'll support you and help you no matter what.” He smiled at that a bit, and went to squeeze her hand.

After a few hours, Yuna switched to the hockey commentary station and they listened to that in the background until Shane's name came up.

They were comparing him to the Russian prospect that they had flown over. Ilya Rozanov seemed to be in every conversation that Shane was in. The journalists were always talking about the two of them, listing their stats, strengths and differences.

They'd finally meet soon at the Winter Prospect where they would play against each other. He had almost looked him up online, but the stress of his omega puberty coming in had occupied all the time he had that was not on the ice or school.

After that, school became more difficult. He was never one for big crowds when not at the rink. Alphas started coming closer to him, invading his personal space. His last day of school was when a new younger teacher cornered him in the hallway in between classes and tried to kiss him. He kneed the older man and ran to the office. His scent patches were no longer working for some reason and he was pulled from the school to continue classes online.

He finished high school a year early. Without the distractions of blending into the social hierarchy of being a very popular athlete that was getting international notice, lessons were a breeze. He had more time on the ice and he had an easier time socializing when it was with his team.

The sun was rising when they made it to New York. They stopped for breakfast before taking the twisting back roads to a small neighborhood in Brooklyn. They agreed that his mother would wait down the block in the parking lot of a pharmacy while he went into the shabby looking house. He licked his lips nervously. It was a facade-this wasn't exactly legal-birth rates were down all over the world in the past few years, and they were blaming omegas for taking heat restricting medications in order to do exactly what Shane was about to do.

Fights in several countries had begun to break out-especially in Russia and China where unmated omegas were being forced to bond with men and produce as many babies as possible. Whenever that type of news was on, his parents quickly changed the channel. He

wasn't completely naive and while it was rare in Canada, he knew some Omegas had more appeal than most and they sometimes were tricked into mating with an Alpha.

His parents had warned him. Lots of blushing on both sides when they explained sex to him last year. They made sure he wore a bite guard around his neck when possible, he was never alone with men. If his Alpha teammates knew he was an Omega, they never said anything. It was more an overly affectionate family. The Alphas took him under their wings, protecting him on and off the ice and he loved them all like brothers.

When he almost confessed his designation, they collectively waived him off and said it didn't matter if he kept playing like he did and kept being his quirky self. Recently they made more of an effort to make sure they all communicated better through the group chat they had going on since some would be moving on to college and some were expected to be drafted.

He walked to the house and entered through the side door. He walked down the hall and knocked on apartment 4 and waited. An older woman answered-Omega by her scent. "Come in son."

He walked in, slipping off his shoes and taking off his glasses. "No problem finding the place?"

"No ma'am."

"Good. That's good. No come, I have everything here for you."

Shane walked over to the table where packets of pills and scent patches were laid out.

"We have to go over this one more time. These pills, once a day-every day. This will stop your heat from coming. You'll still get your monthlies but not as heavy and they might be more uncomfortable. When you want to have a heat-stop taking them and it'll happen within a day or two. I recommend going through at least one heat a year-it'll help when you decide to stop the suppressants.

The scent patches don't just mask, they neutralize the pheromones so make sure you take them off at night to give your scent glands some time to balance themselves. Make sure you're in a safe space. Try to get single hotel rooms when you're on the road.

When you are sexually active, be careful-when off heat, your body will still try to follow instincts. Be responsible with your partners. An alpha will be desperate for you-

"What do you mean desperate?"

"An omega like you, untouched and looking the way you do?" She tilted her head slightly, studying him in a way that made his skin feel too tight. "Even suppressed, your scent isn't gone. Just quieter. Softer. The kind that pulls instead of pushes."

Shane swallowed. "I thought the patches-

“They help,” she interrupted gently. “But a strong alpha? Close enough?”

She gave a small shrug.

“They’ll notice. Maybe not right away. But your body... it doesn’t forget what it is. And neither will theirs.”

His fingers curled slightly at his sides.

“You just need to be smarter than them.

Technically you can skip heats, but I would highly recommend against it. You have a full years supply here and that will get you by unless you miss a dose or forget a patch. Replace the patches every 24 hours.”

“Any more questions?”

Shane shook his head and opened the duffel bag, pulled out the twelve thousand dollars and laying them on the table, “You want to count it?”

She gave him a warm smile. “No, you have an honest face.”

He nodded and began putting the pills in and patches in his bag. She handed him the instructions written out in a booklet. “If you have any questions, please use this burner phone. The website changes all the time and this is a safe connection.”

He took the small flip phone and they said goodbye. Shane put up his hoodie and the sunglasses as he was leaving the building and walked for two minutes to the pharmacy. He sent her a text from his regular cell and waited in the car. A few minutes later, she came out with a small bag.

They made small talk during the drive home. They spoke about Shane’s stats, who to watch out for during the next conference. They stopped for lunch but he only let himself have a small salad with some grilled chicken.

“You know, maybe you should skip next week. Just while your body gets used to the medication?”

“No. Scouts will be there. I want to go.”

“You’ll need to learn how to be around the Russians. I heard its harder to-”

“I know mom. I have to act like them. Alex and Joey will have my back so I don’t get into the boards too much so I’m covered in that respect.”

“Have you really thought this through?”

“Mom-hockey is above everything. This is what I was meant to do. Or what-do you want me to just have some random man that thinks I smell good just come and take me away to pop out babies left and right?”

He was slightly horrified when his mom inhaled and turned her head slightly. “Mom, I’m sorry. It’s just-”

“I know, sweetheart. I just want you safe. If I could trade places with you over this omega thing I would in a heart beat.”

They held hands for a minute before Shane broke the ice and started talking again, asking for help on some homework that he had.

Dinner that night was quiet. David, Shane’s father had mentioned seeing a highlight of Russia’s junior team and that the captain was intense. Shane knew it was Rozanov without having to hear the name. He tuned out the rest of the conversation and focused on trying to eat more of his dinner. He had to hit another 200 calories before bedtime, but he was struggling. His mother had used cream-which normally he would completely refuse to eat but she had put forth the effort to make a comforting meal so he would try to eat it.

Once he managed to excuse himself to his bedroom, he pulled out his laptop to do some of his research paper but instead the urge to research Ilya Rozanov wouldn't be ignored. He felt his face warm as he looked at pictures of the Russian-a gorgeous but stern face. Dark blonde curls, beautiful lips. Shane was fascinated. The curiosity only increased when he watched him play.

Ilya Rozanov was an amazing athlete. He was surprisingly graceful for someone as large as he was. Shane had always had to use speed to avoid getting slammed into the boards, but Ilya seemed to go out of his way to fight. When he aimed for the net, it looked like he didn't have a strategy. Shane had the habit of analyzing all the shots, had memorized what the goalie usually tried to cover first and exploited the hole in the defense.

When he found some interviews, he watched them in a loop-not understanding anything he said since it was all in Russian. He found and translated articles, watched game reels...it was 4 in the morning when he finally forced himself to close the laptop screen. Shane felt a strange warmth in his stomach and he went to his bathroom to splash cold water on his face.

Rozanov was an amazing hockey player-probably as good as he was. His checks were brutal but all clean. He was quick to antagonize the opposing team but his talent was real. Shane was fascinated. There was something that hadn't allowed him to look away - it wasn't often that he was impressed by another player around his age.

He did his nightly routine and carefully laid out the medication in a straight and neat line. After washing his face and brushing his teeth, he got ready for bed, trying his best to ignore the two new features staring back from the reflection-a faint blush making his freckles stand out and the almost invisible scent patch right at the dip of his collar bone.

He put his glasses on to do some reading but couldn't focus. He ran over his mental list of what needed to be done for the next few days and over the defense line of his opposing teams. Russia was the 2nd match. America the first, but they had beaten the same team last week without a problem so he didn't worry.

He closed his eyes, willing his body to relax. He went through his mental list repeatedly until he felt himself start to drift off. He lay on his back, staring at the ceiling.

The room was quiet. Too quiet.

He shifted once under the covers, then stilled again immediately, forcing himself not to move a second time. The sheets felt wrong, too warm where they pressed against his legs, too tight across his chest. He exhaled slowly, deliberately, counting the seconds the way he always did.

One. Two. Three. His hand drifted up before he could stop it, hovering just above his collarbone.

The patch.

He didn't touch it.

He knew exactly where it was without needing to feel it- the slight pull of adhesive, the faint warmth underneath, the way his skin reacted differently there than anywhere else.

He dropped his hand back to the mattress. It was fine. Everything was working. It had to be. He turned his head slightly, eyes tracking the faint line of light under his door. Tomorrow he would take the first pill. One a day. Every day. Simple. He liked simple things. Simple meant predictable. Predictable meant control.

But the instructions hadn't been simple.

Not really.

Take the pill. Replace the patch every twenty-four hours. Remove it at night. Be in a safe place. Safe place. Shane swallowed. What counted as safe? His room was safe. The rink - usually safe. The locker room... less so. Hotels weren't safe. Buses definitely weren't safe. He squeezed his eyes shut briefly.

Too many variables.

His brain started organizing anyway, whether he wanted it to or not. Schedule.

Morning: pill. Same time every day. Patch: replace before practice. Not after, but before. Less risk. Night: remove patch only if door is locked. Always lock the door. Check twice. No-three times.

He exhaled again, slower this time. That was manageable. But then-

What if he forgot? The thought hit fast and sharp. Not dramatic. Just immediate. What if he missed a pill? What if he didn't notice? What if something changed and he didn't understand it in time?

His fingers curled slightly into the sheets. He didn't always notice things right away. Not like other people did.

Sometimes it took him longer to realize something was wrong -longer to connect what he was feeling to what it meant. That was fine most of the time. On the ice, it didn't matter. He could read plays, anticipate movement, calculate angles faster than anyone. But this-

This wasn't structured. There were no clear patterns. No playbook to memorize.

He rolled onto his side, pulling the blanket tighter around himself. The warmth settled around him, grounding. He tried to map it out again. If something feels off: check patch. If still off: check the timing of pill. If still off: isolate. Isolation was easy. He was good at that.

But what if it wasn't enough? The question sat heavier. What if he didn't realize something was wrong until someone else did? Until an alpha noticed. Until-

He stopped the thought there. Didn't finish it. Didn't let himself. His breathing had gone uneven again. Shane pressed his palm flat against his sternum, just below the patch, feeling the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. It was fine. Still steady. Still normal. He focused on that instead.

His mom's voice echoed faintly in his head. *You're perfect, understand?* He didn't feel perfect. He felt... complicated. Like too many systems running at once, and none of them communicating properly.

He turned onto his back again, staring at the ceiling. He could do this. He would do this. He just needed rules. Clear ones. Ones he could follow.

After a long moment, he reached over to his nightstand, grabbed a notebook, and clicked his pen open. If he wrote it down, it would be easier. Everything was easier when it was written down.

Daily Control:

- Pill – same time every morning
- Patch – replace every 24 hours (set alarm)
- Remove patch - only in locked room
- Check door (x3)

Warning Signs:

- Heat (body temperature)
- Restlessness
- Difficulty focusing
- Scent? (hard to tell -monitor reactions from others)

If something feels wrong:

1. Check patch
2. Check timing
3. Isolate immediately

He stared at the list for a long time. Adjusted one word. Then another. Neater. Clearer. Better. The tension in his chest eased- just slightly. Enough.

He set the notebook back down, turned off the light, and lay still again. This time, when he closed his eyes, the thoughts didn't spiral as quickly. They lined up. Organized. Contained.

Just before sleep finally pulled him under, one thought slipped through anyway. Uninvited. Unstructured.

What if control isn't enough?

And, just behind it- Ilya Rozanov's face. Sharp. Focused. Watching. Shane's fingers tightened once against the blanket. Then went still.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Hi Ilya-people may dislike you at first because I plan on making you some crazy sh!t but they'll grow to love you, like I love you...

Chapter Notes

Y'all - thank you so much for the reviews and kudos! I had to get this out-its not beta read so some tweaks will be made but I hope you enjoy. Next chapter will be up in a couple days.

Ilya stood in the penalty box watching his team beat the Americans. It wasn't really a hard thing to do. Stupid Americans thinking that they were good at all sports—it was fun beating them. He loved the faces of anger on other alphas' faces when they realized that the win would be out of their reach.

After his three minutes were up, he skated right toward center ice and took possession of the puck with an ease that made him wish he had some real competition. The past few games were like this.

He was only here because this series led directly to the NHL. Scouts had been after him since juniors and had gone to his games back home in Russia. After he saw attention from the other countries, he started teaching himself English with his friend Svetlana. His English was getting pretty good if the conversation wasn't too deep and he could focus on one person at a time, but if he wanted to get out of Russia, he needed to be the best here.

Reporters were comparing him to a member of the Canadian team, Shane Hollander. That name kept popping up over the course of the past year or two. Ilya couldn't get a good read on the boy. He wasn't photographed much. His team were a bit protective of him and there were no pictures online without his helmet.

In a few days, Ilya would come head to head with him for the first time. He wanted to win. He wanted to face off against this Hollander and see if the hype was real. If the precision translated under pressure. If the calm held when someone pushed back. Most players broke eventually. They all did.

The whistle blew and play resumed. Ilya didn't rush. He never rushed. He let the puck move once, twice, watched the spacing open exactly where he expected it to. When it came back to him, he took it clean, cutting through center with controlled speed. Not flashy. Not wasted. Efficient.

The American defenseman stepped up too early. Mistake. Ilya shifted his weight just enough to throw him off balance, shoulder dipping, skates carving a sharp edge into the ice. The man tried to recover, reaching. Too slow. Always too slow.

Ilya slipped past him, closing the distance to the net. The goalie squared up, tense, already overthinking. Good. He didn't aim where the opening was. He aimed where it would be, then adjusted. The puck snapped into the net with a clean, decisive crack.

The crowd roared, but it barely registered. Ilya was already turning away, exhaling through his nose, pulse steadying just as quickly as it had risen. Routine.

Another hit came, late and unnecessary. He expected it. He always did. This time he didn't move out of the way. The impact drove into his shoulder, sharp and solid. He absorbed it, planted, then turned, eyes locking on the American immediately. Anger. Frustration. Predictable.

"Lucky," the man muttered.

Ilya tilted his head slightly, studying him. His English wasn't perfect, but it didn't need to be. "Not luck," he said evenly. "You are just not good."

That did it.

Gloves dropped.

The fight was fast. It always was. Ilya didn't swing wildly. Didn't waste energy. He stepped in close, controlling distance, landing two clean hits before the other player even found his footing. One to stagger. One to finish. The American hit the ice hard.

The whistle shrieked. Hands grabbed at Ilya, pulling him back, separating them. He didn't resist. Didn't need to. He'd already won.

Back in the penalty box, he rolled his shoulder once, testing the joint. Fine. Everything was fine.

Across the ice, the Americans were louder now, frustrated, sloppy, pushing harder than they should. They'd already lost. They just didn't know how to stop trying.

Ilya leaned back against the glass, gaze drifting lazily over the rink. This was the problem. No one here was enough.

They relied on size. On instinct. On being alphas. Weak.

He had built himself differently. Early mornings. Extra drills. Endless repetition until movement became something sharper than instinct, something controlled. Predictable.

Reliable.

That was the only thing you could trust.

The game ended exactly how it should have. Russia on top. Again.

After, the reporters swarmed like they always did. Flashes. Questions. Too many voices at once. Ilya filtered them automatically, focusing on one at a time, the way he'd taught himself.

"Rozanov! Your performance tonight-"

"We play well," he said.

"You've been compared to Canadian prospect Shane Hollander-"

There it was again. That name. Ilya's attention sharpened slightly, though his expression didn't change. "Is good player," he said. "We see soon."

He moved on before they could ask more. No reason to waste time.

Later, in the locker room, the noise pressed in, loud, humid, thick with overlapping scents and adrenaline. Teammates shouted, laughed, celebrated. Ilya ignored it. He always ignored it.

It wasn't that he didn't feel it. He did. The pull. The pressure. The sharp edge under his skin when too many alphas crowded too close. But he didn't let it decide anything for him.

That was the difference. By the time he stepped out into the hallway, the noise had faded behind him. Quieter here. Better. His coach was waiting. Of course he was.

"Tomorrow," Petrov said in Russian, handing him a tablet, "you leave for Canada."

"I know."

"Watch this."

Ilya took the tablet without question and pressed play. The footage loaded, grainy at first, then clearing. A game. Fast. Clean. He saw him immediately.

Shane Hollander.

Not because he stood out in the usual way. Not because he was louder, stronger, or more aggressive. Because he wasn't. He moved differently. Ilya leaned forward slightly. Hollander didn't force plays. He didn't chase. He didn't collide unless he had to. He calculated.

Every movement had purpose. Every shift in position created something. Ilya watched one sequence twice. Then again. *There*.

A gap opened, small, barely there. Hollander moved into it before it fully formed. Not instinct. Not reaction. Prediction. Ilya's eyes narrowed just slightly. Interesting.

"Again," Petrov said.

Ilya didn't argue. He replayed it, slower this time. And then he noticed something else. Subtle. Hollander avoided contact. Not fear. Not weakness. Intentional. Always just outside reach.

Ilya leaned back, gaze still fixed on the screen. Something about it didn't fit. Not wrong. Just incomplete.

Like there was something missing from the pattern. Or something hidden inside it. He couldn't name it yet. But he would. He always did.

"Canada," Petrov said. "You face him there."

Ilya handed the tablet back. "Good," he said. And this time he meant it. Because for the first time in a long time, he might actually have to try. And somewhere under that thought, quieter, harder to reach, something else settled in. Not excitement. Not curiosity. Recognition. Even if he didn't understand why yet.

The apartment was dark when he got home.

Not quiet. Never quiet.

The television murmured from the other room, low and constant, a voice talking about nothing that mattered. A bottle knocked lightly against glass somewhere, the sound sharp in the stillness.

Ilya slipped his shoes off without turning on the lights. He knew the layout by memory, could walk it in the dark without thinking. It was easier that way.

Less chance of being noticed.

He moved down the hallway, shoulders tight, gaze forward, not looking into the living room as he passed. He didn't need to see to know his father was there.

"You're late," came the voice anyway, rough, already irritated.

Practice had run long. Interviews after. Travel logistics. None of it mattered.

"You think you are too important now?" his father continued. "Big player. Big money. You forget who pays for this apartment?"

Ilya stopped. Just for a second. His jaw tightened, but his expression didn't change.

"I pay," he said evenly.

A pause.

The television clicked louder.

"Watch how you speak," his father snapped, but there was something thinner underneath it now. Not anger. Not fully. Something closer to dependence.

Ilya didn't answer. There was no point. There was never any point. He kept walking, closing his bedroom door behind him with quiet precision. The lock clicked.

Only then did his shoulders drop—barely. His room was small. Half clean, half a chaotic mess.. Everything in its place for his hockey equipment- that was lined neatly along the wall, skates polished, sticks taped and ready. No clutter. No distractions when it came to his hockey things. Everything else no one cared about.

Control. Always control. He sat on the edge of his bed for a moment, staring at nothing.

The silence pressed in differently here. Not heavy. Just empty. His phone buzzed once in his hand.

Svetlana.

He unlocked it immediately.

You alive? she had written.

He exhaled through his nose, something in his chest loosening just slightly.

Да. Won.

Of course you did. Any fights?

He looked down at his knuckles, already bruising slightly.

Да..

A pause.

Then:

You're going to get yourself killed one day.

He huffed quietly, the closest thing to a laugh.

Not today.

She sent a typing bubble. Stopped. Started again.

You leave tomorrow?

Yes.

Canada.

Another pause.

That Hollander boy will be there.

Ilya's gaze flicked briefly to the tablet still sitting on his desk.

I know.

Is he good?

Ilya leaned back slightly, considering.

Good. Different.

Typing bubble again.

Careful, Ilya.

He stared at that message a second longer than the others.

Why?

Because you only look twice at things that matter.

His jaw tightened faintly.

He didn't respond to that.

Instead, he set the phone down on the bed beside him and leaned forward, elbows on his knees, hands clasped loosely together. The apartment creaked faintly outside his door. The television still murmured. His father's presence pressed through the walls, even without words.

Ilya focused on his breathing.

Slow.

Controlled.

Predictable.

Just like everything else.

It had to be.

Because if it wasn't-

There was nothing holding anything together.

He reached for the tablet again without thinking and replayed the footage.

Hollander moved across the screen, precise, controlled, always just out of reach.

Ilya watched him longer this time. Not analyzing the play. Not the structure. Something else. Something harder to define. His eyes narrowed slightly. Interesting. For the first time in a

long time, something had caught his attention and refused to let go.

He didn't like that. But he wasn't going to ignore it either. He never ignored patterns. Even the ones he didn't understand yet. Especially those. Tomorrow, he would see him in person. And then he would figure it out. Whatever it was.

Ilya woke up, looking around his room to what he might have missed while packing. American or Canadian teams would supply anything he needed but when he thought about personal items, there was not much other than his clothes. All his English lessons were digital or by video. The only things he really cared about was his mother's cross and an old photo album. He wore one, the other was already packed in his duffle bag.

He dressed carefully. It was freezing temperatures outside but he hated looking sloppy. With the layers and his good coat and toque on, he picked up his bag and went out to the hall.

His father's wife, Polina was already in the kitchen. She was a quiet thing, An Omega that had thought she could be happy after her first mate passed in an accident. His father had sucked the life out of the woman of course. She had tried to show kindness to the two orphaned boys at first, but Ilya couldn't tolerate the thought of having another woman try to mother him.

She looked up from the stove when she heard him by the door. Slowly she placed a covered bundle. "Blini's. I thought you might want something warm for your journey." she said quietly in Russian.

"Спасибо вам" He took it off the table and nodded his goodbye.

He left the apartment without seeing his father or brother. It was for the best. The next time he saw his father would be with offers from the NHL. He would not stay and play for Russia unless forced, and his father had enough friends to avoid that at least.

His coach was picking him up and together they had planned to go over strategy. His name was in front of many of the major decision makers for the leagues and there was no real doubt that he would be drafted. Realistically he wanted to be on a newer team-where he can have a say on who he played with and make a bigger impact. But he also would go for an established team who could afford him.

That way he could try to make as much money as possible for the first part of his career and then follow where his gut would take him.

He listened to the American podcasts that he could follow, frowning because his accent was still very strong and some of the words did not make sense. He would be playing on a team with his Russian friends, but he wanted to understand what was being said about them without a translator flattening the information.

He watched more film as the plane took off, his coach letting him focus on that while he scolded one of the goaltenders. He found himself watching Hollander play. There was definitely something different on the way he moved. When he took shots, it was almost snakelike.

He was good-very good. He had tried to find some interview or something that will show more of his face-Ilya was of the thought that you could tell a lot from someones eyes-but no luck. A grainy picture from a newspaper article was not clear and so he focused on the plays and tried to find the weaker points to exploit. There had to be something. There always was.

The plane landed smoothly, the shift in pressure barely noticeable. Ilya was already awake, already focused, already moving before most of the others had unbuckled their seatbelts.

Cold air hit him the moment he stepped outside, sharper than back home, cleaner. It bit through the layers just enough to be noticeable, just enough to wake him fully. Good.

The bus waiting for them was exactly what he expected. Black. Polished. Already running. Another small reminder that they wanted the team -but mostly him, comfortable. Wanted him to be impressed. Wanted him choosing them before the draft was even official. He didn't comment on it. He simply got in.

The arena came into view not long after. Large. Bright. Already alive with movement despite the early hour. Ilya didn't wait. The moment the bus stopped, he was out, bag slung over his shoulder, already moving toward the entrance. Inside, the air shifted immediately. Colder. Familiar. Ice. He paused just long enough to orient himself, then headed up instead of down. Not locker rooms. Not yet. He wanted to see.

The upper seats were mostly empty, scattered staff, a few early players warming up below. Perfect. Ilya moved silently along the row, choosing a spot high enough to see everything clearly. Then he stopped. There.

Shane Hollander.

He knew it immediately. Not by face. Not by jersey. By movement. Hollander cut across the ice in a clean line, edges sharp, body low, completely balanced. Not rushing. Never rushing.

Ilya leaned forward slightly, forearms resting against his knees. Watching. The puck moved toward him. Hollander adjusted before it reached him. Already where it needed to be. Again.

A defenseman stepped in. Closer this time. More aggressive.

Hollander slipped past him without contact. Not speed alone. Timing. Always timing.

Ilya's gaze sharpened. *Find it*. Where does it break?

He watched another sequence. Then another. Nothing. No hesitation. No wasted movement. No panic. Annoying.

Ilya leaned back slightly, jaw tightening just enough to be noticeable. There should be something. A flaw. A delay. A pattern that could be forced into a mistake.

But from up here- he couldn't see enough. The helmet stayed on. The distance was too far. The details he needed- micro-adjustments, reactions, and expressions were missing. Incomplete.

Ilya exhaled slowly through his nose, irritation settling low and steady. Not enough.

He stood abruptly, decision already made. If he couldn't see what he needed from here, he would find another way. The cold hit him again as he stepped outside, sharper this time after the warmth of the arena. He welcomed it. Grounding. He reached into his pocket, pulling out a cigarette and lighter.

Chapter 3: Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

First meeting with our two love birds! After this chapter we start deviating from cannon. I'm inserting a warning-my Ilya is a bit obsessed. I promise this will end with a HEA but they'll be going through it.

Chapter Notes

Very special thank you to my beta reader- LordRandalll for all the help to make this story make more sense.

The arena was loud, not just noise, but pressure and expectation were pressing in from every side.

Team Canada had already won their first match against Sweden earlier that day. The opposing team had pushed hard in the second period with tight neutral zone pressure and aggressive forechecking, forcing rushed exits and broken entries, but Shane had adjusted. He had slowed the pace, forced cleaner breakouts, and created controlled entries instead of forcing plays through traffic. It had been a good win. A necessary one.

After the game, Shane had managed to dodge spending too long in the locker room with his celebrating team when the Canadian coach asked him to come speak to some local reporters. He took the chance, knowing that if he had a brief ten-minute conversation, the showers would most likely be done when he came back so he would be able to shower in peace. The name Ilya Rozanov came up again.

A Québécois reporter asked in French whether he was nervous or looking forward to playing against his most direct competitor. Shane understood the intention enough to catch the angle they were trying to get. He smiled, answered smoothly, and redirected the conversation back to the team's performance, talking about zone entries, defensive structure, and how they had handled Sweden's pressure.

He wondered, briefly, if Rozanov was getting the same questions.

After fifteen minutes of answering, his mother stepped in and pulled him away from the reporters.

"Go, you've got this."

Shane nodded and slipped past her quickly.

The locker room was mostly empty when he entered. Steam still hung in the air, gear half-packed, the noise fading into something manageable.

Good.

He moved slower than usual, deliberately unhurried as he pulled out his change of clothes. He checked his phone. The timer showed that he had almost five more hours until he needed to change the scent patch and take the next round of his pills.

Still within control.

He showered fast, under five minutes, like he had trained himself to do. The farthest stall from the door, back to the wall, his movements efficient and controlled. No lingering. No unnecessary exposure. In and out. Safe.

At the locker mirrors, he went through his skincare routine, precise and practiced. The one omega-coded habit he allowed himself. No one had questioned it yet. He dressed in Team Canada's black and red sweats and shoved his damp hair under a beanie, fingers lingering just long enough to make sure everything felt right. Normal.

He made his way back out to the rink just as Russia took the ice against Germany.

Shane settled into his seat, posture relaxing while his focus sharpened. Rozanov stood out immediately. Not just size, but presence.

He was a powerful skater. Where Shane relied on speed, edge work, and angles, Rozanov drove straight through plays. Heavy strides, strong crossovers, no hesitation at the blue line. He pushed defenders back simply by entering the zone, forcing collapse and creating space without needing to search for it.

But it wasn't just brute force. Shane leaned forward slightly, observing how Rozanov adjusted mid-stride, subtle but precise. He read pressure quickly, not as structured as Shane's own game but effective in a way that forced reaction instead of anticipation. Dangerously effective.

A German defenseman stepped up too late. Rozanov did not go around him. He went through him. The hit echoed. Shane's fingers curled slightly against his sleeve. That would not work against him.

He tracked the next play. Rozanov carried the puck deeper, drawing two defenders before slipping a wide pass. It looked careless for a second, but it connected. Intentional. Shane's mind mapped it immediately.

Rozanov was a violent player, not because he thrived on violence, but because he had no qualms about entering in another player's space, dominating it. He had a way of forcing a reaction out of his opponents and not just through his chirping. He was able to put pressure on other players instead of anticipating it and turning it against them like Shane did.

Different. Not wrong. Opposite.

Rozanov ended up in the penalty box twice in the last period, once for a late hit and once for roughing after the whistle. He antagonized players as they passed him, building frustration in ways that had nothing to do with the puck. Shane found himself watching him even when the play moved elsewhere. That was unusual.

After the game, he leaned toward his mother and talked about strategy.

“If we force him wide early, he’ll push harder inside. We collapse late instead. Cut off his second move. He’ll create pressure anyway,” she said.

“Yeah.”

Later, needing space, he excused himself. Shane stepped outside into the cold air. The wind carried a scent with it. Leather. Something else. Familiar. He followed it without thinking.

Around the corner stood Ilya Rozanov, trying to light a cigarette.

Shane stopped. Watching. Listening to the clicks of the lighter. Then forced himself forward.

“Ilya Rozanov? Hi. I’m Shane Hollander. I just wanted to introduce myself. You’re an amazing player.”

Ilya

He had freckles. Dotted all along his cheekbones and nose. Ilya had the sudden urge to pull him close and count them.

The deep brown eyes waiting for a response grew wary and he realized that Hollander had been holding his hand out.

He put the cigarette back in his mouth and shook his hand briskly.

Hollander's hand was soft and smooth, aside from a tiny callous on the knuckle of his pinky. Ilya pulled away before he could drag the hand closer to examine the skin there.

For some reason couldn’t look away from him, while Hollander seemed like he was having trouble meeting his eyes back. “I don't think smoking is allowed here.”

Ilya almost smiled. He watched as the other player motioned as if holding a cigarette - the

gesture was just so cute. Hollander rambled again for a few seconds before offering his hand to shake again.

Ilya tried to find a way to keep him there, but fell short. This whole interaction had left him feeling out of his depth. “You will not be so nice when we beat you.” He managed to call out before Hollander turned away, trying to return to familiar grounds. The smile he received back made him take even more notice of the pretty curve of Hollander’s full lips, and he wondered what he’d do if Ilya shoved him against the brick wall and nuzzled that small visible patch of skin on his neck.

“That’s not happening,” Shane said, smiling back before walking away.

Ilya watched him go, something unsettled in his chest. The scent lingered faintly.

Honeysuckle. Muted, not right. Probably nothing.

Still, he wanted more.

The next game came fast.

Canada versus Russia. This one mattered.

Shane stepped onto the ice, shoulders rolling once as the cold hit him. Across from him stood Ilya again, closer now, heavier in presence.

The puck dropped.

Shane moved first, clean and fast, but Ilya drove forward instead of contesting the pull, closing space immediately. The contact came sharp and controlled.

Too close. Ilya felt it again. Not the play. Him. Something faint, buried. He marked it.

The game stayed tight through the first period. Shane controlled pace, cutting off passing lanes, intercepting plays, setting up clean shots. Close.

Russia answered with pressure. Rozanov drove the play, pulling the defenders in.

Late in the first period, Shane had managed to adjust to his play and won a clean faceoff. Ilya grinned. Better than expected. The second period was faster. Rozanov hit him along the boards, hard but clean. Shane twisted to absorb it. Ilya did not pull away immediately.

He held him there just long enough, testing, feeling the tension, the controlled stillness. There it was again. The faint smell.

He leaned in slightly, close enough to feel the shift in Shane's breathing.

Then he met his eyes. And smiled. Small. Controlled. Then he skated away.

Shane adjusted after that, cutting angles tighter, avoiding contact.

Too careful. Ilya noticed. The third period opened with a tie. The puck dropped between them again. They moved at the same time. The sticks locked for too long. The puck slipped loose. Russia recovered it. Ilya drove forward, cutting through the neutral zone, forcing space open through pressure alone. Shane tracked back, read the play, and moved to intercept him. He was half a second late. Ilya adjusted. Shot. Goal. The arena exploded.

Ilya turned, just once, looking back at Shane before skating away.

The final buzzer came soon after. Russia won. By a single goal.

Shane stood still at center ice. Half a second. Not a complete failure. But not enough to win.

They lined up while the Russian national anthem played to bump fists with the Russian line. When they crossed paths, Ilya bent down slightly and whispered "See you at the draft."

In the locker room, the silence felt heavier. Too slow. Too careful. Too weak. The thoughts came sharp. Because you are an omega. He forced himself through his routine, stripping gear, breathing steady. No one said anything.

It did not matter. He knew. He had held back. And it had cost them. Not good enough. Next time, there would not be a second place.

There could not be.

The win felt settled before the final buzzer. Not guaranteed, but close enough that Ilya didn't need to chase it.

When the horn sounded, his teammates surged forward, loud and immediate. Sticks tapped the ice, bodies collided, voices rose in celebration. Ilya slowed instead, pulling off his helmet

as he turned away from the net.

He looked back once. Hollander stood at center ice, still for a second longer than anyone else. Ilya held the image for a moment, then dropped it.

Not important now. The locker room was loud in a way he didn't need. They were celebrating. They had earned it. But Ilya had already moved on. He stripped out of his gear with practiced efficiency, ignoring the noise around him. His hands worked automatically, undoing straps, pulling off pads, wiping sweat from his neck.

"How did you make that goal?" one of his teammates said.

Ilya shrugged. "Was open." That was enough for them.

The media waited outside. They always did. Lights flashed the second he stepped into view, voices overlapping in English that came too fast when they talked over each other. He picked one. Always one.

"Mr. Rozanov, can you talk about that final play?"

"Defense was late," he said. "I take space." Simple. Done.

Another voice cut in. "You've been compared a lot to Shane Hollander. Thoughts on that matchup?"

Ilya didn't look at the reporter this time.

"Good player," he said. "But we still win." He stepped away before they could follow up.

No reason to stay.

The team went out that night. They always did after a win. The club was crowded, loud enough that conversation didn't matter. Music filled the space, heavy and constant, making everything feel slower than it actually was.

Men and women came to him, they always did. It didn't take long to spot one for the night.

She approached without hesitation, confident in the way people were when they already knew how the night would end. Brown hair. Brown eyes. He noticed that first. Then the rest. Pretty. Easy. He let her talk, nodding when necessary, answering just enough to keep her there. She leaned in closer, hand brushing his arm, testing space the same way he did on the ice. Predictable. He let it happen.

Later, back at the hotel, it was the same as always. No lingering. He didn't stay awake after. Didn't ask questions. Didn't care about answers. When she left, the room felt quieter than it should have. Ilya sat on the edge of the bed for a second, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck. Something about it hadn't landed the way it usually did.

He knew why. He just didn't like it.

His phone buzzed. Unknown number. He answered.

“Rozanov, this is Carter Jameson from the Boston Bears. We'd like to invite you to come see the facilities while you're in North America. Meet the staff, talk through options.”

Ilya leaned back slightly, gaze drifting toward the window.

Boston.

That was one of the teams that could afford him.

“We will see,” he said. Not a yes. Not a no.

Enough to keep them interested. Another call came in before he even set the phone down. Different team. He ignored it. Instead, he opened his messages.

Svetlana.

I: You awake?

S: Always.

S: You win?

I: Да.

S: And?

I: I need something. Information.

S: On who?

I: Hollander. Shane Hollander.

S: You're serious?

I: Yes.

S: What kind of information?

I: Everything.

S: I might know someone. Private. Not cheap.

I: Do it.

S: You don't even know what you're looking for.

Ilya looked down at his hand, flexing his fingers once. He thought about the boards. The contact. The moment that didn't match the rest.

I: I will know when I see it.

S: You're getting obsessive.

He locked the phone without responding. The room was quiet again. Too quiet. Ilya stood, moving to the window. The city lights stretched out below, unfamiliar but not uncomfortable. Temporary. Everything here was temporary.

Except -

He stopped that thought before it finished.

Hollander's movement was replayed once, clean and precise. Too precise. There was something missing. Ilya exhaled slowly, pressing his hand briefly against the glass. He would figure it out. Next time, he wouldn't waste it watching from a distance. He would get close.

And this time he wouldn't let him slip away.

Chapter 4: Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

After this we're straying from cannon. Please remember that this will be HEA-but I like crazy obsessive men so Ilya will be...intense starting on chapter 6.

Chapter 5 is done, will probably post it tomorrow or the day after if you all like this chapter.

The lights were brighter than they needed to be.

Shane stood still anyway, shoulders squared, posture easy in a way that took effort to maintain. Cameras flashed in quick bursts while voices overlapped, reporters calling out questions that blurred together until they became noise more than anything else. First and second. That was the headline. It should have felt like a win, something worth holding onto, but it didn't settle that way in his chest.

"Shane, one more here."

He turned automatically, the smile already in place before he faced them. Polished. Practiced. The good Canadian poster boy they wanted him to be. It came easily enough after years of repetition, even when it didn't feel real.

"Can we get both of you together?"

He stepped closer before he could think about it. Ilya was already at the center of the photos, another Alpha—the third overall pick—positioned confidently at his other side. Shane slipped into place beside them, close enough that he could feel him without actually touching him. It wasn't scent, not in a room this crowded. It was something else entirely. Presence. Heavy and steady in a way that made him more aware of his own breathing.

"Top two picks. How does it feel going one and two?"

Shane didn't look at him.

"It's an incredible opportunity," he said smoothly. "There's a lot of talent in this class. I'm just excited to get started."

It was safe. Polite. Exactly what they wanted to hear.

Ilya spoke next, his voice lower, accented but clear. "We will see on ice."

A few reporters laughed, pleased with the answer. Shane didn't. He glanced over despite himself, and immediately regretted it. Ilya was already watching him, not the cameras, not

the crowd. Just him.

Shane held the smile a second longer than necessary before forcing himself to look away.

“Perfect, thank you.”

The moment broke as quickly as it had formed. Shane stepped back immediately, the air feeling easier to breathe with even a small amount of distance between them.

“Are you okay?” Yuna asked quietly, already guiding him away. “Good. Come on.”

The reception was louder, less controlled. Executives, scouts, and coaches moved through the room like it belonged to them, conversations overlapping in low, practiced tones. Deals were being shaped behind polite smiles, expectations set without ever being said outright.

“We’re very excited about Montreal,” Yuna said smoothly as she introduced him again.

Hands were shaken. Names exchanged. Shane responded easily, falling into the language he knew best. Systems, pace, transition. Hockey made sense. The structure of it, the predictability, the way everything could be broken down and rebuilt—that was where he was comfortable.

But his attention drifted anyway.

Across the room.

Ilya stood with his father, posture unchanged at first glance, but there was tension there if you knew where to look. It sat in his shoulders, in the stillness that felt too controlled to be relaxed.

“You stand like you’ve already done something,” his father said in Russian, voice low but sharp. “This is only the beginning.”

Ilya didn’t react.

“You get lazy,” the man continued. “You enjoy too much. That is when you lose everything.”

“He earned this,” another voice cut in, calm but firm.

His coach.

“If you’ve watched him play, you’d know lazy is not a word that applies.”

There was a pause, the tension shifting just slightly before his father turned away. Ilya didn’t move. His gaze lifted instead, scanning the room until it landed on Shane.

Shane looked away first.

He couldn't sleep.

The hotel room was too quiet, too still, and his thoughts refused to settle into anything manageable. After twenty minutes of lying there, staring at the ceiling and tracking his breathing, he gave up. There was no point forcing it.

Routine.

That had always helped.

He got out of bed and checked the time before reaching for his bag. The scent patch needed to be replaced anyway. He peeled it off carefully and pressed a new one into place with practiced precision, fingers lingering just long enough to make sure it held. The pills came next, swallowed without hesitation.

He couldn't change where he had been drafted.

But this—this was something he could control.

The gym would be empty at this hour. That was the point.

He pulled his hoodie up and kept his head down as he moved through the lobby. A few members of the press lingered, but no one stopped him. No one looked too closely.

Good.

The gym was dim and quiet when he stepped inside. No music. No voices. Just the low hum of the machines waiting to be used.

Exactly what he needed.

Shane moved straight to the bikes, setting the resistance high before starting immediately. The rhythm came quickly, steady and controlled, his breathing falling into something predictable as his legs pushed harder with each rotation.

For a few minutes, it worked.

Until the door opened.

“Couldn't sleep?”

Shane didn't stop. He pulled one earbud out and glanced over.

“Something like that.”

Ilya stepped inside like he belonged there, like the space had already been his before Shane got there.

“You train late.”

“It helps.”

Of course he chose the bike next to him. Of course he did.

They didn't speak at first. The rhythm of their movement filled the space instead, the low hum of the machines blending with the sound of controlled breathing. Then Ilya pushed, gradually increasing the pace, adjusting the resistance until it demanded more.

Shane matched him instinctively.

They hit the same speed and held it there.

Shane's breathing shifted first, faster and tighter as the effort built. Sweat rolled down the back of his neck, and with it—

That scent.

Faint-Honeysuckle.

Ilya slowed just enough to notice. Not lotion, not this time.

Shane broke first, stepping off the bike and moving toward the mirrors to stretch. Ilya followed without hesitation, settling across from him like the distance meant nothing.

“What a fucking day, huh?” Shane muttered.

“Yes. Congratulations.”

“Mm. Thanks.”

They talked for a few minutes, nothing important. Just enough to fill the silence. But Ilya watched him the entire time, noting every shift in expression, every glance that didn't quite land where it should.

Shane's eyes drifted more than once, dropping to his lips, his throat, then away again.

Ilya noticed.

He extended his water bottle toward him.

Shane waved it off. “I've got-”

“Drink.”

The word cut cleanly through the space. Low, direct. Shane didn't think. He took it immediately and drank, maintaining eye contact as if that made it normal.

Ilya watched carefully, letting a few seconds pass before speaking again.

“More.”

Same tone. Shane obeyed again, slower this time. Then he stopped and looked at him. Confusion flickered first, then realization. Too late- Shane stood abruptly.

“I’m done.” He left before Ilya could respond.

The hallway felt wrong the second he stepped into it. Too bright, too long, too exposed. His skin burned in a way that didn’t make sense, heat spreading too fast for him to control.

No.

This couldn’t- He fumbled with the keycard, barely managing to get the door open before slipping inside and locking it behind him.

His breathing broke.

The heat hit harder now, settling deeper into his body in a way that made his stomach twist sharply. “No.” He grabbed the old flip phone, hands unsteady as he dialed.

“Shane?”

“Something’s wrong,” he said. “It’s too hot.”

“Are you alone?”

“Yes.”

There was a long pause from the other end. “Go to the bathroom. Turn the shower on cold. Fill the tub. Get in.”

He did it without thinking, moving on instinct more than anything else.

“I took everything,” he said. “The patch, the pills—”

“When did it start?”

“...the gym.”

“What happened?”

“...Rozanov.”

A pause. “Was there skin to skin contact?”

Shane hesitated. “Our hands touched.” Silence stretched just long enough to feel worse.

“That should not have been enough.”

“I know.”

“Stay in the water.”

The call ended. Shane sat in the tub, letting the cold bite into his skin. It helped, but not enough. The heat didn’t fully fade. It lingered, wrong and persistent.

Time blurred after that.

Cold water. Try to breathe. Repeat.

When the water warmed, he drained it and refilled it again. And again.

His phone buzzed later.

“Add a second suppressant,” the doctor said. “I’ll send more. Enough for the year.”

Good. Having a plan meant control. He stayed in the tub all night. Because leaving wasn’t safe.

Ilya didn’t follow.

He could have. The hallway had been empty, and it would have been easy to close the distance before Shane made it far. Under normal circumstances, he wouldn’t have hesitated. He liked the chase when it was mutual, when the tension stayed balanced and sharp instead of uneven.

But the look on Shane’s face before he left had stopped him.

That hadn’t been part of any game.

It hadn’t been irritation, or embarrassment, or even anger. It had been something else entirely—something sharper, more immediate. Panic. Real and unguarded in a way that didn’t fit with everything else Shane had shown him.

So Ilya stayed.

After a few minutes, he pushed himself up from the bench and walked back into the gym, the quiet settling around him again as if nothing had happened. He sat for a moment without moving, forearms resting on his thighs, replaying the interaction in his head with the same precision he used to break down plays.

The scent, the response. It was too fast. It didn’t line up to the usual Beta behavior .

The thought came back again, more persistent this time. Omega.

He dismissed it just as quickly. That didn’t make sense. The leagues tested too often, too thoroughly. There were too many checks, too many safeguards in place for something like that to go unnoticed, especially at Shane’s level. Someone would have caught it by now.

And yet-

Something still didn't fit.

He had seen betas who leaned submissive before. It wasn't common, but it wasn't unheard of either, especially in certain dynamics. Some of them didn't even realize it themselves. That could explain the response. It should have explained it.

But it didn't explain everything.

Not the scent, not the discipline. Not the way Shane had reacted when things tipped just slightly out of his grasp.

Ilya leaned back, exhaling slowly through his nose, irritation settling low in his chest. He didn't like loose ends. He didn't like patterns he couldn't immediately solve.

His phone vibrated in his bag, the sound cutting cleanly through the quiet.

He reached for it without looking away from the empty stretch of floor in front of him, pulling it out and glancing at the screen. Unknown number.

He answered.

"Yes."

"Mr. Rozanov," the voice said, accented and careful. "I found something."

Ilya didn't interrupt. He just listened.

"Shane Hollander's parents opened a bank account for him a few years ago. All his hockey income goes there, starting from his early teens. Last year, he withdrew twelve thousand U.S. dollars in cash. A car was rented. They were seen in New York, going to a private residence."

Ilya's gaze shifted slightly, unfocused now as he processed the information.

"I don't know what happened there," the man continued, "but the person living at that address moves every few months."

That alone would have been enough to raise questions.

"Even more," the voice added, "the same league doctors administer all of Mr. Hollander's bloodwork. The schedules always align. Only those two."

That was worse. More deliberate. More controlled.

"Curious, is it not?"

Ilya leaned forward slightly, his grip tightening around the phone just enough to register.

"Say someone wanted to hide designation," he said slowly. "Make omega look like beta."

There was a pause on the other end.

“That kind of thing exists,” the man said carefully. “But it is usually cheaper than that. And most stop when they hear about the side effects. They don’t last long.”

Unless it was something new.

Ilya didn’t respond immediately. He let the silence sit for a second longer, letting the pieces settle into place.

“I understand,” he said finally.

He ended the call without another word.

For a moment, he stayed where he was, phone still in his hand, the quiet of the room pressing in again. Then he set it aside and leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees, his focus sharpening in a way that had nothing to do with hockey.

The scent. The reaction. The tight rein Hollander seemed to have with every interaction. The money. The doctors.

Individually, the facts didn’t prove anything.

Together- they formed something much harder to ignore.

But something in his expression shifted. Not confusion, not uncertainty.

Something closer to recognition.

Whatever Shane Hollander was hiding, it wasn’t small.

And now that he had started pulling at it - he wasn’t going to stop.

Six months later, the noise of the after game interviews didn’t bother him.

It never really had.

But here, in this setting, it became something else entirely- fuel. Cameras flashing, voices calling out his name, the constant pull of attention that followed him from the ice to the hallway and into the press room like it belonged there.

Ilya stepped into it without hesitation.

He didn’t slow down. Didn’t adjust. The room adjusted to him.

“Rozanov! Over here-”

“Question about that last goal-”

“Ilya, how do you-”

He picked one voice out of the crowd and moved toward it, just enough to give the illusion of choice. “What did you see on that play?” the reporter asked, already leaning forward.

Ilya shrugged slightly, expression loose, almost bored.

“They slow,” he said. “Defense was open too much.”

A few people laughed. He tensed, trying to see if his English words were mistaken and they were laughing at him or if they were laughing with him.

Another voice cut in quickly. “You’ve been dominating this season. Do you think there’s anyone in the league right now who can actually match you?”

Ilya tilted his head, considering the question like it deserved more thought than it did.

“Maybe,” he said.

A pause.

Then, with the faintest shift in his expression- “I have not seen enough yet. Only one other player comes close.”

That got a reaction.

Laughter again, louder this time. A few murmured comments between reporters as they scribbled something down, already shaping it into a headline.

Confidence. Arrogance. They ate it up.

“Is there anyone you’re specifically looking forward to playing against?”

Another easy question. Another expected answer.

Ilya leaned back slightly in his chair, one arm draped over the back like he had nowhere else to be, like this wasn’t something scheduled and structured and controlled by people who thought they were in charge.

“Depends,” he said. “If they are good, is fun.”

“And if they’re not?”

A flicker of something sharper crossed his face.

“Then is waste of time.”

More laughter.

Someone near the back called out, “You’re not worried about making enemies in the league?”

Ilya’s mouth curved slightly.

“No,” he said simply.

He didn’t need to explain it. The answer stood on its own.

They kept going, they always did until a coach pulled him away.

Questions about strategy. About the upcoming stretch of games. About rivalries that had been mostly started by the press- narratives that needed something to sell.

Ilya gave them just enough.

Short answers and reactions. A few deliberate remarks that pushed just far enough to keep them interested without crossing a line that would get him pulled aside later.

He knew exactly where that line was. He just liked walking along it. A reporter leaned forward, smiling a little too easily.

“You’ve become something of a fan favorite already. How are you adjusting to that kind of attention?”

Ilya glanced at her, taking in the details automatically. Confident. Comfortable. Used to this.

“Is fine,” he said. “They like good hockey.”

She smiled wider. “And they like you.”

He didn’t answer right away. Let the silence stretch just enough.

Then-

“Maybe,” he said.

The room laughed again. When the reporters had enough, it didn’t actually end. People lingered. They always did.

A few reporters approached him directly, questions shifting from professional to personal in a way that wasn’t subtle. Someone from a local station asked about his adjustment to the city. Another asked about his training habits, leaning in just a little too close while she spoke.

He didn’t pull away. Didn’t lean in either. Just stayed exactly where he was, letting them come to him. That was the pattern. They came to him.

By the time he stepped out into the hallway, the noise followed again, quieter now but still present. A couple of younger players from another team passed by, glancing at him quickly before looking away just as fast. Recognition. Respect. Something else mixed in.

He didn’t care enough to name it. Someone called his name again, not a reporter this time.

A woman leaned against the wall near the exit, arms crossed loosely, watching him with open interest. She smiled when he looked over, pushing herself off the wall and stepping closer.

“You’re even worse in person,” she said.

“Worse?”

“More cocky than you should be.”

Ilya shrugged. “Is problem?”

She laughed. “No. Not really.”

It would have been easy- it always was.

The conversation fell into place without effort, her tone light, her interest obvious. She stepped closer without hesitation, testing space in a way that felt familiar.

Ilya responded the way he always did. Not too much interest shown. He made it clear that this is just sex. But something about it felt off.

Not wrong. Just not enough to hold his attention the way it used to. He let the conversation taper off sooner than expected, offering a half-smile and a vague excuse about needing to get back. She didn’t push. They rarely did.

When he stepped outside, the air felt colder than it had inside, sharper in a way that cut through the leftover noise in his head. Better.

He stood there for a moment, hands loose at his sides, gaze unfocused as his mind drifted somewhere else entirely.

Six months. Six months since the gym. He could still see it clearly - the hesitation, the reaction. The moment something didn’t line up.

Ilya exhaled slowly, shifting his weight slightly as a car passed in the distance. He was tired off it all already. Less than a year into his professional career and the excitement was not enough at times. The money was great. Men and women throwing themselves at him was nice but his mind constantly drifted off to the boy with freckles and secrets that he

On the ice, he was sharper than ever. Faster, stronger. His team was looking to him more and more for leadership. He loved his life while playing.

Off the ice, his attention had narrowed.

Not to the crowd. Not to the noise. Not even to the people who kept trying to get close.

To one thing. One *man*. One problem he hadn't solved yet.

Shane Hollander.

Ilya's mouth curved slightly, but not quite a smile. Because when something didn't make sense, he would not force the answer.

You waited. Watched. And when the moment came- you pushed. Hard enough to see what broke.

Six months later, Shane had learned how to belong. At least, that's what it looked like from the outside.

He showed up early, stayed late, and did everything that was expected of him without needing to be told twice. He learned the systems quickly, adapted to the pace, and earned his place in the lineup in a way that made coaches trust him and teammates respect him. On the ice, things were simple. Structured. Predictable. He could read the play before it happened, move where he needed to be, and execute without hesitation.

Off the ice was different. That part required more effort.

The locker room had stopped feeling like foreign territory after the first few weeks. The noise didn't hit him as hard anymore, and he had learned how to navigate conversations without overthinking every response. He laughed when he was supposed to, contributed just enough to stay included, and deflected anything that got too personal with practiced ease.

It was manageable. As long as he did what he could to hide his secret.

"Hey, Hollander, you coming out tonight or what?"

Shane glanced up from where he was re-taping his stick, forcing a small smile as he looked over. A few of the guys were already half-dressed, talking over each other about whatever bar they had decided on.

"Maybe," he said, keeping it light. "Depends how dead I feel after practice."

"Come on, you say that every time."

"Because it's true every time."

A few laughs, easy and expected. It worked. He didn't go. He rarely did. It wasn't that he didn't want to.

There were moments, sitting there listening to them talk, where he could almost see what it would be like to just say yes. To go out, relax, let himself exist without calculating every movement, every reaction, every possible risk.

But the more people there were, the harder it became to control everything. And control was the only thing keeping him safe.

Hayden didn't push. That was part of why Shane gravitated toward him early on. He was easy to be around, in a way that didn't demand anything Shane couldn't give. Their conversations stayed simple most of the time—hockey, travel, dumb observations about other teams- and when things got quieter, Hayden didn't seem to mind that either.

JJ was different. Louder. More direct. But not in a way that felt invasive. He filled the silence instead of forcing Shane to. That helped. The three of them fell into something that looked like routine.

Eating together after practice. Sitting near each other on the bus. Talking just enough to pass the time without turning it into something Shane had to manage too closely.

It was... comfortable. Or at least close enough.

The rest of the team, Shane considered friends. That was what they were. But there was a line he didn't let himself cross. Because every extra hour spent around them meant more chances for something to slip. A scent that didn't fade fast enough. A reaction he couldn't hide quickly enough. A moment where he didn't think before responding.

It didn't take much. So he kept it balanced. Close enough to belong. Distant enough to stay safe. Practice was the easiest part of his day. It always had been.

The ice didn't ask questions. It didn't care about anything except execution. Shane pushed harder than he needed to. That had become normal.

He stayed late after drills, running the same sequences over and over until they felt perfect again, even if they had already been good enough the first time. His edges were sharper now, his reactions faster, his control tighter than it had been at the start of the season.

Coaches noticed. They praised it. "You're reading everything early," one of them told him after practice, watching him reset for another rep. "Keep doing that." Shane nodded. He didn't explain that it wasn't intentional anymore. Nothing could catch him off guard.

At least, that was the idea. It didn't always work. There were moments, small and quick, where his focus slipped just enough for something else to push in. A scent lingering too long when someone brushed past him in the locker room. The shift in his own breathing when a teammate got too close without warning. The constant, underlying awareness of his body in a way that never fully shut off anymore.

It had gotten worse after the draft. Worse after the gym.

He didn't think about that night unless he had to. But his body remembered. The pills helped, he let himself go through one heat in the past six months and that had been brutal. The increased dosage kept everything contained, most of the time. But it came with its own problems.

He was more tired now. Not in a way that showed easily, but it sat behind everything, slowing him down just enough that he had to push harder to keep up the same level of performance. His sleep was inconsistent, his appetite off, his focus sharper in some moments and worse in others.

He adjusted- he always adjusted. No one noticed, that was the goal.

“Hey, you good?”

Shane blinked, realizing he had been standing still longer than he should have.

Hayden was looking at him, brow slightly furrowed.

“Yeah,” Shane said quickly. “Just thinking about that last drill.”

“You’ve been thinking about it for like two minutes.”

“Yeah, well,” Shane shrugged lightly, “it wasn’t great.”

Hayden snorted.

“If that wasn’t great, I’m screwed.”

Shane smiled faintly, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“I just want it clean.”

“It was clean.”

“Cleaner.”

Hayden shook his head but didn’t argue. That was another reason Shane liked him - he didn’t dig.

JJ dropped down onto the bench beside them a second later, still half in his gear.

“You’re both overthinking it,” he said, nudging Shane’s shoulder lightly. “Coach is already obsessed with you. Relax.”

Shane stiffened for a fraction of a second at the contact.

Then forced himself to relax.

“Yeah, that’s the plan,” he said.

JJ laughed.

“Worst liar I’ve ever met.”

Shane huffed out a quiet breath, shaking his head. But the comment stuck. *Relax*. He didn’t remember what that felt like. Later, when the locker room had mostly cleared out, Shane

stayed behind like he usually did. Not long enough to be obvious, just enough to avoid the rush.

He moved through his routine quickly, keeping everything efficient, controlled. He timed it carefully, listening to the noise in the hallway, tracking when people left, when it quieted down enough that he could finish without worrying about someone walking back in unexpectedly.

It worked. It always did. Until it wouldn't.

Someone laughed in the hallway, closer than he expected. Shane froze for half a second, listening.

He exhaled slowly as the footsteps faded, forcing his body to settle again. Too close. He finished faster after that.

Back in his apartment later that night, the quiet felt heavier than usual. Shane sat on the edge of his bed, staring at nothing for a few seconds before reaching up to press at the edge of his scent patch again. Still in place. Still working. He didn't trust it. Not completely.

His phone buzzed.

A message from Hayden.

You alive or did JJ kill you with his terrible jokes?

Shane stared at it for a second, then typed back.

Barely survived.

A second later:

You coming tomorrow early?

Yeah.

Good. I need someone to make me look better.

Shane huffed out a quiet breath, something in his chest loosening just slightly.

That's easy.

It was simple.

But even as he set the phone down, the weight settled back in. Because it didn't change anything. The more he built here-The more he settled into this team, these routines, these people, the more there was to lose. And the harder it would be if anyone ever found out.

The press room in Montreal was quieter than most.

Not silent, but contained. The kind of space where conversations didn't overlap so much as take turns, where reporters waited instead of shouting over each other. The lighting was softer, less aggressive, and the questions—at least on the surface—felt more structured.

Shane preferred it.

It gave him time to think.

Too much time, sometimes.

“Shane, over here.”

He adjusted slightly in his seat, offering a small, easy smile as he turned toward the voice.

“How are you settling in with the team so far?”

“Really well,” he said, nodding once. “The guys have been great. It's been a pretty smooth transition.”

It sounded right.

It was right.

Mostly.

“Est-ce que tu te sens à l'aise avec le système jusqu'à présent?” another reporter asked from the side.

Shane shifted his attention without hesitation.

“Oui, ça va bien,” he answered, his accent soft but clear. “Le système est rapide, mais j'aime ça. Ça correspond bien à mon style de jeu.”

The reporter nodded, satisfied, jotting something down quickly.

Shane kept the small smile in place.

It was easier in French sometimes. The distance helped.

“Do you feel any pressure coming in as a top draft pick?” someone asked next.

There it was.

Expected.

Shane leaned back slightly, keeping his tone light.

“I think there’s always pressure at this level,” he said. “But for me, it’s more about focusing on getting better every day and contributing where I can.”

He could hear it as he said it. Clean. Polished. Empty.

He resisted the urge to wince.

“Tu joues avec beaucoup de calme sur la glace. Est-ce que c’est quelque chose que tu travailles consciemment?” another voice asked.

Shane nodded again, shifting easily.

“Un peu, oui,” he said. “Mais je pense que c’est aussi naturel. J’essaie de lire le jeu et rester patient.”

Patient. That was one way to describe it. Internally, he felt anything but. A reporter near the front leaned forward slightly.

“You’ve been praised for your consistency early in the season. Is that something you take pride in?”

Shane paused just long enough to make it look thoughtful.

“Yeah,” he said. “I think consistency is important. It’s something I try to bring every game.”

Another good answer. Another safe one.

It made his skin itch.

“Comment trouves-tu la ville de Montréal jusqu’à maintenant?”

That one was easier.

“J’aime beaucoup,” he said, a little more genuine this time. “C’est une belle ville. Les partisans sont passionnés.”

That part was true. The energy in the arena, the way the crowd reacted—it was something he could hold onto without overthinking it.

“Have any of the veteran players taken you under their wing?”

Shane smiled faintly.

“Yeah, a few of them have been really helpful,” he said. “Just with the little things—adjusting to the schedule, the pace. It’s been good.”

Names flickered through his mind.

He didn’t say them. Safer that way.

“Tu passes beaucoup de temps avec certains coéquipiers en particulier?” another reporter asked, tone casual.

Shane felt something tighten slightly in his chest.

Careful.

“On est tous assez proches,” he said, keeping his voice even. “Mais oui, je parle souvent avec Hayden et JJ.”

That was safe enough. True. Contained. The reporter nodded, satisfied.

Shane kept his posture relaxed, even as his thoughts sharpened behind the calm expression. Too specific was risky. Too vague was suspicious, he needed to be balanced.

Always balance.

“Last one,” someone said. “What are your goals for the rest of the season?”

Shane exhaled quietly through his nose before answering.

“Just to keep improving,” he said. “Do what I can to help the team win.”

It sounded like something he had said a hundred times before. Because he had. And every time, it felt a little less like something he believed. The media coordinator stepped forward, signaling the end of the session.

“Thanks, everyone.”

Shane stood, offering one last polite smile before stepping away from the table. The room cleared slowly, quieter than it had been when he walked in.

He exhaled once he reached the hallway. It had gone well. No mistakes, no slips. Nothing out of place. Exactly how it was supposed to be.

And still- His shoulders felt tight. His skin too warm under the layers. His thoughts already replaying every answer, every word choice, every shift in tone. Did that sound natural? Too rehearsed? Too vague?

He reached up, fingers brushing briefly against the edge of his collar where the scent patch sat hidden beneath. Still in place. Still working. Good.

He dropped his hand quickly, glancing down the hallway out of habit more than fear.

No one was looking. He started walking again, pace steady. Friendly, approachable. Future captain of Canada's best team.

From the outside he looked exactly like he was supposed to.

Inside he was getting tired of hearing himself talk.

Chapter 5: Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

We're getting to the heavy stuff my people. Dropping this one here before going to work and getting ready to crash out over the Met Gala on Threads tonight.

Chapter Notes

Last beta'd chapter because of life. I'd LOVE LOVE LOVE an ARC reader to pull me back from the ledge though. My sister usually prereads my outlines and she's too pregnant right now to read about the crazy stuff Ilya is about to do.

Cold air settled against Shane's skin the moment he stepped through the doors, the familiar bite of it filling his lungs with every breath as the ice stretched out clean and bright under standard arena lights. There was no dramatic staging to it, no artificial glow, just the steady hum of overhead fixtures and the faint echo of skates somewhere in the distance. It smelled like sharpened steel, rubber, and freshly cut ice, grounded and predictable in a way Shane understood without needing to think about it.

The production equipment was what broke that illusion.

Cameras lined the boards at calculated angles, lighting rigs were adjusted in careful increments, and a cluster of crew members moved with quiet efficiency across the ice. It was still a normal rink, but now it had been layered with something else, something controlled and deliberate.

"You made it Hollander."

Shane turned at the sound of his name and immediately found Rozanov already watching him, already skating toward him with that same effortless glide that made everything he did look intentional.

"Of course." Shane replied, still trying to make sense of it.

"So when they tell you you do commercial?" Ilya said, the corner of his mouth lifting slightly.

Shane narrowed his eyes. "A couple days ago? My mom called me and said they'd fly me out.. Why? When did they tell you?"

“They tell me nothing-it was my idea.” Ilya said simply.

Before Shane could respond, the director called them into position, and the moment shifted.

The first shots were simple in theory and exacting in practice. They were placed at center ice and adjusted repeatedly, shoulders turned, posture corrected, spacing refined down to inches as if in a face off at the start of a game.

“Closer together.”

Shane hesitated for half a second before stepping in. Ilya did not hesitate at all, closing the space easily until their shoulders brushed, the contact light but constant. Shane focused on the camera. Ilya focused on him.

“You look like you are about to fight someone,” Ilya said quietly.

“I might,” Shane muttered.

“Good,” Ilya replied, watching the way the tension sat in his shoulders. “They will like that.”

Shane let out a small breath, the edge of a smile slipping through before he could stop it, and the shift was immediate. His posture loosened, his expression softened, and the camera clicked rapidly as the director caught it.

That was the first moment it changed.

It did not stop there.

Every reset gave them time to talk, and the conversations came easier than they should have. Ilya pushed in small ways, comments that were just off enough to draw a reaction, questions that felt casual but were not.

“You skate too clean,” Ilya said at one point.

“That’s not a thing.”

“It is. You make it look easy. It is annoying.”

Shane snorted quietly. “You’re such an asshole. You’re the one they built this around.”

“Yes,” Ilya said without hesitation. “But you are still boring.”

Shane laughed, and this time it was real.

Ilya watched that too.

They were moved to the bench while the crew adjusted the camera rig. Shane sat first, resting his stick loosely between his hands. Ilya followed, sitting close enough that their knees brushed when Shane shifted.

Shane stilled for a second before forcing himself to relax.

“You are nervous,” Ilya said.

“I’m not.”

“You are.”

Shane glanced at him. “You always like this?”

“Not always.”

“Just with me?”

Ilya turned his head, holding his gaze. “Yes.”

Shane looked away almost immediately.

That became a pattern.

He could not seem to hold eye contact for long, his gaze slipping away after a second, dropping to his hands or the ice. Ilya noticed every time, and he started pushing it, holding his gaze longer, leaning in slightly when Shane tried to create space, making it harder and harder for him to avoid it without being obvious.

Later, a makeup artist stepped in briefly, brushing under Shane’s eyes and along his cheekbones before sending him back out.

Ilya looked at him again, slower this time.

“You look pretty like this,” he said.

Shane blinked, thrown off. “You’re wearing makeup too.”

“It is different.”

“How?”

“I do not need it.”

Shane rolled his eyes, but there was no real bite behind it.

Ilya liked that.

When the shoot shifted to motion capture, Ilya was pulled onto the ice alone, sensors attached to his gear while cameras tracked every movement. Shane stood off to the side, watching despite himself.

“Three new sponsorship offers,” his mother said beside him, scrolling through something on her tablet. “We will go over them tonight.”

“Okay,” Shane said, not looking away.

Ilya accelerated into a tight turn, the spray of ice catching the light as he shifted direction with precision that translated even through the artificial setup.

“You are not listening, Reebok is sending clothes and sneakers to your house by courier.” she said.

“I am listening,” Shane replied automatically.

“You are not.”

He did not argue because he wasn't.

After a few more hours, the commercial shoot ended early since the director couldn't film the two of them together any longer since they both started laughing after a few seconds of screen time.

Shane took advantage that Ilya had been pulled to do what looked like an interview with someone and went to the lockers for a quick shower to wash off the feeling of the makeup.

The shower was where everything broke.

Shane stepped under the water, letting it run over him as steam gathered and softened the room, trying to ground himself in routine. It worked for a few seconds.

Then the door opened and he felt the air shift immediately. The shift in the air, the presence behind him, the awareness settling under his skin before he even turned.

When he did look, it was already too late.

Shane stood under the shower, eyes closed but they snapped open when he heard another showerhead turn on. He was naked, of course, water cascading over the formidable landscape of his body - over the thick cords of his shoulders, the sculpted planes of his chest and abdomen, running in rivulets through the dark blonde hair that arched down past his navel. The bruise on his ribs was a vivid splash of purple and blue against his damp skin.

Shane meant to turn away, to give them both privacy, to get out of the shower as quickly as possible. But his body refused the command. He was rooted, his gaze traveling over Ilya with a helpless, hungry fascination he could no longer deny. He'd seen naked men countless times - it came with being an athlete for most of his life but he had never paid another person any attention while in the locker rooms or showers. It felt illicit. Primal.

The sheer physicality of the man was staggering. Power radiated from him even while standing still. Water sluiced over the heavy curve of his biceps, the defined quadriceps, the- Shane's breath hitched. His gaze, inevitably, treacherously, dipped lower.

Ilya's cock hung thick and heavy between his legs, already half swollen from the heat of Hollanders quick glances. As Shane stared, paralyzed by the mix of awe and acute embarrassment, he saw it twitch. A distinct, uncontrollable jump against Rozanov's hand.

Mortification burned through Shane, hotter than the water and steam surrounding them. He jerked his eyes up.

Too late. Rozanov's eyebrow lifted. Those glacier blue eyes were firmly fixed directly on him. He'd seen it all—the unabashed appraisal, the guilty linger, the telling reaction. A slow, knowing smile curved Ilya's lips, far more potent than any he'd given the camera. He didn't say a word.

Still holding Shane's captive gaze, Ilya's own hand drifted down his body, bypassing soap, ignoring everything but its target. His fingers wrapped around his growing length with a familiarity that made Shane's mouth go dry. He began to stroke himself, a slow, indolent pump, his fist gliding easily through the wetness provided by the shower.

He wasn't hiding. He wasn't turning away. He was fully facing Shane, presenting the explicit spectacle of his own self-pleasure as a challenge, a provocation. The rise and fall of his muscular forearm was hypnotic. Water droplets clung to the back of his hand, to the straining veins on the shaft he was working. His expression was one of arrogant inquiry, a raised eyebrow asking a silent, deafening question: *Well? What are you going to do about it?*

“Fuck off.” Shane said angrily, trying to control himself.

Shane stood frozen under his own punishing spray, the water suddenly feeling lukewarm, irrelevant. The soap was forgotten in his hand. Every nerve ending was attuned to the visual feast before him, to the shameless, rhythmic motion of Ilya's fist. His own body responded traitorously, blood rushing south, his earlier limpness vanishing as he hardened under the relentless, watchful eye of this Alpha.

Shane quickly turned. He had to get himself under control and leave the room immediately. This was too risky. No one had seen him naked in years and if the steam let up a bit more, Rozanov would see the physical proof of what he was.

He failed.

The awareness sharpened with every second, something slipping beneath his control in ways he could not stop.

Ilya stepped closer. Shane moved to leave. Ilya caught his arm. “Don't,” Shane said, panic breaking through.

Ilya didn't stop.

His attention had already shifted, narrowing as he watched the water move across Shane's neck, catching briefly against something almost invisible. The patch.

He reached up slowly. “Don't, please.” Shane said again.

Ilya ignored him. He peeled it away. The scent flooded the room instantly. Honeysuckle. Fresh rain. Cinnamon. The Omega scent bloomed into the room, overcoming Ilya. Soft and warm and completely wrong for the space, filling the steam-heavy air in a way that made it impossible to ignore. Ilya stilled, his grip tightening slightly as the realization settled into place.

Not a theory anymore. Something real. “You hid this,” he said quietly.

“Rozanov, please.”

That word changed something. Not softened it. Sharpened it. He let Shane go a second later, but the shift had already happened.

Shane ran.

By the time he reached the locker room, his hands were shaking too badly to work properly as he dug through his bag for another patch.

“Hollander.”

He froze.

Ilya stood behind him, a towel low around his waist, completely unbothered.

“Just forget it,” Shane said quickly. “You didn’t see anything.”

“You lie.”

“I’m not.”

“You are.”

Shane’s composure cracked. “If anyone finds out-”

“They will not.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do.”

Then, in a calm tone filled with authority- “Give me your room number.”

“...why?”

“So we talk.”

Shane hesitated, then answered “1410.”

“I will come later. Be ready for me.”

And Shane knew this was not over.

It wasn't.

The knock came sooner than he expected. Shane opened the door nervously.

Ilya stepped inside, and the tension returned immediately.

"You try to fix it," Ilya said.

"It's not what you think."

"You are liar."

"I'm not-"

"Then explain."

"I can't."

"Because you do not trust me?"

"This isn't about trust."

"Then what?"

"I don't have a choice." That was the first real answer.

And Ilya understood enough. Then he moved. Slowly. Deliberately. He circled Shane the same way he had on the ice, each step subtle enough to seem casual while guiding him backward until the wall pressed against his back.

"Roz-" Ilya didn't stop, making Shane not know what to say. He closed the distance completely.

The scent, even suppressed again, hit harder this close, mixing with his own in a way that made Shane's head feel light, his focus slipping. He tried to look away. Ilya didn't let him. His hand came up, gripping Shane's chin, firm and unyielding, forcing his gaze back.

"Look at me," he said quietly. Shane's eyes flickered, trying to hold it and failing. Ilya tightened his grip slightly.

"*Look* at me." This time, Shane did. His eyes gave everything away. Ilya watched all of it and enjoyed it.

"You feel that," he said.

"Yes," Shane admitted, his voice unsteady. That was enough. Ilya's hand slid from his chin to his throat, his grip firm and grounding. Shane's breath hitched. The kiss was softer than it

should have been.

Controlled. Measured. Almost gentle against the firm hold at his throat, the contrast sending a sharp, disorienting reaction through Shane's body as the scent wrapped around him, making it harder to think, harder to focus.

He should have pulled away.

He didn't. He *couldn't*

Ilya felt that immediately, the lack of resistance, the way Shane leaned into it without meaning to. When he pulled back, it was only enough to look at him. Shane's eyes were unfocused again, his pupils fully blown out. Too open, too easy to read.

Ilya tilted his chin up again when his gaze dropped.

"Don't look away," he said.

Shane swallowed. This time, he obeyed. And that was worse. Because now he was choosing to stay. Even if he didn't understand why. The silence after the kiss did not break easily.

It stretched between them, heavy and charged, the kind of silence that was not empty but filled with everything neither of them was saying. Shane stayed where he was, his back still pressed to the wall, his breathing uneven in a way he could not quite hide no matter how hard he tried to steady it.

Ilya did not step away.

If anything, he stayed closer.

Close enough that Shane could still feel the warmth of him, the faint trace of his scent mixed with his own in a way that made it harder to separate where one ended and the other began. Shane's focus slipped again, not as sharply as before, but enough that it made him tense.

He tried to look away.

Ilya caught his chin again.

Not rough, but firm enough to stop the motion before it could complete, guiding his face back up with quiet certainty.

"I told you not to do that," Ilya said.

Shane swallowed, his throat moving under the pressure of Ilya's hand. "I'm trying," he said softly, though it sounded more like an admission than a defense. "Rozanov, please. I don't want a mate. I don't-we can't do this. We shouldn't."

The knowing looking in Ilya's blue eyes was a tangible thing, warming Shane down to his very bones. He didn't step back. Instead, the hand that had been cradling Shane's neck slid down, over the rapid flutter of his pulse, to settle heavily on his shoulder. Ilya rumbled

something, probably in Russian, the single syllable vibrating through Shane's bones. Then, his voice dropping into a register of pure, unquestionable command: "Kneel."

It wasn't shouted. It was worse -it was perfectly calm, perfectly expectant, leaving no possibility in the universe except compliance. At the same time, a wave of scent rolled off him, thick and deliberate. That clean, leather scent deepened, mellowing into something richer, heavier - like aged cedar and amber resin, heated by a hearth.

It was an Alpha's purposeful pheromone release, designed not to intimidate, but to soothe, to subdue instinctual fear and replace it with a profound, bone-deep acquiescence. It washed over Shane, seeping into his lungs, his bloodstream, untangling the last knots of anxious hesitation in his muscles.

Shane's body obeyed before his mind could fully process the order. His knees buckled, finding the worn hotel carpet beneath them. He went down gracefully, almost bonelessly, the plush fibers pressing into his shins. He looked up, the position placing Rozanov in a new, monumental perspective—towering, broad-shouldered, silhouetted against the dark sky. The fog of the kiss still clouded his thoughts, but beneath it, a new, sharper awareness was crystallizing. His heart hammered, but it was laced now with a strange, warm lethargy from the scent saturating the air.

From above, Ilya watched the descent, a slight, predatory tilt to his head. Pleasure, dark and satisfied, glinted in his eyes. The speed of the obedience, the utter lack of resistance, pleased him immensely. It spoke of a trust, or perhaps a recognition of natural order, that went beyond thought.

"Very good," Ilya repeated, his voice like velvet-covered stone. His hands went to the fastenings of his trousers—simple, functional buttons on sturdy fabric. He worked them open with efficient, unhurried motions, each click of a button loud in the silent hotel room.

Shane watched, transfixed, his mouth gone dry again. As the fabric parted, he caught a glimpse of darker boxers beneath. His own hands twisted nervously in his lap. Sensing the direction, driven by a desperate desire to please, to participate, he lurched forward slightly, his fingers fumbling for Ilya's waistband.

They trembled, clumsy with nerves and rushing adrenaline, snagging on the material. A low chuckle escaped Ilya.

"Eager," Ilya observed, not unkindly, but with immense amusement. He gently batted Shane's inept hands away. "Allow me." With a final shrug, the trousers and briefs were pushed down over his hips just enough. His cock sprang free, already fully erect, thick and ruddy against the tanned skin of his abdomen. It was an imposing sight, veined and heavy, the reality of it making Shane's breath catch audibly. This was no longer theory or stolen glance; this was dominant, physical fact.

Ilya took himself in hand, his own grasp sure and familiar. He gave a few slow, languid strokes, his eyes fixed on Shane's upturned face, watching the kaleidoscope of emotions—awe, fear, apprehension, undeniable fascination—play across his features.

“Open,” Ilya commanded softly, the pheromones in the air thickening, coaxing, making the command feel like a natural next step, an inevitable progression from the kiss. Shane’s lips, still tender and swollen from before, parted on a shaky inhale. Ilya guided himself forward, not aiming for entry, not yet. Instead, he dragged the broad, slick head over Shane’s lips, painting them with the evidence of his arousal. The sensation was startlingly intimate - hot, silken, salty. Shane flinched minutely at the first touch, then stilled, his eyes huge, lashes fluttering. Ilya rubbed the tip back and forth, tracing the cupid’s bow of his upper lip, sliding along the fuller lower one, a blatant, sensual claim. “Relax your jaw,” Ilya instructed, his thumb coming up to press lightly on Shane’s chin. The pheromonal blanket wrapped tighter around them, muffling panic, amplifying submission. “And when I push, you yield. Understand?”

Shane managed a weak nod, the movement causing the head of Ilya’s cock to bump against his teeth. Then, with no further ceremony, Ilya applied pressure. The blunt crown nudged past Shane’s lips, meeting the resistant barrier of his clenched teeth for a second before, with a soft, surrendering sigh from Shane, they parted. Ilya pushed inside. The stretch was immediate, unfamiliar, overwhelming. Shane gagged reflexively, his body tensing, a choked sound escaping his stuffed mouth.

Tears sprung to the corners of his eyes.

“Shhh,” he soothed, his other hand returning to cradle the back of Shane’s head, not forcing, but supporting. His scent poured out, a focused cascade of calming dominance. “Breathe through your nose. Just breathe. Take it.”

What he lacked in technique, he drowned in raw enthusiasm after a few seconds it seemed. Once the paralyzing surprise passed, a determined fire lit within him. He wanted this. He wanted to please the Alpha whose taste and scent and command were rewiring his very soul. He tried to relax his jaw further, letting it sink deeper, and tentatively, experimentally, his tongue stirred. It swiped along the underside of the shaft filling his mouth. The movement was clumsy, unpracticed, but it was effort. It was an offering. A guttural groan vibrated from his chest, a sound of pure, gratified pleasure.

Suddenly he was yanked up. “I’m sorry.” He said out of breath. “Was that bad?”

“No. Too good. I don’t want to finish like that yet.”

Ilya’s fingers were clenched tight in Shane’s hair, bending down he initiated another searing kiss. The coiled tension in his gut was a white-hot spring, winding tighter, tighter- with a ragged, bitten off curse, Ilya bent, one powerful arm hooking under Shane’s knees, the other banding around his back. With a grunt of effortless force, he stood, lifting Shane clear off the floor as if he were weightless. Shane cried out in surprise, his arms instinctively flying around Ilya’s neck for purchase. Ilya adjusted his grip, hoisting him higher, encouraging Shane’s legs to wrap around his narrow waist.

Shane collapsed on top of Ilya, on the bed and he blinked up, disoriented, his mind foggy with submission and unmet need. Had he done something wrong? Ilya loomed over him, chest heaving, his expression a stark mask of strained restraint. “Too fast,” he gritted out, the words husky with unfinished business. “You’re too damn good. I won’t finish like this. Stand

and take off your clothes. I want to see you.” Before Shane could process the command, Ilya moved, taking off his own clothes while motioning for Shane to stand before him and undress.

His eyes were blazing. Swallowing hard, his fingers trembling anew, Shane reached for the hem of his own shirt. He peeled it off slowly, nervously. He folded it, a nervous, automatic habit, and placed it neatly on a nearby couch. His belt buckle clinked loudly in the silence as he undid it, then the button and zip of his trousers. He pushed them down his legs, stepping out of them, and bent to pick them up, smoothing the creases before laying them atop his sweater. His socks were last, each one rolled off and tucked together.

Throughout this hesitant striptease, Ilya watched Shane’s modest pile of neatly folded clothes, a slow, genuine smile spread across Ilya’s face. It wasn’t the predatory smirk from before; this was different. Softer at the edges, touched with real delight.

The fastidiousness, the inherent orderliness in the midst of such chaos—it was so quintessentially *Shane*. An Omega trait, some might dismiss. To Ilya, in this charged moment, it was an unspeakably erotic display of innate character. It showed a mind that sought comfort in routine, even as his body was being introduced to pandemonium. It was a vulnerability offered in a unique language. Finally bare, Shane straightened, crossing his arms self-consciously over his slender waist. The cool air of the chamber raised goosebumps on his skin. He was all lean lines and pale expanse, his own arousal evident but seeming shy compared to Ilya’s bold declaration. Ilya leaned up and stared unabashedly at Shane, watching the way his eyes flickered, the way every reaction passed through them before Shane could mask it. It made him easier to read than anyone else he had met, and that alone made something settle deeper in his chest.

He liked knowing. He liked seeing it happen in real time.

Shane took the hint and went to lay on the bed, stiffly laying and staring at the ceiling with fidgeting fingers.

“So what do we do now?”

Ilya moved to rest his head and shoulders a bit elevated against the headboard, maneuvering Shane to lay between his legs. With very little encouragement, Shane adjusted himself and bent down, taking the Russian man back into his mouth. He tried to remember the few tips he had remembered reading but his jaw was quickly tiring.

Shane tried to slow down this time, but it was hard to focus. The scent of the Alpha was making him feel drugged in a way and he wanted to do things that logically, in the back of his mind he knew he should put a stop to all this but he couldn’t, didn’t really want to stop.

He felt himself swell with what must have been pride as Rozanov grunted and groaned—muttering Russian words and gripping the back of his hair tightly. After a few more moments, Shane was yanked off suddenly and he stared transfixed as Rozanov finished himself off.

He laid there for a minute, in the bigger man’s arms and just stared at the mess. His mouth watered but he didn’t know what to do now, what would the appropriate socially acceptable

next steps.

Ilya was very proud of his self control. If he'd let himself finish in Hollanders mouth like he really wanted to, the man would be completely vulnerable to him and he would feel guilty for a while. He centered himself and turned. His gaze, always assessing, swept over Shane's tense form. He saw the shell-shocked eyes, the white-knuckled grip on the bedsheets, the slight tremble of his legs. He rolled over closer, not with the prowling intent from before, but with a calm, almost clinical purpose.

"This was fun. I'm going." Ilya said, moving as if to leave the bed.

Shane scoffed. "You've got to be kidding me."

"What-do you need something?" Ilya asked with a raised eyebrow. Shane hadn't looked at him yet-focusing on the ceiling again with the cutest frown on his face.

"I wouldn't do that to you. Let me show you how to do this, kid," Ilya said, his voice a low rumble. Before Shane could parse the meaning his thoughts began to spiral- Was he criticizing his technique?

Ilya moved to hover over Shane. Ilya's large hands settled on his bare thighs, pushing them apart with an insistence that brooked no resistance.

Exposed like that, Shane froze. Ilya's eyes catalogued him openly: his half-hard cock, and below it, the softer, hidden slit, glistening with a nervous moisture of its own. Shane's entire body went rigid, a wave of protective shame tightening his stomach as Ilya's gaze lingered there. He couldn't help it. It was too new, too vulnerable.

Ilya noted the tension. He didn't comment. He didn't push. With a focus that was somehow both detached and deeply intimate, he simply lowered his head and took Shane's cock into his mouth.

The shock was absolute. White-hot and blinding. It was nothing like giving. This was having, being taken, being consumed. Ilya's mouth was furnace-hot, impossibly skilled, his tongue swirling a devastating pattern that mapped every nerve ending Shane possessed. The contrast between Ilya's rugged, dominant presence and this act of sublime submission was catastrophic to Shane's senses. He lasted mere seconds. A broken cry tore from his throat as his back arched violently off the bed. Release slammed into him like a freight train, a convulsive, mind-obliterating surge that left him seeing stars behind his eyelids. He pulsed into the welcoming heat of Ilya's mouth, over and over, until he was spent, collapsing back onto the mattress like a puppet with cut strings, gasping for air.

Ilya pulled away, swallowing smoothly. He rose to his feet, looking down at the wreckage he'd created. Shane lay boneless, shimmering with sweat, eyes glazed and unfocused. For a long minute, Ilya just watched him breathe. He fetched a glass of water from the bedside, placed it within reach. "Drink that when you can." he said, his tone permitting no argument. Satisfied Shane was cognizant - overwhelmed, but present, Ilya retrieved his clothes. He got

dressed while Shane slowly came down from his high, forgoing the black tank and just putting on the worn in leather jacket. He walked back to the bed, leaned down, and captured Shane's slack, pleasantly stunned mouth in a final, possessive kiss.

It was brief, but deep, a brand of ownership. He straightened up, his silhouette framed by the bland hotel room door. "Put yourself to bed," he ordered, his voice leaving no room for negotiation. A final, sweeping glance. "We'll see each other in a few weeks. For the game."

And then he was gone. The door clicked shut with a definitive sound, sealing Shane in a room saturated with pheromones, exhaustion, and the haunting, expert ghost of a mouth that had unraveled him completely. The promise of weeks apart yawned like a chasm, but it was filled now with the indelible memory of heat, and skill, and a lesson that had shattered him. He eventually moved, curling onto his side, and slept dreamlessly in the nest of his own scent and Ilya's fading one.

Chapter 6: Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

This was a tough one because what started at an almost 10k word chapter got cut down by nearly half since my sister thought Ilya was too much. "He should be institutionalized if you keep him like this."

I saved the cut paragraphs to rework them later on though because I like the crazy lol. Next chapter is being worked on already so I hope to have it posted tomorrow.

Thank you so much for the comments-its extremely heartwarming.

Six days. It had been six whole days and Ilya was going insane. The first thing Ilya noticed was that almost nothing had seemingly changed. The ice stretched clean and unbroken beneath the arena lights, the lines sharp and familiar, the boards marked in the same places they always were. The air carried that steady, biting cold that filled his lungs and settled into his chest in a way that usually grounded him. He went to practice, worked out, went to team meetings. It should have been enough to anchor him.

"Again."

The command cut across the rink, sharp and clear. Ilya pushed off immediately, his stride powerful and efficient, blades carving deep into the ice as he took the pass without looking down. The puck settled on his stick as if it belonged there, his movements precise and automatic. He adjusted his angle, shifted his weight, and released. The shot snapped into the net with a clean, echoing crack that carried across the arena.

He knew the second it left his stick that it had been too much. The placement was perfect, but the force behind it was unnecessary, a level of aggression that did not belong in a simple drill. A few of the players nearby glanced at him, the reaction subtle but noticeable.

"Dial it back," someone muttered, not quite quiet enough.

Ilya circled once, slow and controlled, his breathing steady even as something restless moved beneath the surface. He did not respond, but the tension did not settle either.

The first few days had been manageable, which was what made it difficult to track. A laugh from across the ice caught his attention before he could stop himself, the sound wrong in a way he could not immediately place. He looked toward it automatically and then looked away just as quickly when he realized it was not who he thought it was. The reaction left a faint irritation behind, something that lingered longer than it should have.

It happened again in the locker room later. A scent brushed faintly through the air as someone passed him, unremarkable and familiar, yet it caught in his lungs in a way that made him slow for half a second. There was nothing actually wrong with it, and that was the problem. Everything around him was exactly as it should be, and yet it was not.

By the second game, it was no longer subtle. He was desperate to know what Hollander was doing. What he was thinking. Where he was. Some of the information came easily. Game schedules, travel routes, public updates. It was all accessible, all harmless. He checked once, just to confirm something that did not matter, and then again, and then it stopped being a choice at all.

He started looking through after game interviews. Watching game footage and replaying the images of the bench. The clip loaded quickly. Shane sat on the bench, leaning forward as he spoke to a teammate, his posture relaxed, his focus easy. It was that ease that made something tighten in Ilya's chest. That relaxed expression. It did not belong there. Not after what had happened. Ilya stilled the frame with a touch of his thumb and studied it longer than necessary before closing the video and opening another.

This one showed Shane moving through an arena tunnel, someone brushing his shoulder in passing. The contact was casual, unremarkable, accepted without thought. Ilya watched it happen, his jaw tightening slightly, and then closed that one too.

"You're distracted."

The voice came from nearby. Ilya did not look up. "No."

"You are."

He lifted his head slowly, his expression flattening into something cold and final. It was enough to end the conversation immediately. The other player backed off without pushing further.

It should have faded. Distance had always solved things like this. Remove the variable, remove the distraction. Simple. Except this was not fading. It was sharpening, becoming quieter and more precise. Ilya was not losing control. He was organizing it. That was the difference.

It irritated him that this infatuation did not go away as it usually did but he refused to back down. He was irked that Hollander seemed *fine*. As if their time together had had no effect. He swore to himself that it was just a good time and that he would drop it and find someone else to turn his attention too.

"Rozanov, watch it."

The warning came too late. Ilya closed the distance in two strides and drove straight through the opposing player. The impact was clean and brutal, the boards rattling as the other man hit them hard. The whistle blew immediately, voices rising around him. Ilya stood over him for half a second longer than necessary before turning and skating toward the penalty box without a word.

Inside, everything felt muted. The crowd noise blurred into something distant, unimportant. He sat down, elbows resting on his knees, gaze forward. The next shift, it happened again. A defender stepped into his path at the wrong angle, and instead of adjusting, Ilya drove through him. The hit sent the man off balance, the puck already gone before he hit the ice.

“Jesus, Roz,” a teammate muttered nearby.

Ilya did not respond.

Later, a misread pass brought one of his own teammates into his path. The collision was immediate and hard, the impact sending the other player stumbling to the ice. There was a brief pause before play resumed, just long enough for the tension to settle in.

“You good?” someone called.

“Yeah,” came the answer, but the player’s eyes flicked toward Ilya, assessing.

“You need to rein it in,” the coach said quietly when Ilya returned to the bench.

Ilya pulled his gloves tighter and said nothing.

Because he already knew.

The hits were not mistakes. They were release. The only release he’s had in days. If he let his thoughts loose, he’d be a mess—he didn’t feel anything other than the need to see Hollander again until he was hitting others during the game. It was insane. He could feel himself losing his sanity slowly.

That night, alone in his hotel room, the city moved in distant patterns beyond the glass. Ilya sat in the quiet, his phone resting in his hand. He had tried to avoid dialing the number to Svetlana’s contact again but he really needed to get his mind straight. This was his rookie season. He needed to excel and the way he had been playing, he would be spending more time benched or in the penalty box soon.

“Mr. Rozanov. How can I help you?” The gruff voice as in Russian.

“Hollander. I need you get more information. I want everything.”

“Very well. Give me a week.”

Ilya paused at that. It was amazing what money could do. “Another thing. Do you have any one who could maybe follow him? I see—”

“Follow how closely?”

Ilya breathed out, raising his head to the ceiling and pinching his eyes closed. “How close can you get?”

“Depends, this will not be cheap.”

“I dont care. I just need-”

“Mr. Rozanov, I have a contact that can get the information-they can go as close as you want. I just cannot be traced back to this and you need to tell me exactly how much information you want.”

“Get everything. I dont care how. Just do it. I want to know absolutely everything. I want to know who he spends his time with, where he is all the time.”

“Understood, sir. Give me some time to move some things into place and you’ll hear back.”

So he waited. Ilya stalked social media. Hollander seemed to not use any of the normal platforms but he did appear a fair amount in the teams official accounts and sometime he got lucky and spotted him on the other teammates accounts. It was rather pathetic the way he was looking over accounts during his free time.

He was convinced that this infatuation would end once they fucked. And Ilya was determined to have that happen soon.

He was on his way home after training. Nearly another week passed before the package arrived. The courier stopped him and gave him a box. He put it in his car and raced home while sneaking glances down at the brown box, his name in cyrillic was the only information on it.

After getting into his apartment, he threw his coat and hat towards the kitchen island and grabbed a knife to open the box. Inside he found a phone and tablet. The folded note was also in Russian-

Phone is mirrored. Enter 1085 to access Mr. Hollander’s phone as it is being used. Enter 2008 to use for historical data. Tablet is connected to a tail placed on Hollander and to cameras placed in his home.

Body cam will be activated while on the street-working on access while in arenas.

Wire instructions will be sent tonight. Please send payment in american dollars.

Ilya’s heart sped up. He quickly powered up the cell phone and typed in 1085, grinning when the background changed into a picture of what must have been the day of the draft with his parents? The woman looked alot like Hollander-pretty brown eyes and dark hair. The man was tall and well built but average looking with light eyes and graying light hair. Hollander was in between them, holding up his Voyeguers jersey.

He was about to go through the the apps installed when the keypad popped up and he put the phone down and watched a call connect.

‘Hi Hayd.’ Hollandar’s voice came from the loud speaker

“Hey Buddy. Whats going on?”

“I got the invite for Friday but I don't think I'm going to make it. My mom has this thing set up for me. Some type of commercial for the new Under Armour shirts.”

“Jesus Shane. Can she let you have some downtime?”

Ilya listened to the conversation for a few minutes. The only Hayden he knew of was Hollander's teammate. That friendship would need to be looked into. Ilya hated whenever they were interviewed together, Pike had stood closer than usual to Hollander, sometimes having his arm around the smaller man's shoulders.

He sounded insane—in the back of his mind he recognized that but the anger didn't subside. He pulled his normal cell phone to record the call to research later, not all the words were easy to understand for him so he pulled the tablet while they spoke for a few more minutes.

The tablet powered on and the first images came in simple sequences. Shane leaving a hotel. Shane outside the arena. Shane talking to someone, his expression lighter, easier. Then another image loaded, and this time he was laughing. Not controlled. Not measured—real.

Ilya went completely still. He did not react immediately. He studied the details instead, the angle of his posture, the proximity of the people around him, the way his expression shifted. He grabbed his cell: “More frequent updates,” he sent.

A moment later, “Open the app with a green eye as the icon.”

He tossed his phone back on the and found the app. It took a few seconds but a video feed of a living room came on. He was about to text the investigator again when he let out a breath as Hollander came on the screen, wearing basketball shorts and a plain tighter t-shirt. Ilya eased himself onto the barstool as he watched the Omega pace around the living room, on the phone. Блядь—this was a live feed.

He sat there for over an hour, watching the live feed and a few phone calls. It was so boring but for some reason he found it incredibly endearing. By the third day, it became routine. He checked the feed in between drills, between periods, before sleep, when he woke. Not compulsively. Not chaotically. He had himself under control, he told himself.

—

Across the country, Shane did not understand why everything felt off.

He had not meant to keep the tank top. He told himself that the first night, and then again the next morning, and again when he packed. It stayed anyway. Folded at first, tucked neatly between his clothes, then placed on the bed, then left within reach.

The room felt too quiet around him. Shane lay back against the pillows, staring at the ceiling, his hand drifting without thought until it found the fabric. He stilled, his fingers tightening slightly as he pulled it closer.

The scent had started to fade, but it was still there if he focused. Something warm beneath the sharper edge of it, something that settled low in his chest and slowed his breathing without permission. Shane shut his eyes.

“Don’t,” he said to himself quietly.

It did not help.

He pushed himself upright, dropping the fabric beside him as if it might burn him. His gaze moved across the room, landing on his suitcase, on the neatly folded clothes inside it.

The thought came without warning. *Build it.* Shane froze. “No.”

But his body had already begun mapping it out. The placement of pillows, the weight of blankets, the shape of something enclosed and contained. It would be easy. Too easy. A few minutes and it would be done.

This was not home. It was a hotel room. Temporary. Exposed. Anyone could walk in. Housekeeping. Teammates. Staff. The image hit hard enough to break the thought apart.

Shane stood abruptly, pacing once before stopping himself.

“You don’t do that here,” he muttered. His gaze dropped back to the bed, to the tank top. That was already too much. He sat down again, slower this time, and pulled it just a little closer. Not a nest, but holding the piece of clothing close was just close enough.

Later, he picked up his phone, not thinking about it, just needing something else to focus on. The highlight reels of the Bears last game loaded, and Ilya appeared on the screen.

The hit was brutal. Clean. Too hard.

Shane sat down on the edge of the bed, his grip tightening slightly around his phone as he watched. Another clip followed. Another hit. Something about it felt different. Not wrong, exactly, but more intense- sharper. He exited the video, then opened it again, watching it a second time without understanding why he could not stop.

The next day, the locker room felt different. Nothing had changed, but Shane noticed everything. A hand brushing his shoulder as someone passed made him shift immediately. A knee bumping his on the bench had him standing before he could think about it.

“Dude, you good?”

“Yeah,” he said too quickly, already moving away.

—

Shane had not meant to keep the tank top, that was the truth.

The first morning after everything with Ilya, he had stared at it lying near the end of the hotel bed for nearly a full minute, black fabric wrinkled and carrying the faintest trace of scent. He should have left it there. He should have thrown it into the pile of abandoned clothes for housekeeping to deal with. Instead, he folded it carefully and tucked it into his own bag before he could think too hard about why.

Now, over a week later, it had somehow become part of his routine.

At first it stayed buried neatly beneath his clothes where he did not have to look at it. Then it became something he left near the pillow while sleeping. Somewhere along the line, without consciously deciding it, Shane had started reaching for it whenever the strange restless feeling beneath his skin became too sharp to ignore.

And lately, that feeling was almost constant.

By the time the team left for their next road trip, Shane's nerves had gotten noticeably worse. The restlessness followed him from city to city now, settling into him quietly enough that nobody else seemed to fully notice yet. Hotel rooms felt wrong almost immediately after stepping inside them. Too open. Too temporary. Too empty in a way that made his chest tighten every night once the noise of teammates and arenas disappeared.

The instincts were getting worse too. Every night the same thoughts crept in while he tried to sleep. Pull the blankets closer. Move the pillows. Build something enclosed. Something softer, something safe. It terrified him how natural the thoughts felt.

Shane sat alone on the edge of another hotel bed somewhere in Chicago, staring blankly at the folded blankets near the foot of the mattress while traffic lights flickered faintly through the curtains. His duffel bag lay half-open near the desk. The room smelled like detergent, stale air conditioning, and faint traces of the tank top resting beside him.

His eyes drifted toward it automatically.

That was already too much.

The scent had faded over the last several days, but enough remained that his body still reacted immediately whenever he touched it. Warm leather. Cedar. Something deeper underneath that settled low in his chest and loosened the tension in his muscles before he could stop it.

Shane hated that. Hated how quickly his body calmed around it. Hated the awful sense of comfort that came every time he pulled it closer. Slowly, he picked it up again, fingers curling tightly into the soft fabric.

His shoulders relaxed almost instantly. "Fuck," he whispered quietly. That scared him more than anything else. Because he was beginning to understand exactly why Omegas built nests in the first place. Comfort, security.

His body kept reaching desperately toward those things now, especially at night when he was alone. The urges arrived strongest in hotel rooms where nothing felt familiar and nobody smelled right.

Except this. Shane looked toward the extra pillows again. The folded blankets. His suitcase.

Move them closer.

The thought came so naturally it made his stomach twist.

Layer the blankets there, pillows against the wall, something enclosed, something hidden.

His breathing became uneven. He could almost picture it taking shape around him. Warm. Quiet. Protected. *Safe*.

Shane stood abruptly. “No.”

The word came out sharper this time.

He paced once across the room, dragging both hands back through his damp hair before forcing himself to stop moving.

This was a hotel room. Not home. Anyone could walk in.

Housekeeping, teammates, coaches.

The image of someone opening the door and seeing it hit hard enough to break the instinct apart for a moment. “You don’t do that here,” he muttered to himself.

The words sounded weak even to him. Because part of him still wanted to. His gaze drifted helplessly back toward the bed. Toward the tank top still clenched tightly in his hand.

Not a nest, just close enough.

Shane sat back down heavily against the mattress, pulling the shirt unconsciously closer against his chest while exhaustion settled over him in waves. He stared blankly toward the television for several long minutes before finally reaching for his phone beside him.

He did not even realize what he was doing until the NHL app was already open.

Then Ilya’s game highlights loaded onto the screen.

Shane’s stomach dropped immediately.

Ilya looked different.

Not visibly. Not in a way most people would probably notice. But Shane noticed.

The aggression was sharper now. Less controlled.

The first hit came fast and brutal, driving another player violently into the boards hard enough to make the crowd erupt. The replay slowed the impact from multiple angles while commentators praised the physicality of it.

Shane barely heard them.

He watched Ilya instead. The stillness afterward. The way he stood there for half a second too long watching the other player struggle back up.

Another clip followed almost immediately. Another hit. Worse this time.

Shane sat down harder against the mattress, eyes fixed helplessly on the screen.

“That’s too much,” he whispered quietly.

But even saying it, he knew the truth. It was not random. It was intentional. And somehow that made it worse.

His chest tightened painfully as another replay showed Ilya skating away without looking back.

Shane exited the video.

Then reopened it less than thirty seconds later.

He did not know why he kept watching.

Maybe because he could not stop thinking about him.

Maybe because some broken part of him liked being looked at with that same intensity.

That thought made guilt twist violently through his stomach.

He dropped the phone onto the bed beside him like it had burned him.

The room fell quiet again.

Too quiet.

Shane pressed both hands over his face and exhaled shakily into the silence.

He missed him.

The realization landed suddenly and horribly.

Not just physically.

Not just the scent or the kiss or the overwhelming instinctual pull that kept making his body betray him.

He missed the attention.

Missed the terrifying certainty in Ilya’s eyes.

Missed the feeling of being looked at like nothing else in the room mattered.

Shane swallowed hard against the tightness suddenly sitting in his throat.

“This is bad,” he whispered quietly.

No one answered.

After a long moment, his hand drifted back toward the tank top again.

This time, he did not stop himself from pulling it against his chest before eventually falling asleep with it tangled tightly in his hands.

—

That night, Ilya reviewed another set of images. Shane crossing a street, entering a building, sitting at a table. Ilya zoomed in, studying the small shifts in expression, comparing them to memory. Better.

He set the phone down slowly and leaned back.

Now it was clearer. Not complete, but enough.

This was not distance nor absence. This felt like progress, he felt in better control of his emotions now. It would only take a few days of watching over Hollander before he would find something else to obsess over.

He sat up in surprise when he heard his apartment door open. Shoved the tablet and extra cell phone into his nightstand before Svetlana walked into his bedroom with a grin. She shrugged off her long coat, revealing a bright red lacey underwear set that would usually have Ilya ready for some fun right away but they both noticed something was wrong almost immediately.

Not because Ilya said anything, but he was just sitting there in bed, a total lack of interest was almost shocking.

Usually, when she came over after games, the atmosphere carried a familiar rhythm to it. Music low in the background. Vodka already poured before she even took her coat off. Ilya stretched out across the couch or leaning against the kitchen counter watching her with that lazy, predatory focus he wore so naturally. There was always an edge to him after games, especially aggressive ones. Adrenaline still lingering beneath his skin. Restlessness. Hunger.

Tonight, the apartment felt strangely cold. Not physically, but emotionally. Ilya had barely looked up when she walked in. That alone was alarming.

“Well,” Svetlana said lightly as she shut the door behind herself, slipping off her boots. “Either you lost tonight or somebody died.”

“We won.”

His voice came out flat. He needed to make sure Shane was staying in for the night. He still lived with his parents and they were out for the night.

Svetlana frowned slightly as she walked further inside. Ilya swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up fully and grabbed a glass of vodka near his elbow. The television played muted highlights in the background, though he clearly was not watching them.

His attention remained fixed towards the nightstand. Towards the hidden phone.

“I was expecting an invitation. I come all the way here, leaving the parties you never want to go to now, and you just lay there after seeing me in *this*?” she asked, tossing off her coat.

Usually that line earned her at least a smirk.

Tonight, nothing.

“Mm.”

Svetlana leaned against the dresser, quietly studying him. She had known Ilya for almost ten years now, long enough to recognize his moods. Most people assumed he was impossible to read because his expressions rarely changed, but that was not true at all. Ilya felt things intensely. He simply controlled how much other people were allowed to see.

Right now, the control looked strained. “You are being strange,” she said finally.

“No.”

“You almost concussed your own teammate tonight.”

That got his attention.

Barely.

His eyes lifted toward her for a second before drifting back to the nightstand.

“He should watch where he skates.”

Svetlana stared.

Then laughed once in disbelief. “Jesus Christ.” she said in Russian.

Still nothing.

Now she was genuinely curious.

Slowly, she rounded the island and reached for the vodka bottle herself. “What happened to you?”

“Nothing happened.” Another lie. A bad one this time.

Svetlana poured herself a drink and deliberately nudged his knee with hers. Normally that alone would have shifted the atmosphere immediately. Ilya liked touch. Any touch honestly. He was physical by nature, possessive without effort even in situations that meant very little to him.

Tonight he barely reacted. That was new, and very unlike her friend. Her eyes narrowed slightly. "There's someone new?"

That finally made him look at her properly. Not guilty, not defensive - worse.

Guarded.

Svetlana sat back slightly. "Oh my God," she said softly, the realization beginning to settle. "There is."

"There is not."

"Ilyanusha. You ask as if I don't know you. You usually want to fuck after games. I didn't run into anyone around here so I know you didn't have one already. I didn't run into anyone after the game today either."

"I am tired."

"You have never once in your life been too tired to fuck me."

His mouth twitched faintly at that, but the reaction felt hollow.

Svetlana watched him carefully now. Interesting. Very interesting.

She had always known eventually somebody would get under his skin badly enough to disrupt the perfect control he wrapped around himself. She simply had not expected it to happen this quickly.

Or this severely. "Who are they?"

Ilya's expression closed immediately. That answered the question too.

Svetlana blinked once. "Oh, wow."

"Do not start."

"You brought home a hockey player?"

"I did not bring him home."

"So dramatic already." She took another sip before tilting her head. "Is this the one from the commercial?"

Silence.

Then: "You watched it?"

“I have eyes, Ilya.” A pause. “And internet access.”

He looked away again.

Svetlana’s curiosity sharpened instantly. Because there it was again. That strange tension.

Something deeper and infinitely more dangerous. She knew Ilya inside and out. Knew the real him- the small boy who was brilliant and protective and beautiful.

“You actually like him.”

The words came out softer this time. Careful. Ilya’s jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. “No.” Too fast.

Svetlana smiled slightly into her glass. “Ah. So it’s serious.”

His glare flicked toward her immediately. “It is not serious.”

“Then why are you acting like somebody shot your dog?”

“I am not.”

“You are one bad game away from murdering a referee.”

That actually made him exhale sharply through his nose in something almost resembling amusement. Progress.

Svetlana leaned closer against the dresser. “What’s different about this one?”

“Nothing.” Another bad lie.

“You have had plenty of pretty boys before.”

“I know.”

“You have had hockey players before.”

“I know.”

“You have had clingy ones. Emotional ones. Crazy ones. One of them cried in your kitchen for three hours.”

“He was dramatic.”

“You liked it.”

“I tolerated it.”

Svetlana rolled her eyes. “So what is different?”

Ilya went quiet. That silence stretched long enough that she began genuinely expecting him not to answer. Then finally:

“He is...” Ilya stopped.

The hesitation alone startled her.

Ilya never hesitated.

“He is what?”

His fingers tapped once against the side of the glass.

“Interesting.”

Svetlana burst out laughing.

“Interesting?” she repeated incredulously. “That is your explanation? Ilya, you nearly killed three people this week.”

“I did not kill anyone.”

“You understand that is not comforting.”

He ignored her.

But she noticed something then. The furtive glances he kept throwing to his nightstand.

Protective, attached.

Her amusement faded slightly.

“Oh,” she said more quietly this time. This was worse than she thought. “You really have it bad.”

“I do not.”

“You absolutely do.”

He stood abruptly then, grabbing the vodka bottle and moving toward the living room windows. The city lights reflected dimly across the glass while snow drifted lazily outside.

Svetlana watched his shoulders tighten beneath the thin black shirt stretched across his back.

“He is just a distraction,” Ilya said finally. “It will pass.” The words sounded practiced, empty.

Even he did not seem convinced by them.

Svetlana rose slowly and walked over beside him. “Then why does it sound like you are trying to convince yourself?”

His jaw flexed. No answer.

Interesting. Very, very interesting. She studied him quietly for another moment before finally asking, “Have you even slept with him properly yet?”

A pause. “No.”

Svetlana stared at him. “You are acting like this and you have not even fucked him?”

“He is complicated.”

That nearly made her laugh again.

“Ilya,” she said carefully, “you once hooked up with a married politician’s son during playoffs because you were bored.”

“He was annoying.”

“You still did it.”

“He looked good on his knees.” That sounded more like him at least. But only briefly.

The silence settled back in immediately afterward.

Svetlana leaned against the window beside him. “So what is this really?”

Ilya remained still for so long she thought he might ignore her completely.

Then finally: “I cannot stop thinking about him.”

There it was. Not love. Not romance. Worse- obsession.

Svetlana felt the shift immediately. And judging by the way Ilya stared out at the city like he was trying to outrun his own thoughts, he felt it too. “You should leave him alone,” she said quietly.

Ilya looked at her then. Actually looked at her. And the cold certainty in his expression made something uncomfortable crawl down her spine.

“No.” Simple. Absolute.

Svetlana suddenly understood that whatever this thing was had already gone too far.

Neither of them spoke for a while after that.

Eventually, she nudged his shoulder lightly. “Come to bed before you spiral into a supervillain monologue.”

A faint smirk tugged briefly at the corner of his mouth.

Small, but real. Progress again.

The bedroom stayed dark except for the dim city glow spilling through the curtains. Svetlana changed into one of his shirts automatically while Ilya stripped down to boxers, movements slower than usual. Still distracted, still elsewhere.

When she climbed into bed beside him, she expected him to reach for her eventually. That was how this usually worked. Comfortable. Familiar. Physical without complication.

Instead, Ilya simply lay beside her staring at the ceiling.

Minutes passed. Svetlana rolled onto her side finally, propping herself up on one elbow. “You really are not going to touch me?”

“I am touching you now.”

His arm rested loosely around her waist.

Barely. She snorted softly. “This is tragic.”

That finally earned another quiet exhale that almost resembled laughter.

Eventually she settled against his chest anyway, surprised when he actually relaxed slightly afterward. Not sexually. Just... calmer.

His fingers moved absently against her back while his mind clearly remained somewhere else entirely.

“Hm,” Svetlana murmured sleepily after a while. “You know what the worst part is?”

“What?”

“You look guilty.”

That made his hand still.

Svetlana lifted her head slightly to study him in the dark. “You never feel guilty.”

“I do not feel guilty.”

“Liar.”

Silence.

Then quietly: “He looked frightened.” The admission surprised both of them.

Svetlana stared. There it was again. That hollow tone, something raw enough to hollow him out from the inside anyway.

“You should really leave this boy alone,” she whispered.

Ilya’s arm tightened around her instinctively.

“No,” he repeated again.

But this time, lying there in the dark with his thoughts clearly somewhere far away, the certainty sounded thinner than before.

Chapter 7: Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

We're getting to the good parts. I managed to salvage this from too many cuts by my sister. But if I haven't scared anyone away yet I might as well start the unhinged parts like I planned.

I'm writing this while running a midgrade fever and on no sleep-I might come back mid week and change some stuff or roll with it and keep typing away for chapter 8.

Thank you for the reviews-they truly make my day soooooo much better (especially douzi96, little_blue_owl and Peixinho_001-they're reviews made me push this chapter out faster and not let scenes get deleted)

Six months later, nothing had gotten better. Ilya spent most of his free time watching games he pretended he had no interest in or listening to conversations dull enough that even he occasionally questioned his own patience. There had been no sharp realization, no dramatic moment where he understood something had gone fundamentally wrong. Nothing had dissuaded him from continuing to watch his so-called rival.

It had happened slowly, quietly.

Somewhere between flights, road games, and late nights in anonymous hotel rooms, Shane Hollander had stopped feeling like a temporary fixation and became something far more inconvenient.

At first, Ilya assumed time would solve it. Distance usually did.

He had never struggled much with wanting something and eventually losing interest once the novelty disappeared. People bored him quickly. Even beautiful people. Especially beautiful people. Bodies had always been easy. Temporary. Disposable. He liked movement, liked distractions that arrived briefly and left before they became inconvenient.

Attachment had never interested him.

So naturally, he assumed whatever strange thing had happened in that hotel room would eventually dull into memory. Instead, distance sharpened it.

Months later, he still remembered everything with humiliating clarity.

The exact expression on Shane's face whenever he became overwhelmed. The way he avoided eye contact until forced into it. The softness hidden beneath suppressants. The compulsive neatness of him. The eagerness that had surprised them both.

Most annoyingly, he remembered the uncertainty.

The way Shane had looked at him like he did not know whether to run or stay. Nobody else had ever looked at him that way.

That became a problem. The first replacement happened accidentally. Dark hair. Quiet disposition. Slender in roughly the same ways. Close enough, in dim lighting, that something restless beneath Ilya's skin briefly settled. Until the man laughed. It was wrong. The way he moved was wrong.

By morning, irritation had replaced whatever distraction he had hoped for. He had nearly said the wrong name. That unsettled him. Not because he felt guilty.

Because it annoyed him. Nothing worked.

Not distance. Not distractions. Not other people.

Even Svetlana noticed eventually.

“You’re getting predictable,” she said one night while leaning comfortably against his kitchen counter, watching him with open amusement over the rim of a vodka glass.

Ilya barely looked up from his phone. “No.”

“You are.” Her eyes narrowed slightly. “They all look the same now.”

Silence. That was enough to answer.

“Dark hair,” she continued thoughtfully. “Pretty. Slightly anxious. Quiet. Pretty beta’s or omega’s.”

A pause. He ignored her.

She tilted her head, studying him longer. “Whatever happened to blondes?”

“I never cared about blondes.”

“No,” she agreed slowly. “You cared about novelty.”

That landed harder than he expected. Because she was right. Ilya had always liked movement. Temporary things. Temporary people. Brief distractions that never stayed long enough to become inconvenient.

Nothing about this felt temporary anymore. That was the real problem. He still had not contacted Shane even though he had come up with logical explanations to have his phone number.

Because now Shane existed almost entirely in fragments and stolen knowledge.

Interviews. Games. Media clips. Press conferences.

Then watching the video feeds when he was home. Listening to his phone conversations with

his parents and friends. Watching the body cam that the security guard he hired when he went out- late at night in dark hotel rooms while the rest of the team slept he allowed himself to indulge in his obsession. It should have felt pathetic.

Instead, it felt necessary -comforting, even.

Ilya learned things without meaning to. The way Shane touched the back of his neck whenever anxious. The way he only took a few bites of dessert after team dinners. How exhaustion made him quieter instead of irritable. How he stood too close to exits in unfamiliar rooms without seeming aware of it.

Things nobody else noticed. Things nobody should reasonably know. That should have bothered him more than it did. Instead, it felt like instinct. Like paying attention, like understanding.

And understanding made distance easier to tolerate. At least temporarily. Ilya knew everything about Hollander on a surface level but he needed more.

Ilya wanted to know if he kept his hair long enough to have to push back like he constantly did out because he wanted to or if it was because his day was so busy that he didn't have time to get a haircut.

Ilya didn't know if his thick thighs would still be as smooth as they had been all thoughts months ago, or how they'll look with bite marks all over from where he planned to bury his head between them and lick his virgin pussy and suck his cock again. He didn't know nearly enough, and it needed to change this weekend.

The ban on him that Ilya had set for himself had been lifted and it was time to claim him, even if it wouldn't be a permanent claim. The All Star weekend mixer proved that Hollander was too beautiful to be left unprotected, that little fuckwit Elliot Long from one of the American teams gave him the final push to move things along.

He stood towards the back of the room and watched as the tall blonde man greeted Hollander and put his disgusting arm around the smaller man. He watched as Hollander tried to shrug away when Pike came over to talk to him and he broke the glass of vodka in his hand as he watched the other man remove his arm from Hollander's shoulders but not before dragging his hand down slowly his back before pausing at the small of Hollander's back.

He stood there as he watched Shane move away quickly following Pike and another teammate. Ilya fisted his bleeding palm and made his way to the man now walking towards the bar.

“Rozanov! Great to meet you man!” The idiot said, forgetting his drink on the counter.

“Pleased to meet you too. I was wondering if you knew somewhere I could smoke. I keep getting stopped and its just too much.”

They walked out and made their way outside. Ilya stayed a few paces away to hopefully not make it obvious that they were walking out together. Once outside, Ilya removed his suit jacket and placed it over the bench nearby.

He pulled out his lighter and a cigarette and blew out a stream of smoke as he looked around. No one was out, the other man was prattling on too fast for Ilya to fully understand the whole one sided conversation.

“Do you think it's okay for you to touch people that don't belong to you?” He suddenly asked.

“What?”

“Hollander. I saw how you touched him in there. That is not allowed.”

“Look man, Shane’s an unattached beta as far as I know. He could speak up for himself but-”

Ilya didn't let him finish that sentence before he lunged and tackled the other man towards the alleyway by the doors, moving them completely out of view. He let the rage and tension of the past few months out and landed blow after blow.

When he paused after several minutes, he noticed that the other man was about to pass out.

“Listen to me carefully. Hollander is off limits. To everyone. You look his way again, I will end you.”

Ilya had forced himself to back away and went back to the bench and picked up his jacket. He

slowly made his way back inside, smiling to himself when he saw the object of his obsession walking by himself into the restroom.

Across the country, Shane had stopped believing the feeling would go away.

At first, he blamed stress. Then travel. Then the stronger suppressants. Then the increasingly uncomfortable realization that maybe his instincts were trying to tell him something he did not want to hear.

Nothing obvious had happened. That somehow made everything worse. It was small things. The persistent feeling of being watched while walking back to hotels after dinners. The strange habit he had developed of checking over his shoulder more often than necessary. The way crowded spaces suddenly made him tense in a way they never used to.

His teammates still touched him casually without thinking. Shoulder bumps. Hands brushing his back in locker rooms. Leaning too close during conversations. But Shane hated it now.

Not because it hurt. Because it felt wrong, like he was betraying Rozanov which he knew was ridiculous. Everything just felt wrong lately, too loud, too close.

He still kept the tank top. That was its own humiliation.

Months later, it remained folded near whatever pillow he slept beside on road trips. He had stopped pretending it was temporary around the same time he stopped pretending he slept better without it nearby. The scent had faded significantly by now, but enough remained. Enough that it still calmed him. Enough that he hated himself for needing it.

Some nights, especially during longer road trips, he caught himself rearranging blankets without realizing it. Pulling pillows too close. Creating something dangerously close to a nest before forcing himself to stop. His instincts only got louder when he was alone. And now, layered underneath all of it, sat something worse. Paranoia.

Enough to make him close blinds automatically. Enough to make him check locks twice. Enough to turn around too quickly whenever footsteps lingered behind him.

Nothing was ever there, but still-

Something felt wrong. That feeling only worsened when people started acting strange around him. "You ghost everybody now?"

Shane blinked across the locker room. "What?"

Hayden shrugged while tying his skates. "That girl from Denver."

Silence.

Because Shane vaguely remembered her.

Friendly conversation after a charity event. Someone introduced by mutual friends. Easy enough to talk to. Nothing serious.

"You gave her your number," Hayden said.

"I never heard from her."

Hayden frowned. "Apparently she thought you weren't interested."

Weird. Not impossible. Still weird.

It kept happening. Different cities, different people. Introductions that quietly disappeared. Numbers exchanged that somehow turned into silence. Enough to feel strange, but not enough to explain. Not enough to make sense. He would just get his phone checked when he went back home for more than a few days at a time.

Shane found himself staring at his phone more often because of it. Checking notifications. Messages. Nothing unusual. Still, something felt off. The hair on the back of his neck prickles and the horrible sensation of being watched hits him again. It's irrational, he was in a roomful of people, many of them were looking at him since there was so much press surrounding the fact that the two top rookies of the season had both made it to the all star

game in their first year playing. Surreptitiously, he took a moment and glanced around the room, he caught Rozanov's eye for a second but quickly looked away.

“Are you okay?” Haiden asked.

“Yeah, I just had that horrible feeling of being watched, do you know what I mean?” He wrinkled his nose, hating that he sounded like an idiot.

“Oh my gosh, I get that all the time when go swimming at night and I get out of the pool and have to walk back up to the house. It’s weird.”

He left the mixer and went to his room. The Alpha scent of the place should have been too much but he swore he could mostly smell Rozanov in the air. He went to the bed and found an itinerary with his name. He almost ignored it. Another media day schedule, another obligation.

His thumb moved automatically.

Then stopped.

**Shared Press Conference:
Ilya Rozanov & Shane Hollander 11:00 - 13:00**

Everything in him went still. No.

No.

Months. It had been months. Months of distance. Months of avoidance. Months of pretending that enough space between them meant something had settled. His stomach dropped hard enough to make him physically straighten. He reread the line. Then dropped the phone onto the bed beside him. The room suddenly felt too warm.

Still noticed how much more aggressive Ilya had gotten. Still searched interviews without meaning to. Still slept too close to that stupid shirt. Distance had helped, just barely enough. And now suddenly the distance was gone.

He pressed both hands hard over his face. “This is bad,” he whispered quietly into the empty room. No one answered.

All-Star Weekend was supposed to feel different from the regular season. Lighter. More relaxed. Less like work and more like spectacle. The hotel lobby alone looked like the league had taken over every available surface, banners hanging from the balconies, branded signs near the elevators, staff moving in coordinated clusters with clipboards and headsets while players, agents, family members, media people, and sponsors threaded through the space in overlapping streams.

Shane stepped through the revolving doors with his bag over one shoulder and immediately felt the strange, practiced smile settle onto his face. It was automatic by now. Pleasant. Polite. Professional. His mother had drilled that into him long before he had become old enough to understand why it mattered. Smile when people are watching. Shake hands firmly. Do not look nervous. Do not make anyone work too hard to like you.

Usually, it worked.

Today, it felt like a mask sitting slightly crooked over his face.

He kept his gaze moving as he crossed the lobby with one of the team staff members walking beside him, nodding when necessary, answering when spoken to, trying not to look like he was searching the room. That was the problem. He was trying not to look. He was trying very hard not to scan every corner, every group near the lounge, every cluster of players standing near the check-in area, because if he looked too obviously, someone would notice, and if someone noticed, they might ask.

The lobby smelled wrong. Too many scents layered over one another, expensive cologne, coffee, wool coats damp from cold weather outside, leather bags, flowers from the reception desk, Alpha scents under blockers, Beta scents barely noticeable beneath it all. Shane’s suppressant patches held firm beneath his clothes, one at the side of his neck hidden by his collar and another at the small of his back, both checked twice in the elevator and once again before stepping out. They should have made him feel secure.

They did not.

His hand twitched toward his neck before he stopped it.

“Shane Hollander.” He turned automatically toward the voice, grateful for the distraction until he saw who it belonged to.

Scott Hunter stood a few feet away near one of the league banners, taller than Shane had expected in person even though he had seen him on television for most of his life.

The thirty nine year old still had broad shoulders, still carrying that steady Alpha presence that made people move naturally around him without thinking. His hair had a tiny bit gray near the temples now, more visible up close than it was on broadcasts, and there were faint lines around his eyes that made him look warmer somehow, less like a hockey icon and more like a man who had survived long enough in the league to stop trying to prove every room belonged to him.

Shane’s expression changed before he could control it.

Scott smiled like he had noticed and was kind enough not to comment. “Good to finally meet you properly.”

Shane blinked once, then immediately felt embarrassed by how quickly his expression must have changed.

Because this was Scott Hunter.

Not in the distant way celebrities existed on television or interviews clipped into highlight reels online, but standing directly in front of him like a normal person who happened to also be one of the most respected players in the league. Someone Shane had watched for years. Someone whose jersey he had worn so often as a teenager that his mother eventually stopped replacing it after the numbers started peeling.

It was ridiculous. He was an adult. A professional athlete- Scott Hunter’s peer.

And somehow still internally fourteen.

“You alright there rook?” Scott asked, amusement settling into the corners of his voice.

Shane straightened too quickly. “Yeah. Sorry. It’s just weird.”

“Weird?”

“I mean-” Shane exhaled awkwardly. “You were kind of my favorite player growing up.”

Scott laughed softly, easy and unbothered in a way that somehow made Shane more comfortable instead of less.

“That sentence gets more offensive every year.”

“No, I didn’t mean old-”

“You definitely meant old.”

Shane groaned quietly under his breath, earning another laugh. The thing that surprised him most was how normal Scott felt. Not intimidating, or performative.

Years in the league had worn down whatever edges celebrity might have created. He carried himself like someone who had already proven everything he needed to prove and no longer cared about taking up unnecessary space doing it again.

Even his Alpha scent sat quietly beneath blockers, present but unobtrusive in a way Shane immediately noticed before hating himself for noticing anything at all.

It was warm, comforting. The kind of scent that did not press. Scott adjusted the strap of his own bag before nodding toward the elevators. “Come on. They’ve got us trapped in the same hotel for three days. Might as well make friends.”

The word settled oddly in Shane’s chest.

Friends. Easy. Normal. They walked together toward the elevators while people called Scott’s name every few steps, sponsors and media staff greeting him with the kind of familiar respect that came only after years of being impossible to dislike.

“So,” Scott said casually, “how bad’s your first All-Star Weekend anxiety?”

Shane laughed weakly. “That obvious?”

“You’ve checked your phone four times in thirty seconds.”

Mortification hit immediately. “I’m not nervous.”

Scott gave him a look.

“Okay,” Shane admitted. “Maybe a little.”

“A lot?”

“A lot.”

“Good.” Scott smiled. “Means you care.”

That should not have helped as much as it did. It still did. Then Scott added, casually enough that it almost caught Shane off guard, “My husband said I looked like I was going to throw up before each one.”

Something in Shane immediately softened. *Husband*, not mate. Because there it was again. The thing he had quietly admired from afar for years. Scott never hid him. Never danced around the language. Never softened the reality of what he was. Like it had never been anything worth apologizing for.

Shane hated how much that mattered to him. He tried very hard not to think too hard about why.

Then the elevator doors opened. They stepped in and before the doors closed Ilya Rozanov stepped inside. For half a second, Shane forgot how to move. Ilya stood near the back of the elevator with his hands in the pockets of a dark coat, his blond curls slightly damp at the ends like he had come in from the cold not long before. He looked the same. That was the first terrible thing Shane noticed. Months had passed, and Ilya still looked exactly like the memory Shane had been trying to bury. Tall, loose-limbed, controlled in that way that never seemed stiff, blue eyes lifting with immediate recognition and settling on Shane like they were the only people in the entire.

Shane's pulse spiked so hard he felt it in his throat.

The memory of the previous hotel room came back all at once. The wall against his back. Ilya's hand at his chin. His voice telling him to look. The scent. The kiss. The overwhelming certainty in his eyes like he had already decided something Shane had not agreed to and did not entirely know how to refuse.

He must have stopped too suddenly because Scott glanced down at him.

"You good?"

Shane forced air into his lungs and made himself step forward. "Yeah. Sorry." Professional. Normal. Fine. He was fine.

The elevator was large, but not large enough. Scott stepped in beside him, and Shane moved automatically to stand near him, not because he was afraid exactly, not in any way he could explain cleanly, but because Scott felt steady. Ilya's gaze flicked briefly to the space between them, then back to Shane's face.

"Hollander," Ilya said.

His voice was calm, too calm.

Shane's mouth went dry. "Rozanov."

Scott looked between them with mild interest. "You two behave this weekend. This is supposed to be a good time for the fans."

"I know." Shane said at the same time Ilya said, "Ok."

Silence. Shane could feel his ears heat.

Ilya's mouth curved faintly, just enough to make Shane's stomach tighten. "We have spent some time together without fight coming.

“Commercial shoot,” Shane said quickly, gripping the strap of his bag harder. “League thing.”

“Ah.” Scott nodded, either missing the tension or politely deciding not to acknowledge it. “Right. The one with both of you staring like you were about to kill each other. I saw that on TV.”

Ilya’s eyes did not leave Shane. “Ah yes. Good editing.”

The elevator rose too slowly.

Shane stared at the glowing numbers above the doors and tried not to breathe too deeply. Ilya’s scent was muted under blockers, but proximity still made something underneath Shane’s skin react, some traitorous part of him recognizing before thought could interfere. He hated it, despised how immediate it was. Hated that even after months of silence, distance, paranoia, and confusion, his body still remembered before his mind could protect him.

When the doors finally opened on Scott’s floor, Shane nearly followed him out by reflex. Scott paused, smiling easily. “I’ll see you downstairs later.”

“Yeah,” Shane said, too fast. “Yeah. See you then.”

Scott gave him one last friendly nod and stepped out.

The doors slid closed.

Shane and Ilya were alone for exactly four seconds before Shane reached for the button to the next floor as if pressing it harder would make the elevator move faster.

“You look tired,” Ilya said. Shane’s hand froze against the panel. It was such a normal thing to say. Casual. Observational. It still made his skin go cold.

“I’m fine.”

“You don’t sound too sure.”

Shane turned his head slightly, despite himself.

Ilya's gaze moved over his face with slow, unnerving focus, taking in the shadows beneath his eyes, the stiff set of his mouth, the tension in his shoulders. It felt exactly like being studied. Like Rozanov was not just looking at him but comparing him against some private version he had kept all this time.

"You not sleeping," Ilya said.

Shane's heart kicked once against his ribs. "You don't know that."

Something flickered in Ilya's expression, gone too quickly to name. "I can see."

The elevator stopped.

Shane stepped out immediately, barely remembering to keep his pace normal. He did not look back, but he felt Ilya's eyes on him until the doors closed again.

By the time he reached his room, his hands were shaking.

He told himself it was because he had not eaten enough. That was easier than the truth.

The press conference was worse. Not at first. At first, it was simply the usual media chaos, bright lights, long table, microphones arranged in a neat line, name cards placed in front of each chair. Shane arrived early because being early gave him time to breathe and because his mother had trained him to never give people the chance to think he was unprepared. He sat where they directed him, adjusted the water bottle in front of him without thinking, and nodded politely as one of the league media coordinators explained the structure of the panel like he had not done a thousand of these before.

Then Ilya walked in.

Shane did not look at him immediately. That was deliberate. He focused on the coordinator. On the female and some male reporters shooting appreciative glances at the Alpha as he strode in. Then the microphones. Then the press packets stacked near the end of the table.

Anything else. Anything that did not involve watching Ilya cross the room toward the empty chair beside him with the same lazy, controlled confidence Shane remembered too well.

Ilya sat down like he belonged there, which, unfortunately, he did.

Their shoulders did not touch but Shane still felt the heat radiating from the larger man. There was a reasonable amount of space between the chairs. Enough for professionalism, enough for cameras. Not enough for Shane to forget he was there.

“You are avoiding me,” Ilya said under his breath, low enough that the microphones would not catch it.

Shane kept his face neutral. “Not here.” He had moved away from the microphone enough to whisper it, looking down as if adjusting his tie.

Ilya made a quiet sound that might have been amusement.

Shane picked up his water bottle, realized his hand was too tense, and set it down again without drinking.

The reporters started almost immediately once the panel opened, questions coming from every direction, overlapping in a way that always made these things harder than they looked on television. Shane was used to it. He could filter quickly, catching the important parts, choosing the safest answer, making it sound just personal enough to seem sincere and just polished enough to be usable.

Ilya handled the first few easily. A question about adjusting to the league. Another about being selected for the All-Star Weekend as a rookie. A joke about his reputation for getting into fights with most players. He answered with that dry confidence people loved from him, the accent making everything sound more deliberate, more amused, even when he said very little.

Then the questions sped up.

Three reporters tried to speak at once. Someone from the left asked about the pressure of representing Russian hockey. Someone from the right cut in about his physical play recently. Another asked about rumors of tension with teammates after a few penalties. The words overlapped, fast and sharp, too many at once.

For the first time that afternoon, Ilya hesitated. It was barely noticeable. Most people probably missed it. Shane did not.

Ilya's expression did not change, but his eyes shifted quickly from right to left, not confused exactly, more irritated at the speed and noise than unable to understand. Before he could think better of it, Shane leaned slightly toward his microphone.

"I can take that, if you don't mind." He said smoothly, drawing the attention toward himself before the silence could stretch. "I think all of us are dealing with pressure in different ways this weekend, but that's kind of the point of being here. You're surrounded by players who are the best at what they do, and there's a lot of noise around that. As for physical play, I mean, that's part of his game, right? Everyone here competes hard. Nobody gets to this level by being easy to play against."

The room shifted toward him immediately.

A few reporters redirected follow-ups.

Shane kept talking, polite and measured, giving enough that it sounded generous without saying anything that could become a headline. It was automatic, the same press instinct he always relied on when things got uncomfortable. Only when the attention settled more fully on him did he realize what he had done.

The press conference continued for another few minutes. Someone asked Shane about the shootout challenge. Someone asked Ilya about the fastest skater. Someone joked that the league had placed them together because people liked watching them compete, and Shane gave a careful laugh while Ilya leaned toward his microphone and said, "They like drama," which made the room laugh.

Shane's stomach tightened.

For one dangerous second, the room faded around them, and Shane realized he had turned his head toward Ilya without meaning to. Ilya was already looking at him. Of course he was. His expression was relaxed, almost amused, but his eyes were not.

He felt a hand caress his thigh with then a firm, deliberate squeeze through the fabric of his dress pants. Shane stopped breathing.

Nothing changed above the table. The lights stayed bright. Reporters kept scribbling. Someone asked another question from the back. Shane's face remained pleasant because

years of training and terror held it there, but beneath the table, every nerve in his body went violently awake.

Ilya's hand stayed only a second longer before lifting away, Shane felt branded by it. He imagined that when he stripped down for his shower tonight the large imprint of a hand would still be on his upper thigh. Somehow, he survived the rest of the panel.

The moment it ended, Shane stood too quickly. Ilya rose beside him. "Hollander," he said softly. Shane pretended not to hear.

He moved toward the side exit where Scott Hunter was waiting with two other players, laughing at something one of them had said. Scott looked up as Shane approached, and whatever was on Shane's face must have shifted his expression because the older man's amusement softened immediately.

"You okay?" Scott asked quietly.

Shane forced a laugh, too light. "Yeah. Press is just a lot."

Scott studied him for a second, not prying, not pushing. That alone nearly undid him. "Come on," Scott said, clapping him lightly on the shoulder in a way that did not make Shane flinch. "They've got us doing sponsor photos next. Misery loves company."

Shane went with him.

Behind them, Ilya watched.

He watched Scott's hand land briefly on Shane's shoulder. Watched Shane not move away. Watched the tension in Shane's posture ease in a way it had not eased once beside Ilya all afternoon.

The reaction inside him was immediate and ugly. Scott Hunter was not flirting, he couldn't be. That man was old, not good enough for Hollander. Plus he already had a mate.

That made it worse.

Flirting, Ilya could understand. Desire was simple. Competition was simple. But this was

something else. Shane looked at Scott like he trusted him. Like he admired him. Like being near him made the world quieter instead of louder.

That was intolerable.

For the rest of the afternoon, Ilya kept finding reasons to be in Shane's line of sight.

Not obviously.

Never obviously.

He knew how to move through rooms without appearing to seek anything. He stopped near sponsor walls when Shane passed. Lingered near hallways where groups were being sorted.

Joined conversations close enough that Shane could feel him there, close enough that he would have to acknowledge him if he turned.

Shane rarely did. That was new. And it irritated Ilya more than fear would have. Fear at least meant attention. Avoidance meant control slipping somewhere he could not immediately correct.

Every time Shane looked toward Scott instead, something colder settled in Ilya's chest.

Scott was older, established, respected in the way players became respected after surviving long enough to become part of the league's mythology. Worse, he was safe. Publicly bonded. Publicly devoted. An Alpha who had stood beside a male Omega for years without shame, without secrecy, without the sharp hunger Ilya knew he himself wore too easily when his control thinned.

Of course Shane admired him. Of course Shane would drift toward that. Of course that made Ilya want to put himself between them and stay there. By the time evening came, Shane had managed to avoid being alone with Ilya again. Only barely.

Every hallway felt like a trap. Every room felt too crowded and too exposed at the same time. He kept ending up near Scott because Scott was easy. Because Scott asked normal questions

and told normal stories and did not look at Shane like he could smell every thought he was trying to bury.

Still, Shane felt Ilya everywhere. Across rooms, behind conversations. In the moments when the back of his neck prickled for no reason and he looked up to find blue eyes already on him. He hated how quickly his body reacted. He hated that part of him had missed it.

The realization followed him back to his hotel room that night, sitting heavy in his chest as he closed the door and leaned back against it. The room was quiet. Too quiet. He checked the lock twice, then the blinds, then the bathroom, even though he knew how ridiculous that was.

His suitcase sat open near the dresser. The tank top was folded beneath his clothes. He did not take it out. Not immediately. He stood there for a long moment, pressing the heel of his hand against his sternum like he could physically hold himself together. Then his phone buzzed.

A message from the event coordinator.

Reminder: Skills Competition call time tomorrow 10:30 AM. Shootout group includes Hollander, Rozanov, Corrie , Hunter.

Shane stared at the names. Rozanov, Hunter, himself. Same group.

Of course.

His laugh came out small and humorless. “Great,” he muttered to the empty room. Then, because he had no discipline left at all, he opened the NHL app and searched Ilya’s name.

Across the hotel, Ilya sat in the dark and thought about Scott Hunter’s hand on Shane’s shoulder.

He thought about Shane looking away in the elevator. Shane helping him in the press conference. Shane freezing under his hand. Shane leaving with Scott. The weekend had only just begun, and already one thing was clear. Scott Hunter was going to be a problem.

Shane detested how much of it had felt real.

The skills competitions had somehow made everything worse. Scott had spent most of the day beside him, easy company in the middle of chaos, offering quiet advice without making it feel like criticism. They had laughed between events, traded stories about growing up in hockey culture, and for the first time all weekend, Shane had almost relaxed. Almost. Then he would look up and find Ilya watching.

Not subtly.

Never enough to be obvious to anyone else, but enough that Shane always noticed eventually. Across warmups. Sponsor events. Hallways. Training rooms. During media appearances. It had become impossible to ignore.

And somehow, infuriatingly, impossible not to notice.

The shootout challenge had gone worse for Ilya than anyone expected.

Or maybe better for Shane.

The crowd had been loud enough to feel through the ice by the final round, cameras tracking every movement while commentators eagerly pushed the rivalry harder with every second that passed.

“Rozanov currently holds the event record,” someone announced overhead. “Hollander’s got one last shot to beat it.”

Shane had not even meant to think about him. But he had. He always did.

Especially because Ilya stood near the boards watching with his arms folded across his chest, expression unreadable and annoyingly composed in the way only he seemed capable of being.

Shane remembered the commercial.

Remembered the way Ilya pushed until reactions slipped free before he could stop them.

Remembered the hotel room. The kiss. The impossible months afterward.

Then something sharp and competitive twisted through him.

Fine. This was just a game to Rozanov. Pictures of him going out with women and men hanging all over him were frequently shown in the gossip columns so obviously he was just messing with his mind. All Shane needed was for him to keep the secret. Apart from that they wouldn't need to ever speak again.

He skated up to the line and took aim with his stick. Fast. Clean.

Perfect. The crowd erupted. Two seconds faster. A new record.

Shane barely had time to process it before teammates collided into him, laughing and shouting while cameras shoved closer.

Across the ice, Ilya only watched. Still. Silent. Expression impossible to read.

Later, when Ilya won Fastest Skater and then helped carry the 2v2 event, Shane found himself watching anyway. Despite himself. Against his better judgment.

Because nobody moved like him. That was the problem. Nobody else occupied space the same way. Nobody else looked so terrifyingly controlled while skating hard enough to make everyone around him seem slower.

And worse - nobody else made Shane so painfully aware of himself.

Scott noticed eventually.

"You alright?" Shane blinked quickly.

They stood near the tunnel waiting for introductions, the arena loud around them.

"Yeah," Shane answered immediately. Too quickly.

Scott raised an eyebrow but let it go. "You look distracted."

“Tired.”

“Mm.”

The older Alpha looked unconvinced but kind enough not to press.

“Big game,” he said instead. “Don’t overthink it.”

Easy for him to say.

Scott Hunter looked like the kind of Alpha who had spent years learning exactly how to exist comfortably inside himself. Steady. Public. Safe.

The exact opposite of chaos. The exact opposite of Ilya Rozanov.

Across the rink, Ilya leaned against the boards, gaze already fixed on Shane.

The introductions blurred.

Then the faceoff. Of course. Center ice. Because apparently the universe hated him.

Shane crouched automatically, gripping his stick tighter while the referee positioned himself nearby. Then Rozanov leaned closer.

“Shane Hollander. Listen to the crowd. What would happen if I pulled you to me and shoved my tongue down your throat? How many would be shocked when they saw how immediately you would drop to your knees for me?”

Shane froze, thinking about what would happen if he backed away and asked for a line switch suddenly. He can play wing to another center but he didn’t think he could face off against Rozanov like this.

“Relax. Come to my room tonight. We need to talk.”

The whistle blew and they fought over the puck with Rozanov gaining the advantage but Shane recovered quickly less than a minute later.

The game ended more brutally than Shane expected. 6-3, their loss.

By the third period, adrenaline had burned through enough of the tension that instinct finally gave way to muscle memory. The entire weekend had been building toward this in ways Shane had not anticipated. The media had spent two straight days feeding the narrative until it had become impossible to escape. Hollander and Rozanov. The rookie rivalry. Opposite styles. Opposite personalities. The two of them neck and neck in nearly every event while commentators grinned knowingly over replay footage like they had stumbled into the perfect storyline.

Shane had gotten slammed against the boards just once by Rozanov before the game ended. He had tried to brace himself for impact but was surprised when the hit made more noise than hurt and for a moment, he was in Rozanov's arms again, looking into the intense eyes.

"Come to my room tonight. Either you come or I drag you out in front of everyone.

The referees came over and made them break away.

It was too loud to think properly.

Shane played hard because not thinking was easier than thinking. Because every time Rozanov crossed into his orbit something inside him tightened painfully. Because avoiding him became impossible once the game started.

Their team lost. Shane barely processed the final horn. Only the exhaustion afterward. The handshake line moved automatically, muscle memory carrying him through the familiar ritual while adrenaline slowly burned itself out.

Gloves tapped.

Quick nods. "Good game." "Hell of a goal." "See you next season." Routine.

Then Ilya stepped in front of him. Too close immediately. "1221." He whispered but Shane heard it clearly as if they were the only ones in the arena.

Up close, Ilya looked annoyingly composed for someone who had just lost. Damp hair curling slightly at the edges beneath his helmet, flushed from exertion, blue eyes fixed steadily on Shane like the rest of the line had stopped existing.

Their gloves met once. Brief. Professional. To anyone watching, it looked normal.

Another player stepped between them immediately after. Another handshake. Another meaningless exchange Shane barely heard. Because suddenly his pulse was too loud again.

Because months apart had somehow changed absolutely nothing.

And because the truly humiliating part, the awful, terrifying part - was that some small terrible part of him still wanted to turn around.

"You ok there?" Scott had skated up to him again and they got off the ice together. "Don't let Rozanov get to you. I'm in the room next to him and the guy has anger issues."

"No worries, I don't let him bother me." Shane said, going back towards the locker room. He made as if he recognized a few fans and asked Scott to just go ahead and that he'd follow after signing some pucks.

He stayed for about half an hour- but security pulled him away when too many people started to press against the glass to get to him.

Once he was back in his hotel room, he started to pace back and forth. Room 1221 was down two floors. Scott was rooming next to that room. He should ignore Rozanov. Nothing about going there would result in anything good for either of them. He waited a couple hours. He almost went to bed but the threat of Rozanov coming up and making a commotion was very real and he made up his mind and went down.

He managed to avoid running into anyone due to the late hour and knocked softly on the door. His heart was racing at the high chance of getting caught but before he can turn back

the door opened. He rushed inside and closed the door quickly, swearing he heard something in the hallway as he crossed the threshold.

The hotel room air hung thick, Rozanov's scent was all over the room, as if he removed his scent patch as soon as he came into the room for no other reason than to drive Shane insane.

"Is someone chasing you?" Rozanov said with a smirk.

"You asshole! Scott Hunter is right next door. There's 10 other players all around here and you have me waiting in the fucking hallway."

Ilya had to smile. He just had to. An angry Shane Hollander reminded him of a tiny kitten trying to roar and bite at his owners.

He just stared at the adorable face

Ilya leaned against the frame, a vision of casual, predatory ownership. He was in low-slung jeans and another tight black wifebeater, the hard planes of his chest and abdomen on full display under the thin fabric. He smelled of steam and expensive soap and the Alpha scent that was uniquely his. His blue eyes swept over Shane, from his tense, set jaw down to his white-knuckled hands, and a slow, knowing smile touched his lips.

"You are late," Ilya said, his voice a low purr that vibrated in the hollow space of Shane's chest. He didn't move to let him in. He made Shane stand there, in the accusatory hallway light.

Ilya followed his glance. The smile widened, turning cruel at the edges. "Ah. You are worried about the neighbor." He pushed off the frame and finally stepped back, a silent, commanding invitation. "Do not be. He hears nothing but his own boring old man thoughts."

Shane stood there nervously but he couldn't stop himself. The scent he had been missing was now surrounding him. He stumbled out of his shoes and lunged. It wasn't a graceful move. It

was a collapse, a surrender to a gravitational pull he could no longer fight. He fisted his hand in Rozanov's shirt and tangled his other hand went into the soft blonde curls, pulling him down, crashing their mouths together.

The kiss was pure desperation, a clash of teeth and tongue and stifled noise. It was anger and terror and a craving so deep it felt like bone-deep starvation. Rozanov made a rough, approving sound against his mouth and took over, one hand cupping the back of Shane's head, the other splaying possessively against the small of his back, grinding their bodies together. Shane melted into the onslaught, a whimper trapped in his throat, his own hands scrambling over the solid muscle of Rozanov's shoulders, his back, anywhere to hold on as the world dissolved into taste and heat and pure sensation.

Ilya's mouth was ruthless, devouring. He kissed like he played hockey- with brutal precision, overwhelming force, and a complete disregard for the rules. He bit Shane's lower lip, sucked on his tongue, and Shane could only give, and give, and give, his mind whiteing out into a static hum of *more*.

It was during a frantic shift of Ilya's head, his mouth trailing fire down the line of Shane's jaw towards his neck, that his nose wrinkled. He stopped, pulling back just an inch. His breath was hot and ragged on Shane's damp skin. His fingers, which had been tangled in Shane's hair, slid down, searching, until they brushed the edge of the small, clear patch just below Shane's ear.

A low growl rumbled through Ilya's chest. It wasn't one of passion. It was one of pure, unadulterated annoyance.

"This," Ilya muttered, his voice thick with contempt. His fingers hooked under the edge of the suppressant patch.

Shane's eyes flew open. "Don't-"

It was too late. With a sharp, deliberate rip, Ilya tore the patch clean off Shane's neck.

The sensation was not just physical. It was an unveiling. A sudden, violent breach in the dam. The synthetic barrier that muted his omega scent, that buffered him from the full force of alphas and his own biology, was gone. The raw, vulnerable scent of him—fear, arousal, slick, and sweet, sweet omega—bloomed into the space between them, intimate and shocking.

Ilya inhaled deeply, his eyes fluttering shut for a second in what looked like bliss. When they opened, the blue had darkened to the color of a storm-chased sea. All traces of teasing, of casual cruelty, were gone. Replaced by an absolute, primal authority.

He didn't ask. He didn't request it. He gave an order, his voice dropping to a tone that vibrated in Shane's very marrow, a tone that brooked not even the possibility of disobedience.

"On your knees."

The words were a shockwave. It bypassed Shane's brain, his pride, his terror about Scott next door. It went straight to the core of him, the omega core that recognized a direct command from a dominant alpha in its space. His body moved before his mind could form a protest.

His knees hit the hotel carpet with a soft thud. He was looking up at Rozanov, who loomed over him, a god of muscle and will. Shane's hands, acting on an instinct older than reason, went to the waistband of Ilya's jeans. His fingers found the zipper, fumbled for a second, then pulled it loose. He didn't look away from Ilya's face as he hooked his thumbs in the waistline and pushed, dragging the fabric down just enough, just over the sharp jut of Ilya's hips.

Ilya was already hard, thick and flushed against his stomach. The sight of him, the intimate, salty smell of him, sent a jolt of pure, wanton hunger through Shane that obliterated every other thought. He didn't hesitate. He didn't need to be told twice.

He leaned forward, his lips parting, and took Rozanov into his mouth.

The groan that ripped from Ilya was guttural, raw, a sound of pure, conquered pleasure. His hand flew back to Shane's head, not guiding, not forcing, but simply holding on, his fingers tightening in the short strands of hair. "Bozhe moi, yes... just like that..."

Shane lost himself in the rhythm, in the weight and heat on his tongue, in the desperate, approving sounds from above. The world narrowed to this: the taste of salt and skin, the faint tremble in the powerful thighs before him, the overwhelming scent of his own submission and Ilya's dominance mixing in the air. He hollowed his cheeks, took him deeper, his own need came secondary, throbbing echo between his legs. He was here, on his knees, with the man who he couldn't stop thinking about, and he had never felt more utterly, terribly, perfectly *used* in his life. And he never wanted it to stop.

Suddenly, Rozanov pulled Shane up quickly-just like their first time. They made out for a few seconds before they pulled away to catch their breaths.

Ilya reached out, not touching him, but tracing a phantom line in the air beside Shane's cheek. "You are shaking. Is it fear? Or is it want?" He leaned in, his lips brushing the shell of Shane's ear. His whisper was a hot, devastating brand. "I can smell it on you, *kotenok*. The fear is sweet. But the want... the want is delicious."

He pulled Shane against his body again and lifted him. Walking back towards the bed. Shane wanted to kiss some more but was not obliged as Rozanov pulled back and practically ripped his clothes off, doing the same to himself while staring at Shane. They made out for a few more minutes when Rozanov pulled back and tapped Shane on the side of his stomach. "Turn. On your stomach." He said, kissing his way down to Shane's neck. The bite guard was still on and he had an irrational want to yank the damn thing off. Shane froze. His eyes wide, but Rozanov was doing such amazing things to his neck and his hand was caressing him that he let himself be guided. When he felt the Alpha move behind him he stiffened. It took a minute for Rozanov to notice that Shane wasn't responding but he stopped. "What is the matter?"

"We can't. Hunter is right next door. your teams all around..."

"Are you kidding me?"

Shane rolled over, his breath hitching when he realized that now he was pinned under the larger man. "If they hear, and if someone saw me leaving the room later-I'd," Shane looked away. "I'd loose everything. My career would be over."

He felt Rozanov settle his hips down right on top of him, his eyes rolling back at the sensation. He felt the soft kisses right at the edge of his bite guard and he buried his hands in the curly hair again.

“Scott is -”

Shane was cut off from speaking further when Rozanov’s hand flew up and he wrapped his fingers tightly over his throat. “Never mention another man's name when in bed with me. You understand?”

A shiver ran through Shane’s entire body at the order. The grip didn’t cut off his air, but the implication was there.

Rozanov soothed the rough touch with more kissing, down this throat, lower to his chest. Shane whimpered when the Alpha reached his cock and started to suck slowly. He felt his legs being guided to wrap around Rozanov and he was physically and mentally incapable of resisting at all.

It was embarrassing how fast he came. He didn’t feel in control of his body at all and he couldn’t stop the shaking- he just laid on the bed, legs splayed wide as he watched Rozanov inch his way up and straddle his stomach. He watched as the blonde jerked himself off and come all over his chest. It alarmed him that he loved that-that he didn't mind the mess or the facts that he should have felt ashamed and didn’t.

It was a silence that vibrated, filled with the ragged symphony of their breathing. Shane lay beneath Rozanov, his chest rising and falling in stuttering hitches, painted white and sticky. He felt flayed open, every nerve ending scorched and singing, his mind a blissful, humming static. The world had narrowed to the weight on his hips, the heat of the body over him, the smell of alpha- dominant, satisfied, *his*.

Ilya braced his hands on either side of Shane’s head, looking down at his handiwork. His own breath was coming hard, his biceps trembling with residual tension. Shane’s eyes were glassy, pupils blown wide, lips kiss-swollen and parted. A perfect, ruined omega. A possession marked in the most primitive way.

“See?” Ilya’s voice was a gravelly rumble, deep in his chest. He lowered his head, nuzzling roughly into the junction of Shane’s neck and shoulder, inhaling the scent that was now subtly changing, the chemical sterility of the suppressant patch gone, leaving the vulnerable, sweet honeysuckle base note exposed. “Is so much better. No suppressant. Just you.”

He licked a broad, possessive stripe up Shane’s throat, over his pounding pulse, and Shane shuddered, a weak, punched-out sound escaping him. The action smeared the mess on Shane’s chest. Ilya didn’t seem to mind. He was cataloging it, claiming it.

The fog in Shane’s brain began to condense into cold, dripping dread. The physical sensation was receding, and in its wake rushed the reality of the situation. The paper thin hotel wall. Scott, his captain for the weekend, his friends and peers, lying in oblivious sleep just feet away. The entire team, a constellation of potential witnesses, scattered through the hallway. He was naked, covered in another alpha’s cum, his protective patch ripped away.

“Rozanov,” he whispered, the word strangled.

“Mmm?” Ilya was kissing his collarbone, seemingly fascinated by the contrast of his own pale spend on Shane’s skin.

“You have to... I need to clean up. I need to go.”

The kisses stopped. Ilya went very still. Then, slowly, he pushed himself up again, looking down at Shane. The post-coital softness in his blue eyes was gone, replaced by a glacial, calculating sharpness. “Go?”

“Scott is next door,” Shane said, his voice gaining a desperate edge. He tried to sit up, but Ilya’s weight was immovable. “What if he heard? What if he comes to check?”

Ilya’s lip curled. “Let him check. Let him see.” He leaned down, his nose almost touching Shane’s. “Would be good for him. Good for everyone. It might excite him. Like mating call.”

The words were a bucket of ice water. Shane's stomach lurched. "I don't belong to you. This was a mistake. A huge, fucking mistake." The panic was giving him a brittle courage. He shoved at Ilya's shoulders. "Get off."

For a second, he thought Rozanov would refuse, would pin him harder and prove his point with teeth and force. A thrill of terror, and something darker, shot through him. But the bigger man merely snorted, a sound of profound contempt, and rolled off him onto his back on the rumpled sheets.

The sudden absence of his weight and heat left Shane feeling hollow and exposed. He scrambled to the edge of the bed, his legs wobbly. He grabbed the first thing he could find, Ilya's discarded t-shirt, and began scrubbing frantically at his chest and stomach. The fabric smelled overwhelmingly of Ilya, pine and cold air and alpha, and it felt like another layer of violation, but the physical evidence had to go.

He heard the click of a lighter, then the slow exhale of smoke. He turned. Ilya was lying back against the headboard, one arm behind his head, a cigarette dangling from his lips. He was still gloriously, arrogantly naked, watching Shane with the detached interest of a scientist observing a panicked specimen.

"You are so boring, Hollander." Ilya stated, blowing a smoke ring towards the ceiling. "All that fire. All that fight. And then you melt. You beg. You take me so sweetly into your mouth, kotenok. And now you are having panic attack because someone might hear?" He laughed, a short, harsh sound. "You think they do not know? You think your precious Alpha friends are not going to smell me on you tomorrow?"

Shane froze, the shirt clutched in his fist. He felt sick. Was it true? Would they be able to smell it? Could everyone? The suppressant patch was gone. He was broadcasting a muddled, terrified omega signal marinated in Ilya's dominant pheromones. He was a walking scandal if he met someone on his way back up to his room.

"Give it back," he demanded, his voice trembling.

Ilya glanced at him. "Give what?"

“The patch! You ripped it off. Give it back!”

Ilya took another drag, his eyes slitting against the smoke. He gestured lazily with his free hand towards the floor somewhere near the foot of the bed. “Is there. Probably.”

Shane dropped to his knees, scanning the carpet. He found it, the small, clear adhesive square, now wrinkled and dirty. It was useless. He couldn't put a contaminated, floor-worn patch back on a fresh wound. It was a symbol of his shattered control. He crumpled it in his hand, his shoulders slumping.

“I have spare,” Ilya said, his tone conversational. “In my kit. But is in bathroom.”

It was a test. A cruel, simple test. *Ask me. Beg me.* Shane closed his eyes. The humiliation burned hotter than any desire had. He could walk into that bathroom, find the kit himself. But it was Ilya's territory. Taking it would feel like stealing. Asking for it would be surrender.

Ilya watched the struggle play out on Shane's face. He stubbed out the cigarette in a glass on the nightstand. “You know,” he said softly, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. He stood, a tower of lean muscle and intimidating calm, and walked over to Shane. He didn't touch him. He just loomed. “This fear of being caught. This shame. Is the most interesting part.”

Shane glared up at him. “Go to hell.”

“Maybe,” Ilya agreed. He crouched down, bringing them eye to eye. His gaze was unnervingly focused. “But you are coming with me. You think this is about sex? Is about *fucking*?” He shook his head slowly. “No. Is about this.” He reached out and tapped two fingers against Shane's sternum, right over his frantic heart. “Is about you, on your knees because I told you to. You, shaking because I took your little shield. You, cleaning my cum from your skin while you panic about your teammate.” He said the word like it was a delicious flavor. “You want me. You hate that you want me. You crave what I make you feel.”

Rozanov stood. He ran his fingers through Shane's hair. "Don't worry Hollander. I will get you a patch so you can run to your room and try to hide from what you want. Like coward."

Shane heard the faucet run, the clatter of a kit being opened. He remained on the floor, the crumpled patch digging into his palm. Ilya's words circled in his head like vultures, tearing strips off his self-image. He was right. That was the most horrifying part. The desire wasn't just physical. It was for the annihilation of his careful control. It was for the moment he stopped being Shane Hollander

Ilya returned. He held out a fresh, sealed suppressant patch. Not the team-issued brand, but a premium, high-strength one. Of course.

Shane stood and stared at it, then up at Ilya's impassive face. He didn't move.

"Take it," Ilya said, no kindness in his voice. It was an order.

Shane's fingers unclenched. He let the old patch fall to the carpet. He took the new one. His hand didn't shake. The gesture felt like signing a contract.

"Put it on," Ilya said. He didn't offer to help. He just watched.

Shane peeled the backing, his movements mechanical. He pressed it to the side of his neck, over the tender, kissed skin. The familiar, mild cooling sensation spread, a feeble dam against the torrent inside him.

"Good," Ilya said. He turned and walked back to the bed, picking up his pants and stepping into them. He didn't look at Shane again as he zipped them up. The dismissal was absolute. "Now get dressed. Some people from the team went out and curfew is in an hour."

The whiplash was stunning. From overwhelming possession to cold ejection in minutes. Shane stumbled to gather his own clothes from where they were strewn like battle casualties. He dressed quickly, his fingers fumbling on buttons. The silence was heavier than before,

charged with everything unsaid and undone. “I’m not a coward. I’ve just worked so hard to get this far. You wouldn’t understand.”

Rozanov looked at him, his expression blank. “What the fuck do you want Hollander? You act like scared little boy and run away when things get risky.”

“I want something I shouldn’t have. Neither one of us wants a mate. He just started our careers and everyone is expecting these crazy things from us and-”

Rozanov quickly crossed the room and smashed their lips together again. “Montreal and Boston play in two weeks. We meet then. No more hiding.”

He pulled Shane’s face up to meet his eyes. “Two weeks?”

“Yes, Hollander. We play together in two weeks then we will meet after game.”

“Um, where? I mean wouldn’t your hotel be full of your team?”

Rozanov rolled his eyes. “Your brain still not working from cumming so hard. I will go to your place and we finish what was started here.”

“Um, how will we meet?” Shane asked nervously.

“You have phone? Give.”

Shane pulled his cell phone from his pocket and stared, fascinated at just watching the man. He mentally shook his head before he got caught staring and noticed that he now had Rozanov’s number.

“There. We text now.”

Shane’s hand was on the door handle. He should leave. Just walk out and never look back. Treat this like a dangerous, one-time lapse.

“Goodnight, Roanov.”

“Goodnight Hollander.”

Shane slowly opened the door and slipped into the hallway, closing it with a soft, definitive click. He leaned against the cold wood, his heart hammering against his ribs. From the other side of the wall, Scott’s room was silent.

But from Ilya’s room, through the thin, terrible wall, he heard it. The clear, unmistakable sound of a lighter flicking once more, and the long, slow exhale of a man who was, without a doubt, already winning.

Chapter 8: Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

I'm officially running a fever so I called out of work for the rest of the week. This is a set up chapter-next chapter we get our boys together. Getting to the good bits. I tried to edit this chapter myself, no sister involved lol and I rewrote the parts she took out to be used later.

Please remember: this is AU/not following cannon here and there-I have a VISION lol. Next chapter is where we start to get steamy. I have started the first few chapters and its intense. Some people will NOT like what Ilya does, but I promise there is a HEA and he is not irredeemable. There is a method to my madness.

Chapter Notes

Once again, thank you thank you thank you for the kudos and reviews-they truly mean SO MUCH to me=each and every single one.

Shane made his way up to his room in a daze. He couldn't focus on anything much and his heart was racing. He started pacing back and forth, thankful that he had the single room for the night.

He paced. Four steps from the bed to the window, pivot, four steps back. The carpet, a bland swirl of blues and greys, blurred beneath his feet. His heart was a trapped bird beating against his ribs, his mind replaying the ultimatum on a hellish loop: he'd almost had sex. With Ilya Rozanov. The fact that Rozanov could destroy everything he'd work so hard towards. If discovered, there would be no consequences for his team or Rozanov- just for him. He knew in his gut that he was meant to play this game. This fling wouldn't be worth losing that for and he knew that he needed to break this off with Rozanov before it was too late. He'd walked away twice. How much harder could just sending a quick 'Let's not take this any father.' text be?. He'd said nothing. He'd just... left.

His phone, left on the nightstand, buzzed. A short, sharp vibration that sliced through the muffled quiet. He froze mid-pace, his blood turning to slush. He didn't want to look. He had to.

He crossed the room, picked it up.

IGR: Open your door in one hour.

No greeting. Just a command and a timeframe. The finality of it stole the air from his lungs. No discussion. No negotiation. Open your door. It wasn't a request for entry; it was an order to make himself accessible. To be ready.

The pacing resumed, more frantic now. An hour. Sixty minutes. What would be on the other side? Ilya himself, with that glacial, unreadable expression? Something worse? His mind conjured images of the team, of Scott Hunter, gathered there with questions he couldn't answer. The panic was a live wire under his skin.

He was grateful, with a desperation that was pathetic, for the single room. No roommate to witness this unraveling. No one to ask why he was wearing a path in the carpet, why his hands wouldn't stop shaking.

He needed to move. To do something. The restless energy had no outlet. Shower. The thought was a lifeline. A mundane, human ritual. It was also, he realized with a sinking heart, a way to follow an unspoken order. To be ready. He stood in front of the mirror, grimacing at the sticky mess that had dried on his chest. His base instinct was to not wash the mess off. He was embarrassed where his mind went and turned the shower to the hottest water allowed.

The water was as hot, scalding his skin pink. He scrubbed himself raw, as if he could wash away the feel of Ilya's gaze, the phantom pressure of the larger body that wasn't there anymore, the memory of being on his knees. The steam filled the small bathroom, fogging the mirror, hiding his reflection. He was glad. He didn't want to see his own eyes.

He performed his nighttime routine by rote: brushing his teeth, slapping moisturizer on his face, the familiar actions a soothing balm against the chaos. He opened his toiletry kit and took out his nightly medication—the two suppressants, the omega-specific vitamin complex. He swallowed them dry, the pills sticking in his throat. A pathetic attempt at normalcy. At chemical calm.

He pulled on a clean pair of boxers and a soft, old t-shirt. The fabric felt alien against his skin, too simple for the tension coiling inside him. He checked the time on his phone.

58 minutes....59.

The final sixty seconds were an eternity. He stood in the center of the room, facing the door, his body thrumming with a fight-or-flight response with nowhere to go. The timer in his mind reached zero.

He rushed forward, his hand closing around the cold metal of the handle. He yanked the door open, his heart in his throat, braced for confrontation, for Ilya's imposing frame filling the hallway.

The hallway was empty.

He blinked, his eyes scanning left and right. Nothing. No one. Just the garish carpet and the silent, numbered doors. His gaze dropped.

There, sitting squarely on the floor directly in front of his threshold, was a plain brown paper bag. It was folded neatly at the top, like a large packed lunch. It looked utterly innocuous. Profoundly menacing.

He stared at it for a full ten seconds, half-expecting it to move. When it didn't, he leaned out, snatched it up, and retreated back into his room, shutting and locking the door as if chased by ghosts. He leaned against it, the rough paper of the bag crinkling in his grip.

He carried it to the bed, sitting on the edge as if it contained a bomb. Slowly, he unfolded the top.

The smell hit him first.

It wasn't a strong smell. It was subtle, intimate, devastating. It was the clean, sharp scent of Ilya's hotel soap, yes, but underneath it... underneath it was the musky, unmistakable scent of *them*. Of sweat, skin, and sex. Of the hour they'd spent tangled in Ilya's sheets.

His hands trembled as he reached inside.

His fingers touched fabric. He pulled out the first item.

It was the fitted sheet from Ilya's bed. Crisp white cotton, now slightly rumpled. He unfolded it, and the scent bloomed stronger, enveloping him. He could see the faint impression of a body, the subtle wrinkles from their struggle. He dropped it as if burned.

Next came a pillowcase. Then another sheet.

Beneath the linens were clothes. A few worn, soft cotton t-shirts. A couple of tank tops. And finally, bundled at the bottom, a large, heavy hoodie—dark grey, well-worn, the fabric pilled in places. It was the hoodie Ilya had been wearing around the hotel earlier in the weekend.

Shane sat surrounded by the haul, his mind reeling. This wasn't a gift. It wasn't a romantic gesture. It was a colonization.

He'd stripped his own bed and delivered the evidence of their coupling. He'd given Shane his own clothes, items saturated with his personal smell, the smell of alpha, of possession, of *home*.

The message was clearer, more insidious, than any steel band. A folded piece of paper crinkled under a sleeve.

You chose the patch. You chose to hide. So I will make hiding impossible.

You want to stay in your room, in your own space? *I* have now defined your space. It smells like *me*. It contains *me*. When you sleep tonight, you will sleep in my sheets. You will be wrapped in the smell of where you belong. When you wake, you will put on my clothes. You will wear my scent against your skin, all day, under your gear. Everyone will smell it. Everyone will know, even if they do not understand what they are knowing.

You can keep your chemical barrier on your neck and in your body, Shane. But I will be in your bed. I will be on your skin. I am in the air you breathe.

See you soon-

I

It was a psychological collar. A cage made of memory and smell.

Shane's eyes stung. He looked at the soft, inviting pile of fabric. A part of him, a deep, shameful, omega part that was exhausted from the fight, craved it. Craved the comfort of that enveloping scent, the primal reassurance of being surrounded by his alpha's presence. The other part of him screamed in humiliation. He didn't want his baser instincts to take over. He needed to have a stronger hold on his emotions and body before he started making mistakes in public.

If he let himself relax and lean into what he really wanted, then his guard would relax. Things could be forgotten and then he'd get caught. He didn't make a conscious decision. His body moved for him. He picked up the fitted sheet. He walked to his bed, stripped off his own bland, hotel-issued linens in a heap on the floor, and began to remake it with Rozanov's. Each tug of the fabric, each tuck of the corner, released another wave of that intoxicating, terrifying smell. By the time he'd put the pillowcases on and spread the top sheet, his own bed had been transformed into Ilya's. A perfect replica.

He stood back, breathing heavily. The room was no longer his.

He picked up the hoodie. He brought it to his face, inhaling deeply. It was all Ily-Rozanov, the crisp outdoor smell, the underlying warmth of his skin, a faint hint of his shampoo. It was the smell of the man who had torn his patch off, who had commanded him to his knees, who tracked his every move and now demanded he sleep in his scent.

Shane pulled the hoodie on over his t-shirt. It was massive on him, the sleeves swallowing his hands, the hem hanging past his hips. It was like being engulfed. He climbed into the nest—no, bed - the bed that smelled like the Alpha and pulled the sheets, smelling of their shared sweat, up to his chin.

He lay in the dark, cocooned in the evidence of his own submission. The weight of the hoodie was a poor substitute for the weight of the man, but it was a weight nonetheless. A constant, smothering reminder. The scent was everywhere, inescapable. He was breathing Ilya in with every breath. His own clean scent from the shower was already gone, overwritten.

His phone buzzed once more on the nightstand. He didn't reach for it. He already knew what it would say.

The obsession had found a new, more intimate form. It wasn't just those two stolen moments. It was in his bed. It was on his skin. It was in his lungs. And as he finally, fitfully, descended into a sleep haunted by blue eyes and the smell of pine and leather, he understood the true depth of having an Alpha's focus.

He had made Shane's entire world the cage.

The hotel's main banquet room was a sea of controlled chaos and the low, resonant hum of alpha energy. The All-Star breakfast was a tradition, the last friendly mixer before the competitive instincts fully took over when they returned back to the regular season. Sunlight streamed through tall windows, glinting off polished cutlery and the championship rings on a dozen fingers. The air smelled of expensive coffee, maple syrup, and the subtle, varied cocktail of top-tier athlete pheromones.

Shane had chosen his seat with the precision of a bomb disposal expert. He was at a round table with Scott Hunter, of course, and a few other players he trusted—Marty from Vancouver, a laid-back beta defenseman with a perpetual easy smile, and Alexei Petrov, a

veteran Russian winger who was gruff but fair, and crucially, a beta as well. A safe island in a room full of potential predators.

He'd woken that morning wrapped in the scent of Ilya Rozanov. It had clung to his skin, his hair, woven into the very fibers of his sleep. He'd showered again, scrubbing until his skin was tender, used his strongest body wash. He'd dressed in his own clothes, fresh from his suitcase. He'd applied a new suppressant patch with meticulous care, pressing it firmly over the spot Ilya had so violently bared.

But as he sat at the table, picking at a fruit salad, a low-level panic hummed in his veins. "Could they smell it?" Was there a trace, a ghost of Ilya's possessive, pine-and-leather scent lingering on him like a watermark? He watched Scott laugh at something Marty said, his posture relaxed. Petrov was methodically demolishing a stack of pancakes, paying him no mind. So far, so good.

He'd even managed to contribute to the conversation, a few comments about matchups, a weak joke about the hotel gym. He was playing the part. Shane Hollander, dependable Center, one of the guys. Not the omega who had spent the night buried in another alpha's sheets, drowning in his smell.

"You sure you're okay, Rookie?" Scott asked, nudging him with an elbow. His voice was low, concerned. "You look nervous."

Shane forced a smile. "Just... big crowd. You know how it is." It was a weak excuse for an All-Star, but Scott, ever the protector, seemed to buy it, giving him a reassuring nod.

The morning was going well. It was going normally. The knot in Shane's chest began, infinitesimally, to loosen.

Then the atmosphere in the room changed.

It wasn't a sound. It was a shift in pressure, like the air before a thunderstorm. Conversations didn't stop, but they dipped, heads turned subtly towards the entrance. Ilya Rozanov stood in the doorway.

He wasn't doing anything dramatic. He was just... there. Dressed in dark, tailored trousers and a simple black form fitting sweater, he looked more like a billionaire at a board meeting than a hockey player at a buffet. His eyes, that impossible, teal blue, swept across the room with a languid, disinterested authority. They passed over tables of all-stars, MVPs, legends, as if inventorying furniture.

Then they found Shane.

They didn't linger. They didn't narrow. They simply registered him, noted his location, his company, and moved on. Rozanov turned to speak to a league official who had hurried over, a polite, empty smile on his face. But the connection had been made. A circuit completed. Shane felt it like a static shock up his spine.

His appetite vanished. The fruit in his mouth turned to paste. He dropped his gaze to his plate, his fingers tightening around his fork. At that moment, he felt it: a buzzing in his pocket. A short, insistent vibration against his thigh.

His blood went cold. He knew. *He knew.*

Under the table, hidden by the long drape of the linen tablecloth, he slid his phone out. He angled it on his lap, his body a shield.

The screen lit up. A single message.

IGR - Petrov's hand is on your shoulder. Remove it. Now.

Shane's head snapped up. He hadn't even noticed. But there it was, Alexei Petrov's large, bear-like hand, resting companionably on Shane's shoulder as he leaned in to say something to Marty about the food. A casual, friendly, beta-to-beta touch. Utterly innocuous.

And Ilya had seen it. From across the crowded room, through the shifting bodies, while engaged in another conversation, he had seen it, catalogued it, and deemed it unacceptable.

The command on the screen was absolute. *Remove it. Now.*

Panic, sharp and acidic, flooded Shane's mouth. If he shrugged Petrov off suddenly, it would be weird. Rude. It would draw more attention than the touch itself. He was trapped between Ilya's directive and the need to maintain his fragile cover in front of Scott and the others.

Petrov gave his shoulder a final, friendly squeeze and leaned back, reaching for his coffee. The contact broke naturally.

Shane let out a breath he didn't know he was holding, his body slumping slightly in his chair. Crisis averted. He chanced a glance toward the door.

Ilya was gone.

But his phone buzzed again, immediately.

IGR - Better. Do not let it happen again. Your skin is not for their hands. Remember whose scent you slept in. Whose clothes you will wear. Every touch from another is a dilution. I will not allow it.

Shane stared at the words. *Whose clothes you will wear.* The hoodie. The t-shirts. They were in his room, waiting. A mandate. Ilya wasn't just watching. He was curating. He was controlling who could touch him, from across a room, via text. The obsession wasn't just about possession; it was about purity of that possession. He was to be a closed system, with Ilya as the sole point of contact.

"Earth to Shane," Marty said, waving a hand in front of his face. "You zoning out on us? Big night last night?"

Shane shoved the phone back into his pocket as if it were burning him. He tried to smile again. It felt like a crack in plaster. “Yeah,” he mumbled, his voice rough. “Something like that.”

He looked at Scott, who was watching him again, the concern back in his eyes, deeper this time. Shane looked at Petrov’s now-harmless hands, at Marty’s open, friendly face. He saw the normal, sunny breakfast room.

And all he could feel was the invisible, tightening web of Ilya’s gaze, and the phantom weight of a hoodie he hadn’t even put on yet, smothering him from the inside out. The game hadn’t even started, and he was already playing by Rozanov’s rules, on a field only Rozanov could see.

‘Just get through the day. Avoid him. Smile, eat, be a person. It’s one breakfast.’

When Hunter moved his head closer to him, Shane forced himself to calm down. “You can head out early if this is too much, Hollander.”

“It’s a lot. Feels... isolating, even in a crowd.”

Scott nodded, sipping his own coffee. “Tell me about it. First time I did this, I hid in my room for a full day just to decompress. Kip- my husband, says even after all these years he see’s me get a bit nervous when these are scheduled. I hate it until I remember how much fun it is to just hang out with players that are not part of the team.” He smiled, a private, soft thing. “He’s an omega, you know? Has this sixth sense for when I’m getting in my own head. Told me, ‘Big weekends like this mess with your head, Scott. Try not to isolate. It makes the weirdness worse.’”

The words, meant to be comforting, landed like a blow. Try not to isolate. Shane’s gut twisted. He *was* isolated. He had built a fortress of secrets so high he could no longer see over the walls. He took a too-quick gulp of coffee, the heat scalding his tongue. “Smart guy,” he mumbled.

“The smartest,” Scott agreed, then his eyes narrowed slightly. “You sure you’re okay?”

Before Shane could formulate another lie, a shadow fell over their table.

A chair was pulled out from the table directly across from Shane, the legs scraping softly on the tile. Ilya Rozanov sat down.

Scott’s eyebrows lifted a fraction, amused. “Morning, Rozanov. Joining the party?”

“The coffee is good here.” Ilya said, his voice a low rumble as he poured. His eyes flicked to Shane, held for a half-second, then moved away. No smirk. No intense stare. Just... acknowledgement. As if seeing Shane first thing in the morning was the most ordinary thing in the world.

Scott was watching them both now, the easy camaraderie at their table gone, replaced by a faint, puzzled tension. It wasn’t romantic suspicion; it was the unease of a man seeing a dynamic he didn’t understand, one that felt oddly... proprietary.

“Well,” Scott said, clearing his throat and checking his watch. “I’ve got that league media thing in five. You two... enjoy your coffee.” He stood, clapping Shane on the shoulder once—a gesture that now made Shane flinch, wondering if Ilya was counting that touch, too. “Remember what I said, Hollander. Don’t isolate yourself.”

And then he was gone, leaving Shane trapped at the table with the man who was the very source of his isolation.

The silence that descended was thick, charged not with aggression, but with the sheer, unnerving weight of Ilya’s attention. He wasn’t glaring. He was just... there. Occupying space with a terrifying assumption of right.

After a moment, Ilya reached for the small ceramic pot in the center of the table. It wasn’t coffee. It was hot water for tea. He picked up an empty cup and saucer from the stack beside

it and placed them deliberately in front of Shane. Then, from the pocket of his henley, he produced a single tea bag—Earl Grey—and set it beside the cup.

“You do not like the hotel coffee after the first cup. It turns bitter on your palate. You switch to tea,” Rozanov said, his voice low enough that only Shane could hear it over the breakfast hum. “You take it with one sugar and a splash of milk, but only if the milk is very cold. The creamer on the table is room temperature. It will curdle. Do not use it.”

Shane could only stare at the tea bag, at the cup, at Rozanov’s impassive face. His mind screamed the question on a loop: *How do you know that? How do you *KNOW* that?*

He had never taken tea with Ilya. He’d never taken coffee with him. These were private, mundane rituals. The kind of thing a partner of years might know.

Ilya leaned forward slightly, his elbows on the table, his eyes capturing Shane’s. There was no warmth in them, but there was a profound, unsettling intimacy. “The shaking in your hands stops after you have eaten something with protein and complex carbohydrates. Yogurt is not good enough. You need eggs.” He nodded toward the buffet. “Go. Now.”

It wasn’t a suggestion. It was a calm, implacable directive born of a knowledge so intimate it felt violating. He knew Shane’s body, his habits, his tells, better than Shane knew them himself. This wasn’t about desire at that moment. It was about ownership of information. It was as if Rozanov had compiled a dossier on him, and he was now administrating Shane’s life based on its contents.

The erotic charge of it was sickening, and undeniable. It wasn’t about touch. It was about being so thoroughly *seen*, so completely known and controlled down to the temperature of his preferred milk, that resistance felt not just futile, but absurd. The obsession wasn’t a fire—it was a science, and Shane was the sole subject of the experiment.

Swallowing against a dry throat, Shane stood on unsteady legs. Without a word, he walked to the buffet, filled a plate with scrambled eggs and a piece of whole wheat toast, and returned to the table. He sat. He poured the hot water, dunked the tea bag, added one sugar from the bowl. He left the milk alone.

He ate under Ilya's silent, watchful gaze, every bite a surrender to the terrifying, quiet fact that had just been established:

There was no avoiding him. Ilya wasn't just in his space. He was in his habits, in his bloodstream, in the very way he took his tea. And he had been for a long, long time.

Shane's mind, usually a focused, tactical thing on the ice, began to stutter and spin, connecting dots he'd never thought to look for.

The hotel coffee. He *did* hate it after the first cup. It *did* taste bitter. He always switched to tea at these league events. But he'd never said that out loud to anyone here. He'd just... done it. Quietly, at the back of a press room, in the corner of a hospitality suite.

His hand, holding the fork, trembled slightly. He saw Rozanov's eyes flick up from his phone, note the tremor, and return to the screen without comment. *You shake when you need protein.*

A cold sweat broke out on the back of Shane's neck. He resisted the urge to rub at it. *Do I do that? Do I touch my neck when I'm stressed?* He thought back. After a bad shift, in a tense meeting... his fingers would often find the spot just below his ear, where the suppressant patch lay. A self-soothing gesture. Had Ily-Rozanov seen that? Had he noted it, filed it away?

Has he been paying attention this whole time?

The realization was a sinkhole opening up beneath his feet. This wasn't a sudden, hot obsession. It was a cold, deliberate project. Shane had been under a microscope for months, and he hadn't even known the lab was running. And the worst part—the small, terrible, shameful part that made bile rise in his throat—was the tiny, glowing ember of warmth it sparked deep in his gut.

Someone noticed him. Not the poster child of Montreal.

Not just his hockey. Not just his mistakes on the ice. But *him*. The way he took his tea. The fact that he got hangry. The specific, silent way he expressed anxiety. Someone had seen all those invisible, mundane details- details even Shane himself took for granted - and had remembered them. Had catalogued them with the focus of a scholar studying a sacred text. It was the most intimate thing anyone had ever done to him. It was also the most violating.

He hated it. He hated the part of him that curled around that attention like a plant towards a sinister sun. He was an omega in a world that either fetishized or dismissed his designation; he was a center man known for being steady, the best player on his team-one of the top players in the league. But to be seen so completely, so minutely, was a drug he'd never known he craved, and its dealer was a man who intended to own him, body and soul.

He finished the eggs, the last bite like swallowing clay. He took a sip of the now-perfect-temperature Earl Grey. It was, infuriatingly, exactly how he liked it.

Rozanov looked up as Shane set the cup down. His expression didn't change. He didn't smile in satisfaction. He simply gave a small, almost imperceptible nod, as if a minor task had been completed to specification.

"The car should be here to pick me up soon. I expect you to answer when I text you. We will see each other in two weeks, Hollander." Ilya said, his voice back to a neutral, informational tone.

He just nodded, a numb, mechanical mirror of Ilya's own gesture.

Ilya stood, pushing his chair back smoothly. He looked down at Shane for a moment, that same calm, proprietorial look in his eyes. "Do not ignore me when I contact you." he said, and it wasn't a reminder for a peer. It was an order for a possession that needed to be in its proper place at the appointed time.

Then he turned and walked away, melting into the crowd of departing players, leaving Shane sitting alone at the table, surrounded by the ghosts of a hundred observed, remembered details, and the horrifying, seductive understanding that to Ilya Rozanov, he was not a mystery. He was an open book, and Ilya had already memorized every word.

Back at the hotel, with a few hours to go before his flight back home, Shane finally had solitude. He'd successfully avoided the group lunch, claiming a headache, and had retreated to his room. He should have felt relief. He felt exposed.

He paced for a bit, then tried to watch film on his laptop. The players on screen were just blurry shapes. He gave up and stood at the window, staring down at the city without seeing it.

That's when he realized it.

His eyes weren't just gazing blankly. Without any conscious intent, they were scanning the hotel lobby far below, flicking across the clusters of people coming and going. They were looking for a specific height, a particular way of moving, a dark blonde head of hair.

He was looking for Rozanov.

The realization hit him like a punch to the solar plexus, stealing his breath. Which was stupid really, he knew Rozanov had left over an hour ago. It wasn't a search born of fear or even attraction. It was a new, horrifying instinct. His internal compass had been recalibrated. Rozanov was the magnetic north his subconscious now checked for, constantly, automatically. He was looking for the threat, for the obsession, because on some primal level, his body had accepted that its coordinates were now defined in relation to that man.

A wave of nausea rolled through him. He turned from the window, pressing the heels of his hands against his closed eyes. *This is how it starts. This is how you get consumed. You start seeking them out in a crowd. Don't let this man turn you into a pathetic simping moron*

He needed to break the loop. He needed to do something normal, something that belonged to *Shane*, not to this new, twisted version of himself.

IGR- 14 days and counting. Can't wait.

He stood there, in the middle of the silent room, the text glowing on his screen, and understood the true depth of the inevitability Scott had hinted at.

Ilya Rozanov didn't just want him. He was programming him. And Shane was now awake enough to watch it happen, but utterly powerless to stop it. The cage wasn't just around him anymore.

It was being built inside his own mind.

Home felt smaller than Shane remembered.

Not physically. The house looked exactly the same as it always had. The basketball net near the driveway still leaned slightly to the left where his father had promised to fix it five summers ago and never actually did. The kitchen light above the sink was still on when he came in through the front door because his mother had always hated the idea of anyone coming home to darkness. Everything about it should have felt comforting after the chaos of All-Star Weekend, after hotels and cameras and too many people packed into too little space. Instead, standing in the foyer with his duffel hanging heavy from one shoulder, Shane felt strangely disconnected from it all, as though he had stepped back into a place he had already quietly outgrown without realizing it.

His mother hugged him too tightly, immediately fussing over whether he had eaten enough and whether the league had actually fed them properly or if he had survived mostly on protein bars and bad catering again. His father was subtler about it, clapping him once on the shoulder and asking about travel delays, the game, the media obligations. Normal questions. Familiar questions. It should have settled something restless inside him.

When he told his mother he wanted to look for his own place that night over dinner, she was a bit taken aback but his father had encouraged his need for independence, so a realtor was contacted and in a stroke of luck, she found him an apartment building with all his wants-a little over his budget but with the tenants already living there, he would be able to recoup the investment within a few months.

At night, he let his mind wander. No new texts. Nothing from Ily-Rozanov. Which should have felt relieving. Instead, if he was being embarrassingly honest with himself, it mostly just felt strange.

The next several days moved quickly. Hockey had a way of swallowing time whole, especially during the regular season. Practice, games, recovery then team workouts or film

sessions until days folded into one another so seamlessly that sometimes Shane only realized how tired he was when he caught himself zoning out halfway through a meeting. Normally that rhythm grounded him. Normally hockey made everything else quieter.

Then the texts began. Shane had expected the bossy overhand texts. Instead, something had shifted. Mostly because Ilya Rozanov somehow became part of his routine. Not in any dramatic way. Not all at once. Just slowly -quietly. Persistently. At first, the texts annoyed him.

They arrived without warning and without context, usually phrased less like conversation and more like observations that somehow managed to sound vaguely like orders.

IGR - Eat before practice.

IGR - You looked tired after game.

IGR - You skate slower when exhausted.

Sometimes they were insulting:

IGR - Your defense tonight was embarrassing.

IGR - You looked distracted.

IGR - You are like a angry baby tiger when mad.

Which inevitably led to Shane texting back things like:

Shut up, asshole

Or:

You're literally the most annoying person alive.

Then, somehow, infuriatingly, those conversations stretched longer than they should have.

A complaint about airport food somehow turned into twenty minutes arguing over who had worse travel schedules. A stupid joke about bad hotel coffee became a running argument over whether Americans genuinely did not know how to make tea properly. One afternoon, after a particularly awful pregame meal, Shane had snapped a picture of dry chicken and overcooked vegetables with:

IGR: If I die from food poisoning, tell the league this is their fault.

Three minutes later:

IGR: America cooks terribly.

Followed immediately by:

IGR: Why are eggs this color?

Shane had laughed. Actually laughed.

Then sat there staring at his own phone afterward with immediate suspicion because what exactly had been funny about that?

Nothing. Absolutely nothing. And yet- The worst part, the truly humiliating part, was how quickly the texts became expected. He started checking his phone between workouts. Started looking at the screen during intermissions. Started wondering, quietly, privately, whether something would be waiting after games.

Some days the conversations felt weirdly easy in ways that unsettled him far more than the intensity ever had. Intensity he understood. Intensity was easier to fight. Harder to explain was the way Ilya somehow remembered things Shane barely noticed about himself. The tea he preferred after difficult games. The fact that he forgot meals whenever he got overwhelmed.

The specific way he got quieter before stressful road trips.

The fact that he hated early morning flights because they made him feel vaguely sick for hours afterward.

None of those observations arrived dramatically. They just appeared casually, slipped into conversation with alarming certainty, dropped between insults and hockey arguments like they had always existed there.

Every single time, Shane had the same awful thought:

How long have you been paying attention?

He never asked. Mostly because he suspected the answer would make him uncomfortable. Partly because some deeply embarrassing, traitorous part of him liked it. He liked being noticed.

But Shane wanted control again. Space. Privacy. Safety.

Sometimes, late at night, after road trips or difficult losses, the conversations settled into something unexpectedly easy. Hockey complaints. Dumb arguments. Long stretches of teasing insults that somehow felt comforting instead of exhausting.

Those were the dangerous nights. Because those were the moments Shane caught himself forgetting to be careful. Forgetting why this felt complicated. Forgetting why he should probably stop.

The realization usually came later, always later.

Usually while lying in bed staring at the ceiling of the new apartment after another conversation had stretched too long, phone warm in his hand, stomach twisted around emotions he did not fully trust.

Because none of this felt temporary anymore. That was the problem. It had started with one hotel room. One terrible, confusing night he still did not fully know how to categorize.

Somehow- without permission, Ilya had become woven into the quieter parts of his days. That should have scared him more than it did. Maybe it already did. The apartment had become dangerous too in its own way. Not because anything bad happened there. Because it felt too safe. Too private. Too easy to settle into habits he probably should not have.

The blankets had multiplied without him meaning for them to. Familiar textures gathered in corners of the couch. Hoodies stayed draped over chairs longer than necessary. Comfort accumulated slowly until the place felt warm in ways hotel rooms never had.

Sometimes Shane caught himself relaxing too much there. Sometimes he hated how quickly his body softened once he stepped through the door, Rozanov's scent still in the air from the clothes that still carried his scent. And sometimes, on worse days, he thought too hard about what all of it meant. Because eventually, inevitably, the same thought always found him.

This could end badly. Badly enough to ruin things he cared about. Badly enough to expose things he had spent years hiding. He understood enough about biology to know instincts were never simple. Alpha. Omega. It was already complicated before feelings entered the equation.

If feelings ever entered the equation. The possibility alone unsettled him.

Because whatever this thing between them was- it had edges now, weight. Something growing quietly beneath all the arguments and teasing and strange moments of softness Shane never knew what to do with afterward. And instinct complicated everything.

He had spent most of his life suppressing pieces of himself carefully enough that nobody questioned anything. The risks were too high otherwise. Hockey culture had gotten better, sure, but not enough. Not completely. Not in ways that made him feel safe gambling his future on hope. Omega's were still treated as trophy's, breeders and lower class.

Especially not when instinct eventually wanted things people could not always control. Attachment. Bonding. *Mating*. The word alone made his stomach twist.

Because if whatever this was became something real- eventually biology would want more, would push, would complicate.

Would *demand*.

And Shane had no idea what happened if he could not give it. Or worse, if he wanted to.

That thought scared him most.

Because somewhere beneath all the fear and irritation and confusion sat something much quieter. Something harder to argue with. He missed Rozanov when the texts stopped for too long. Missed the attention, missed being noticed. Missed the strange certainty of someone remembering small things about him without being asked.

That alone felt dangerous enough.

Which was why, one quiet night after another long conversation stretched later than it should have, Shane finally sat staring at his phone for a long time.

The apartment sat warm around him. A lamp glowed softly near the couch. Outside, snow pressed quietly against the windows while the city blurred into muted gold beneath the dark.

His thumbs hovered uselessly over the keyboard.

Then finally moved.

S- I think we should probably talk less.

He stared at the message.

Deleted it.

Typed again.

S- I'm getting busier over the next few weeks.

Deleted that too.

Coward.

Eventually, after nearly ten minutes of rewriting, he settled on something simpler. Safer.

Something that felt less honest than the truth.

S- Going to be quieter for a while. Need to focus.

The typing bubble appeared almost immediately.

Disappeared.

Appeared again.

Shane's pulse kicked unpleasantly.

Finally:

IGR- On what?

Shane swallowed.

Everything, he almost wrote. Himself, distance, control.

How badly this could go if he let himself stop thinking.

Instead:

S- Hockey. And I have endorsements to do.

The pause afterward stretched longer this time.

Too long.

Then finally:

IGR - Fine. We will discuss when I see you next week.

Nothing else came after. No argument. No teasing insult. No sarcastic comment.

Just silence.

Shane set the phone face down beside him and immediately hated how empty the apartment suddenly felt.

Chapter 9: Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Putting this one down gently for you all, and running away to my bed again and hopefully breaking this fever. This chapter started was 13,000+ words, my sister edited down to around 9000 and I insisted to keeping my original ideas.

Don't kill me! Ilya will get more normal... maybe...probably.

Thank you to Alex, the best gay bestie a girl could have when she needs details on some boy boy love lol.

A million kisses to all the reviewers, people who leave kudos, and the ones who review every chapter-big fat Ilya kisses for you all lol

I'm going to go hide and anxiously await the feedback.

The plan had been simple. Or at least, as simple as anything involving Ilya Rozanov had apparently become.

Boston versus Montreal. Two weeks after All-Star weekend. After the first Boston vs.Montreal game, they'd meet, hookup and get this infatuation out of their systems.

Shane had spent an embarrassing amount of time trying very hard not to think about their last time together. Which naturally meant he thought about it constantly.

The idea settled into the edges of his routine before he fully realized it had become something to anticipate. He thought about it while unpacking kitchen cabinets, then reorganizing them when they absolutely did not need reorganizing. While unpacking groceries with the kind of meticulous focus that only really happened when he was nervous about something he refused to name. During workouts. During film review. Halfway through stretches when his attention drifted somewhere it should not.

Because despite everything, despite the boundary he told himself that they needed to establish, despite how serious Shane had been when he said they should talk less-

The texts had not stopped. They had changed. That was somehow worse.

The silence after Shane's message had lasted almost a full day.

Twenty-two deeply uncomfortable hours, to be exact.

Not that Shane had counted, obviously.

Then, late the following evening, while standing in his kitchen pretending to cook something healthier than takeout, his phone buzzed.

IGR- Ate dinner?

No acknowledgment of the silence for the day. No argument. No defensiveness.

Just dinner. Like nothing had happened.

Shane had stared at the message for three full minutes before finally typing:

S - Yes.

Three dots appeared immediately.

IGR - Good.

Then, a second later:

IGR- What is it? Some boring salad or a depressing flavor lacking piece of chicken.

Shane had laughed despite himself.

Then immediately hated himself for laughing. Things settled strangely after that. Not better exactly. But different.

Rozanov adjusted in ways Shane had not expected. Still annoying. Still incapable of minding his own business. Still somehow deeply irritating in ways that should have been exhausting.

But softer around the edges.

More observant.

After rough practices:

IGR- Rough day?

After games where Shane clearly looked exhausted:

IGR- Sleep tonight.

After interviews where nerves sat too visibly beneath carefully polite answers:

IGR- You looked not like yourself.

The worst part was how natural it started feeling, how easy.

The rhythm of it slipped quietly into Shane's days until he found himself checking his phone between workouts or after practice without really meaning to. Some nights the conversations stretched too late, drifting from hockey to stupid arguments to long silences that somehow never felt awkward.

Distance made it manageable. That was the dangerous part. Distance made everything feel safer.

Texting existed in this strange contained space where Shane could think before answering, where instinct stayed quieter, where proximity could not complicate things further. They could argue there. Joke there. Be strange there.

He liked it when the words didn't make sense. Rozanov had told him a few times that he had to look words up to make sure it was used correctly. He liked it when Rozanov gave little Russian names to him but refused to look them up- he didn't need to learn words in another language for something that was going to end in less than a week.

Even when Ilya made that difficult. Especially when Ilya made that difficult.

Like one night after an interview:

IGR- You looked good.

Shane frowned immediately.

S- Weird thing to say.

Pause.

Then:

IGR- True thing though.

Or after Shane sent a picture of a new sweater Hayden had bullied him into buying:

IGR- Keep wearing that.

S- Why?

Long pause.

Then:

IGR: Makes me want to bend you over and fuck you in just that sweater.

Which somehow felt worse.

Because it made heat bloom in his belly and he felt himself smile.

The deeply humiliating part was that sometimes Shane genuinely failed to recognize when Ilya was flirting with him until much later.

Usually hours later.

Usually while brushing his teeth or trying to fall asleep.

Then suddenly-

Oh.

That had been flirting.

Idiot.

Still- Seeing him again felt dangerous. The way Ilya somehow occupied space too easily. The way he looked at him. The way Shane forgot himself whenever they stood too close.

Texting felt safe. Seeing him again felt real. And real felt terrifying. This whole thing couldn't be real. The game sat on Shane's calendar like a countdown. Boston versus Montreal.

Every time he looked at it, something uncomfortable twisted beneath his ribs.

Especially because Ilya brought it up with unsettling certainty.

IGR- Dinner after game.

Not:

Do you want to have dinner with me after the game?

Just- Dinner. As if there was no way on earth that Shane would say no.

Shane had stared at the screen.

Then:

S: You're such an asshole.

IGR- You like it I think.

Heat climbed immediately into Shane's face. Because absolutely not. No. He ignored the message for twenty-six minutes.

Then:

S- Depends on the day.

The response arrived suspiciously fast.

IGR- Good answer, kotenok.

Shane spent fifteen full minutes pretending he had not immediately looked up the translation again despite already knowing perfectly well what it meant. That was one of the few words he let himself learn.

Idiot.

Then the snowstorm hit. At first, nobody worried. Hockey dealt with weather constantly. Flights got delayed all the time. Roads reopened. Schedules adjusted. Life moved on.

Then airports shut down.

Then the league announcement came. Game postponed. Shane stared at the notification for a long time.

Relief arrived first. Then disappointment. Sharp enough to make guilt follow almost instantly after. Some terrible part of him had been quietly panicking for days.

Now he had time. Distance. An excuse.

His phone buzzed.

Of course.

IGR- Convenient.

Shane frowned.

S- I literally did not cause a blizzard.

IGR- Suspicious timing.

S- Shut up.

Three dots.

Then:

IGR- Still seeing you soon.

Something unpleasantly warm settled low in Shane's stomach. Because it was stated as a fact again. Always certainty. Like time did not matter, like postponement was temporary.

Like eventually was enough. That should not have comforted him. Unfortunately, it kind of did. That was the beginning of the realization that he really needed to end this. There conversations continued over text and it left Shane feeling unbalanced and chaotic. The game had been postponed to the end of season, there was no real reason for them to be communicating now that plans had changed.

He made up his mind. He knew people had casual sex, he wasn't completely oblivious so that's what he needed to treat this as. No friendship, no need to be involved in each others day to day.

So that's what he did. Over the next few months, he put distance between them. Every time Rozanov brought meeting up while one of them was playing nearby, Shane somehow had a reason to not go.

Practice, travel, family obligations, apartment things, filming endorsements.

Busy. Always busy.

IGR- I fly out next week.

Shane stared. Too fast. Too real.

S- Kind of slammed.

Pause.

IGR- Following week then.

S- Road trip.

Another pause.

Then:

IGR- You are very busy suddenly these past few months.

The guilt landed immediately. Because Shane knew exactly what he was doing. The problem was not that he did not want to see Ilya. The problem was that he wanted too much. Wanted it desperately. Every time over the past 4 months, whenever he was happy, sad, lonely, tired- anything really, he wanted to reach out to Rozanov. To ask him how his day was. To tell him that he was going crazy because he thought his tenants were spying on him. That he wanted to win against him at the NHL awards next month. But no one always got what they wanted.

And wanting felt dangerous. Because texting had already become too important. Too routine. Too comforting. Stopping it before more feelings got involved felt safer for both of them, before they met in person again.

What happened if proximity made all of that worse?

What happened if seeing him again turned whatever this was into something Shane could no longer pretend was temporary?

Because eventually- instinct complicated things. Attachment complicated things. Being an Alpha and an Omega complicated things. And Shane had no idea what happened if this became real enough to want more. That terrified him.

Across the country, Ilya noticed the pattern almost immediately. Not rejection at first but avoidance.

Hollander still replied- just not as quickly. Ilya noticed immediately. Ilya watched the cameras in his apartment when he sent a text out, saw Shane read the message and put down the phone for a while before he eventually answered.

It maddened him. He had trashed his hotel room the first time he'd noticed and had been ejected from the game for being too aggressive that night when another three texts went unanswered.

When he managed to calm himself by the next day, he spent hours watching the feed of Shane moving around his home. Then it hit him-Shane's world was small-hockey, parents, a few friends. That was all. He was scared. Frightened of having something risky in his neat little world. And Ilya could understand that. It wouldn't change the outcome but at least he can understand that Hollander wanted to protect himself. He wasn't exactly unwilling and that distinction mattered.

For now, Ilya let the distance exist. Not because he liked it. Because pushing harder too early rarely worked. Eventually, Hollander would stop treating this want like something dangerous.

He didn't stay completely away though. That was an impossibility. Whenever he had the whole day off or the rare treat of consecutive days off, he flew to wherever Hollander was. He stood back in shadows while he filmed ads. He followed when he went shopping with his father, he particularly watched when he spent time with his teammate Pike and Dagenais. Those two he really hated-they were way too familiar with Hollander and he was too relaxed with them. But he stayed in the background, unseen and would wait for the chance to get him face to face- where he wouldn't be able to run.

The NHL Awards sounded like a amazing honor and opportunity to Shane and he was ecstatic when he was nominated for the Rookie of the Year. His first instinct was to call Rozanov and congratulate him on his own nomination but he stopped himself. Months of near complete silence put a damper on his mood but he had to push through when his parents ran over and they celebrated with the team at his mother's favorite Japanese restaurant. He braced himself to see Rozanov for the first time in months. He took the month to think about what they'd say to each other if anything. Clearly the only one suffering was Shane- he couldn't remember all the articles of Rozanov out every night with a different woman or man on his arm.

That was Shane's first coherent thought after the third hour of smiling politely at cameras and pretending he was not already exhausted. Already emotionally spent from being in the same room as the other man.

Everything about the night felt too polished. Too bright. Too full of people who wanted things from him. Cameras flashed constantly, catching awkward half smiles and stiff

shoulders and conversations he barely registered. Veteran players moved through the room in expensive suits with the kind of practiced confidence Shane still had not learned how to imitate. Everywhere he turned, someone wanted something. A picture. An interview. A handshake. A quick comment about the season.

He tried his best. He really did. Winning Rookie of the Year was amazing, something he had wanted since he was a little kid. He was surprised since Rozanov was ahead of him by three goals for the season so far, but he was incredibly pleased.

But being seen this much had always made something restless crawl under his skin.

The applause still rang strangely in his ears long after he stepped off the stage. His parents had cried. His mother openly, his father pretending not to while squeezing his shoulder hard enough afterward that Shane understood anyway. Hayden had nearly tackled him backstage. JJ had texted him fourteen times in all caps.

Scott Hunter had looked genuinely proud. "Hell of a year, kid," Scott had said, one broad hand landing warm and steady between Shane's shoulder blades. "You earned this."

The praise settled awkwardly somewhere beneath Shane's ribs because he still sometimes forgot people he grew up admiring were real enough to stand beside him. Scott had become something of a friend these past few weeks after New York had played against Montreal., he made things feel possible. Or at least less terrifying. Which was probably why Shane stayed near him most of the night. Not intentionally at first, it just happened. Scott understood media rooms. Understood crowds. Understood when Shane looked overwhelmed enough that conversation became difficult.

"You good?" Scott had asked quietly after one particularly aggressive round of interviews.

"Yeah," Shane answered automatically.

Scott snorted. "Terrible liar."

Shane laughed softly despite himself.

"You look like you wanna crawl under a table."

"That obvious?"

"Yeah. Come on-let's get the others and have a drink. Where's your boy Rozanov?"

Shane stopped cold. "What? My boy?" A million denials were on the tip of his tongue.

"Well, you know. It's always 'Hollander and Rozanov'. You two are always going to be thrown together it looks like." Scott gathered a few players he was familiar with and after two shots, Shane was starting to feel it.

Across the room, Ilya Rozanov watched the entire thing unfold with steadily worsening patience.

Months. Months apart. Months of avoidance disguised as scheduling conflicts and nervous excuses. The silence. Ilya still watched his games. Still watched his phone activity and the cameras. He had been patient.

Far more patient than anyone deserved credit for. And now, after months - he finally stood in the same room again. Only for every Alpha in the building to suddenly decide Shane Hollander was approachable. Congratulatory hands landed too easily on shoulders. Too many people stood too close. Too much scent in one place.

And Scott Hunter. That one annoyed him most. Not because Hunter was doing anything inappropriate. That almost made it worse. Hunter felt safe. Older. Established. Publicly mated. Calm. The kind of Alpha Shane visibly relaxed around without even realizing it. Ilya hated how obvious it was. The slight loosening of Shane's shoulders. The easier laugh.

The way he kept drifting subtly back toward Hunter throughout dinner. Every instinct in Ilya sharpened unpleasantly around the edges.

He knew better than to make a scene. Knew better than to trust his temper tonight. Because the ugly truth sat heavy beneath all the irritation: He had missed Shane, too much. More than he intended. More than made sense.

Seeing him again after months of distance felt unfairly immediate. Familiar in ways distance should have dulled but somehow never did. Shane still touched the side of his neck when nervous. Still folded inward slightly when overwhelmed. Still looked too young whenever he got tired. And he still had no idea when someone was flirting with him. That part remained absurdly endearing.

A retired player had spent ten straight minutes obviously hitting on him near the bar earlier while Shane nodded politely and changed the conversation to hockey drills.

Idiot. My beautiful, boring idiot.

Hunter leaned closer to say something. Shane laughed. Something dark tightened unpleasantly in Ilya's chest. Enough.

Before he did something embarrassing. Before he said something territorial in a room full of cameras. Before he actually considered punching Scott Hunter, which felt deeply unreasonable considering the man had done absolutely nothing wrong besides exist comfortably beside Shane.

"I need air," Ilya muttered to no one in particular. A teammate frowned. "You okay?"

"Yes."

"You look angry." Maybe. Ilya left anyway.

The rooftop was cold. Quiet- better.

City lights stretched endlessly below while cooler night air whisked the cigarette smoke away from him. He leaned against the railing, suit jacket abandoned over one shoulder, cigarette balanced loosely between his fingers.

The first drag burned pleasantly. The second did nothing. The third barely touched the tension under his ribs.

"Still smoking?"

Ilya stilled. Of course. He turned slowly.

Hollander stood near the rooftop door, tie loosened slightly now, hair messier than earlier., a faint blush bringing out those damn freckles that had enraptured him as soon as he laid eyes on Hollander. Trophy long abandoned somewhere downstairs.

For a second, neither moved. Distance suddenly felt ridiculous. Because there he was.

Months apart collapsing uncomfortably fast beneath proximity.

Shane frowned faintly.

"You okay?" No greeting. No awkwardness. Straight to concern.

Something warm and irritating twisted low in Ilya's chest.

"No."

The honesty seemed to surprise them both.

Shane shifted closer carefully, hands shoved into pockets. "You disappeared."

"I needed to leave."

"Why?"

Ilya laughed once. Sharp, humorless.

"You really ask?"

Shane frowned harder.

"I don't know."

Of course he didn't. Because Hollander genuinely had no idea what he looked like standing

beside Scott Hunter all night. Comfortable. Easy. Safe.

Like he belonged there. Like months apart hadn't hurt him as much as it hurt Ilya..

Ilya looked away briefly, jaw tightening.

"You avoid me for months," he said quietly. "Then I finally see you again and every Alpha in room is suddenly touching you."

Shane blinked. "What?"

"Hunter." The word came flatter than intended.

Recognition hit Shane almost immediately.

"Oh my God."

"You stay beside him entire night."

"He's helping me."

"Yes."

"You sound jealous."

"I am."

The honesty landed hard enough that Shane stopped. Neither of them spoke for a second. The city hummed quietly below.

Shane crossed his arms. "You don't get to be jealous."

"I know."

"Then why are you acting like this?"

Ilya exhaled slowly. Because the truthful answer sounded unreasonable. Because months of distance sat badly under his skin. Because seeing Hollander again after so long had somehow made missing him worse instead of better.

"You've been hiding from me for months.," he said finally, quieter now.

Shane looked away. Guilt arrived too visibly. "That's not fair."

"No?"

"No."

"You avoid me."

Shane swallowed hard. "You make things difficult."

"I ask to see you."

"You don't ask," Shane said immediately. "You decided. You ordered."

Pause.

Then - "...fair," Ilya admitted.

That startled him. Enough that Shane laughed softly despite himself.

"I don't know what I'm doing," Shane admitted eventually, voice quieter now. "Okay?"

The honesty shifted something.

Ilya waited.

"It's easier when you're far away," Shane said finally.

Fear. Distance felt safer. Of course it did. Shane continued before Ilya could answer.

"When you're far away, I can think. We text. I can pretend this isn't..." He hesitated.

"You are drunk." Ilya stated, finally managing to get a better look at him.

"I just need some air."

For a long second, only city noise filled the silence.

Then Ilya looked out toward the skyline. Suddenly the anger that had simmered under the surface from Hollander ignoring him for so long burst out.

"Had to get away from your new fans at party? Congratulations, by the way."

Shane frowned slightly. "It would have gone to either one of us."

"But it went to you. Well deserved, the poster boy of the NHL."

"You're such a fucking asshole! I win one stupid thing and you couldn't even come up to me

and just talk to me. You're ahead of me in all the stats and I win one fucking thing and you're out here throwing yourself a pity party!"

"This has nothing to do with you, Hollander! You fucking try to disappear suddenly and what, I should congratulate you and put you on pedestal like everyone else? What do you want?"

"Nothing. I don't want anything from you. I just needed some air."

Ilya fumed more. He threw the spent cigarette over the ledge and tried to calm down before he spoke again. "I go back home this week."

"Home?"

"Russia." The word landed strangely heavy. Ask me to stay. Ask me to go back to what we were starting. Ilya begged internally.

The quiet afterward stretched. Long enough that Shane hated how disappointed he suddenly felt. Because summer felt long. Too long. "That must be nice." Because somehow, without realizing it, he had assumed Ilya would still be there. Texting. Annoying. Present.

Ilya looked at him finally. Expression unreadable. "I go see my family," he said quietly, pushing away from the balcony ledge.

Hollander looked down. "I thought we could, I don't know. Maybe-" He stopped himself and shook his head. Mostly because for the first time in months- he was not entirely sure he wanted an excuse anymore.

"Have a good summer, Rozanov. See you next season." He held out his hand and Ilya walked over slowly to him, Ilya couldn't stop himself anymore. There was no slow lean, no question. Ilya closed the final inch and captured Shane's mouth with his own. It wasn't a kiss. It was a conquest.

The initial pressure was fierce, almost bruising, a release of hours of pent-up tension. Ilya's lips were demanding, moving with a hungry, relentless rhythm that stole the air from Shane's lungs. A soft, startled sound and a muffled moan escaped Hollander, swallowed instantly by Ilya. One of Ilya's hands slid up to grip Shane's face moving him exactly how he wanted, the fingers of his other hand threading into his dark, soft hair, tilting his head to deepen the angle. Once Hollander was completely pliant he braced both arms against the wall, caging them the smaller man completely.

The taste of him was overwhelming. Bitter whiskey,, a hint of spearmint, and something uniquely, essentially Shane—a dark, warm flavor that went straight to Ilya's head. His own hands, which had been frozen at their sides, rose of their own volition, fists clutching desperately at the worn cotton of Ilya's shirt. They pulled him closer, or maybe he surged forward; the distinction melted away. The kiss deepened, turned wet and searching. Ilya's tongue swept against the seam of Shane's lips, and they opened for him with a shuddering gasp.

The quiet hallway was filled with the raw, intimate sounds of it: the slick, hot slide of mouths, the ragged pull of breath through noses, the soft, desperate whimpers Shane couldn't suppress. Ilya answered with a low groan from deep in his chest, a vibration Shane felt against his own. His body pressed Hollander's harder into the wall, the solid line of him from chest to thigh a brand of heat through their clothes. The careful professionalism of the day, the weeks of hurt and lonely, incinerated in the span of a heartbeat, leaving only this primal, grasping need.

Shane was drowning in it, in the scent and the taste and the sheer rightness of Ilya's weight. His mind fogged, blissfully empty of everything but sensation. The rough scrape of Ilya's stubble against their chin. The iron grip in his hair.

Suddenly Shane broke through the haze of sensation and realized where they were. What they were doing. It sliced through the haze like a shard of ice.

Reality crashed back in, cold and terrifying. A rooftop- a very public rooftop.

A bolt of pure, adrenal fear shot through Shane's veins, freezing the fire in their blood. They tore their mouth away from Ilya's with a ragged, wet sound.

"Nngh—stop! What the fuck are you doing!"

He yelled as he shoved against Ilya's lips. Shane's hands, which had been clinging, now pushed at his chest. The movement was frantic, bird-like.

Ilya stilled, but didn't pull back. His forehead rested against Shane's, his breath coming in harsh, hot gusts that fanned over their wet, swollen lips. His eyes were heavy-lidded, dark with a hunger that was far from sated. "Hollander," he murmured, voice gravelly and thick.

"Someone," Shane gasped, their own voice trembling. They strained to listen, their body rigid with panic. The silence now felt predatory, listening back. "I heard a door. Someone could come."

The spell shattered. Ilya's eyes cleared, sharpening from lust to alertness. He pulled back, just an inch, his head turning to scan the long, shadowed corridor. His jaw was tight, the muscles working. The loss of his heat was immediate and profound; the wall felt like ice against Shane's back.

For a long, suspended moment, they stayed there, frozen in the aftermath. Shane's heart hammered against their ribs, a frantic drumbeat of fear and lingering desire. His lips felt bruised, sensitive, throbbing with the ghost of the kiss. Ilya looked back at them, his gaze dropping to their mouth, and Shane saw the conflict warring in him, the urge to reclaim what was interrupted warring with the cold logic of the risk.

Slowly, with obvious effort, Ilya uncurled his fingers from Hollander's hair. His arm lowered from the wall. He took a full step back, putting a foot of devastating, professional distance between them. The space felt like a chasm.

"See you next season, Hollander."

By some stroke of luck, the first game of the season was Montreal vs. Boston. They had started texting again over the summer.

IGR- Let's make a bet.

S- Ok?

IGR- If I win, I get to fuck you wherever and however many times I want tonight.

Ilya watched the text bubbles start and stop for several minutes.

S- And if I win?

IGR- Same prize, but more boring...

S- Asshole

IGR- How many times do you think you can come tonight?

Same thing, typing and stopping for a few minutes. Ilya put the phone down within view while he put his gear on.

S- I dont know. Maybe twice.

So fucking cute, Ilya thought with a grin.

IGR- I'm going to ruin you.

Ilya pushed the cell into his bag.

They won. 4-3 but he had a hat trick and an all around amazing game. He gave Hollander a wink and an extra squeeze of his hand during the final lineup.

By the time he finished his shower, he had a text message with the address.

S- 175 Mountain Ct. Come through the side entrance on Manor.

He parked a block away, chewing gum to get rid of the cigarette taste. He went inbetween the building and frowned at the dark alley, relieved when he saw the door open and Hollander step out halfway..

"You will murder me." He said half in jest because Hollander had that angry kitten look to him again. He didn't stop until he was right in front of Shane, close enough that Shane had to tilt his head back to meet his eyes.

"Maybe!" He hissed. "What took you so long?" Shane's own voice was thin, breathless.

Ilya's gaze was a physical weight, traveling over Shane's face, lingering on his lips. "Are you going to invite me up?" They joked together as they raced each other up the stairs, loosening some of the tension.

Shane was hyper-aware of Ilya beside him, of his size, his heat, the clean, sharp scent of him cutting through the sterile air. He fumbled with his keys at the door, his hands clumsy.

His apartment was neat, quiet, all soft greys and blues. It felt small with Rozanov in it. He watched as the Alpha shrugged out of his coat, draping it over the back of his sofa, and looked around with that same assessing gaze. Taking inventory. Claiming territory.

“So, where do you want me?” Ilya said, nodding to the couch. “That chair, the floor? The counter?”

Shane scoffed, walking away towards the hallway. Ilya followed silently. He stood in the center of the room, looking around the bedroom. The power dynamic was immediate, palpable.

“Wow. Someone likes the decorating magazines.”

“Shut up. I hired someone.”

Ilya nodded, moving closer to him “You have been frightened.” Ilya took a step closer. “Of this.” Another step. “Of what happens when there is no phone between us.” He was standing in front of Shane now, looking down. “You do not need to be frightened of me.”

“I’m not,” Shane whispered, the lie obvious.

Ilya tilted Shane to look up at him with a hand wrapped around his chin. His expression was serious, intent. “Holander. Look at me.” Shane forced his eyes up. “Nothing happens here that you do not want. Do you understand? Every touch. Every kiss. Every single thing. You say yes, or you say no, or you say wait. And I will listen. This is not a game. This is a promise.”

The intensity of his gaze, the raw sincerity in his voice, shattered something inside Shane. The last of his resistance crumbled. He wanted this. He wanted him. The obsession, the attention, the terrifying, all-consuming focus.

“Yes,” Shane breathed.

Ilya’s eyes darkened. He reached up, his hand impossibly gentle, and cupped Shane’s cheek. His thumb stroked over the arch of Shane’s cheekbone. “Yes?”

“Yes.”

Ilya leaned in and kissed him.

It was not what Shane expected. It was not demanding or rough. It was slow. Deep. Devastatingly thorough. A kiss that felt like being known. Ilya’s mouth was warm, his taste clean and sharp. He kissed like he did everything else, with absolute focus, learning Shane’s responses, the soft sound he made in the back of his throat, the way his hands came up to clutch at Ilya’s shoulders.

When they broke apart, both were breathing heavily. Ilya rested his forehead against Shane’s. “Patches,” he murmured, and it was a question.

In the soft light of his bedroom, Rozanov undressed him with a reverence that made Shane tremble. Each button of his shirt, each brush of fingers against his skin, was deliberate. Ilya kissed every new inch of skin he uncovered, his collarbone, the center of his chest, the dip of his navel. When Shane stood bare before him, shivering, Ilya just looked at him, his gaze hot and worshipful.

“You are so beautiful,” Ilya said, the words gravel-rough. “You have no idea.”

Then it was Ilya’s turn. Shane watched, heart hammering, as Ilya stripped off his own clothes, revealing the most powerful, beautiful body Shane had ever seen. He was magnificent. And he was here. For him.

Ilya guided him onto the bed, covering Shane’s body with his own, their skin meeting everywhere in a shock of heat. The weight of him was glorious, anchoring, safe. The kissing resumed, deeper, hungrier, but Ilya’s hands were endlessly patient, mapping Shane’s body, learning what made him gasp, what made him arch.

“Tell me,” Ilya whispered against his throat, his lips brushing over the suppressant patch. “Tell me that you still want.”

“I still want,” Shane gasped, his hips canting up of their own accord. “I want you. All of you.”

Ilya made a low, approving sound. Shane reached for the nightstand, where he pulled out a strip of condoms. Ilya prepared Shane with meticulous, tender care that made Shane weep. His fingers were gentle, stretching, scissoring, crooking until Shane was a writhing, begging mess beneath him.

“Roza-please-”

“Look at me, are you okay?” Ilya asked, poised at his entrance. Shane forced his eyes open and nodded quickly but tensed again when he looked down and felt Ilya’s cock at his entrance. He looked up, meeting the stormy blue gaze. “Don’t worry, it will fit. Last chance to say no.” He said with a smirk and an incredibly gentle kiss.

“Yes. God, yes.”

Ilya pushed in.

It was a stretch, a burn, an overwhelming fullness that stole the air from Shane’s lungs. He arched his head back and cried out, his nails digging into Ilya’s back. Ilya stilled, buried to the hilt, his entire body trembling with the effort of holding back.

“Breathe, kotenok,” he soothed, brushing the sweat-damp hair from Shane’s forehead. “Breathe for me. Tell me when.”

Shane took a shuddering breath, the initial shock melting into a deep, radiating pleasure. The feeling of being so completely filled, so utterly claimed, was unlike anything he’d ever imagined. “Move,” he pleaded. “God, please move.”

Ilya began to move. Slow, deep, relentless strokes that built a fire in Shane's core. He set a rhythm that was both punishing and worshipful, his eyes never leaving Shane's face, watching every flicker of pleasure, every wince of overstimulation. He adjusted his angle, and Shane saw stars.

"There-oh, god, right there"

Ilya hammered that spot, his thrusts growing more urgent, his control fraying. "You feel... you feel like heaven, Hollander. So tight. So perfect for me." He leaned down, capturing Shane's mouth in a searing kiss. "Come for me. Let me feel you."

It was the combination of the words, the relentless friction, the smell of Ilya's skin, the feeling of his teeth scraping gently over Shane's scent gland. Shane shattered. Pleasure tore through him, white-hot and blinding, his body bowing off the bed as he came with a broken sob, his release striping between their stomachs.

The sensation of Shane pulsing around him tipped Ilya over the edge. With a guttural groan that was pure possession, he followed, his own climax wracking through him as he emptied into the condom, his hips stuttering against Shane's.

He collapsed, careful to keep his weight on his elbows, and buried his face in Shane's neck, breathing in the scent of sweat, sex, and them. Shane's arms came up, weak and trembling, to wrap around his back, holding him there.

For a long time, they just breathed together, the world slowly filtering back in the sound of rain against the window, the distant hum of city traffic, the pounding of their own hearts.

The pleasure was a tidal wave, pulling him under, dragging him into a warm, silent, blissful dark. Subspace. He floated there, weightless, thoughtless, aware only of the heavy, perfect weight on top of him and the slow, aftershock pulses of his own body. The world was reduced to heat, scent, and the low, steady thrum of a satisfied alpha's purr against his chest.

Ilya felt the exact moment Shane's consciousness drifted away from the sharp edges of the room and into that soft, surrendered place. The tension melted from his limbs, his breathing evened out, his eyes glazed over, staring at the ceiling without seeing it. A perfect, pliant omega. His omega.

A crazy, possessive idea, sharp and sudden as a shard of ice, lanced through Ilya's post-orgasm haze.

He could stop this now. He could let Shane believe this was just a hot, intense hookup. A one-time collision. He could pull out, clean them up, make a joke, and leave. That was the plan. The safe plan. The plan that wouldn't send Shane running for the hills.

The thought of leaving, of walking out of this room and letting Shane think this was just sex, felt like tearing out his own ribs.

He looked down at Shane's face, slack with pleasure, lips kiss-swollen, utterly trusting in his vulnerability. No. This wasn't a fling. It couldn't be.

He shifted, moving slowly so as not to startle him. He gathered Shane's boneless body in his arms and rolled them, maneuvering Shane onto his back again, settling between his thighs. Shane made a soft, confused noise, his brow furrowing slightly as the change in position began to tug him back toward awareness.

Ilya didn't let him surface fully. He dipped his head, nuzzling into Shane's throat, bypassing the suppressant patch to nip and suck at the sensitive skin just below his ear, along the line of his jaw. It was a possessive, grounding touch, a reassertion of claim. Shane's breath hitched, a low whimper escaping him as sensation began to filter back in.

"Ilya...?" His voice was slurred, thick with confusion and lingering pleasure.

"Shh, kotenok," Ilya murmured against his skin, his voice a velvet-wrapped command. "Still with me?"

Shane nodded slowly, his hands coming up to tangle weakly in Ilya's hair. "Mmm."

Ilya kissed his way back to Shane's mouth, swallowing the little sigh he made. The kiss was deep, languid, a slow rekindling of the fire. When he pulled back, Shane's eyes were clearer, but still hazy, his pupils blown wide.

"I want you here now," Ilya said, his voice dropping to a dark, intimate rasp. He slid his hand between them, his fingers finding Shane's slick, sensitive entrance, still stretched and throbbing from their first joining. He pressed against him, not entering, just applying a firm, bruising pressure that made Shane gasp and arch off the mattress. "Still okay?"

It was a formality. A pantomime of consent performed for the part of Shane's brain that was still capable of rational thought. The part that was rapidly being drowned out again by the renewed rush of arousal Ilya was coaxing from his body.

Shane's answer was a slow, dazed nod, his hips pushing down against Ilya's fingers. "Yes... okay..." He was chasing the feeling, chasing Ilya's lips again, already slipping back under the spell.

Ilya kissed him, deep and thorough, as his other hand groped blindly for the strip of condoms on the nightstand. He tore one free, the sound loud in the quiet room. He broke the kiss, holding Shane's gaze as he brought the packet to his mouth, tearing it open with his teeth. The act was deliberately primal, dominant, and he saw Shane shiver in response.

But as he went to sheath himself, Shane's hand fluttered up, landing on his wrist. Not to stop him. Just a touch. His eyes were unfocused again, drawn to Ilya's mouth. He leaned up, seeking another kiss, distractible as a kitten.

Ilya met him halfway, kissing him with a sudden, desperate hunger. This is wrong, a cold, logical voice whispered in the back of his mind. You are taking the choice from him.

He drowned the voice in the taste of Shane's mouth, in the sweet, surrendering scent of him. He couldn't help it. The need to bind Shane to him, truly bind him, was a fever in his blood.

While kissing Shane deeply, swallowing his soft, needy sounds, Ilya made a show of rolling the condom on. The latex whispered against his skin. But as he positioned himself at Shane's entrance once more, he let his control over his own scent slip. Just a fraction. Not a full, aggressive alpha command, but a targeted, potent release of calming, claiming pheromones - the biological equivalent of a lullaby mixed with a brand. He watched Shane's face as it hit him.

Shane's eyes, which had been fluttering closed in anticipation, flew open for a second, wide and startled. Then they glazed over completely, the last vestiges of tension melting from his body. His expression went slack, peaceful, utterly vacant. A low, contented hum vibrated in his chest. He was gone, submerged even deeper into that pliant, trusting subspace, his biology overriding his mind, accepting the pheromonal claim as truth.

"That's it," Ilya whispered, a vicious thrill of triumph and guilt twisting in his gut. He pressed forward, sinking into the exquisite, unprotected heat of Shane's body.

The feeling was astronomically better. Raw. Primal. The slick, tight clutch of him, the shocking intimacy of skin on skin. It was everything. It was a line crossed that could never be uncrossed.

Ilya set a slow, deep, devastating rhythm, each thrust a deliberate act of possession. He watched Shane's face, the blank pleasure there, and knew he was committing a sin. He was tying their futures together with a biological knot Shane hadn't consciously agreed to.

And as he felt his own climax building, a fierce, possessive certainty settled over him. It didn't matter. Shane was his. He had been from the moment Ilya decided it. This was just making it real in the most fundamental way possible.

He came with Shane's name a prayer and a curse on his lips, spilling inside him, marking him, claiming him in the oldest way an alpha could.

After, as he held Shane's limp, blissed-out body against his chest, he kissed his damp hair and whispered the truth into the silent, complicit dark.

"You are mine now, kotenok. You just don't know it yet."

Much later, Shane stirred. The fog was lifting, leaving behind a bone-deep soreness and a feeling of profound, terrifying peace. He was curled on his side, Ilya's chest a solid wall against his back, a heavy arm draped possessively over his waist.

The room was dark. The rain had stopped.

Reality began to seep in, cold and clarifying.

He'd done it. He'd slept with Ilya Rozanov. Not in a hotel room, not in a moment of desperate passion, but here, in his own bed. He'd given him everything, his first time with an alpha, his first time with anyone. And it had been... it had been more than he could have ever imagined. Overwhelming. Consuming. Perfect.

A flicker of unease cut through the afterglow. The second time... it was hazy. Beautiful, but hazy. He remembered the feeling of Ilya inside him again, even more intense, even more present. He remembered the scent that had wrapped around him, sweet and heavy, pulling him under...

He shifted slightly, and the movement triggered a dull, deep ache, a feeling of fullness that was... different. More significant.

Ilya's arm tightened around him. "Awake?" His voice was sleep-rough, vibrating against Shane's spine.

"Yeah."

Ilya nuzzled the back of his neck, his lips finding the edge of the suppressant patch. "Okay?"

Shane swallowed. "Yeah."

Ilya went very still behind him. The silence stretched, thick and heavy. Then he pressed a soft, lingering kiss to Shane's shoulder. "Sleep, kotenok. We will talk in the morning."

It wasn't an answer. It was a postponement. And in that moment, Shane knew. He knew with a sudden, chilling certainty what that different feeling meant. What the overwhelming, scent-drunk haze had allowed.

He should be furious. He should be terrified. He should shove Ilya away and scream.

But as Ilya's arm tightened around him again, pulling him closer into the safe, warm cage of his body, all Shane felt was a deep, settling certainty to match Ilya's own. A terrible, beautiful sense of fate.

He had wanted to be kept.

And now, in the most irrevocable way possible, he was.

The silence in the room was profound, broken only by the slowing syncopation of their breaths. Shane felt boneless, adrift in a warm, hazy sea. The sharp edges of the world- the rain, the streetlights, his own name, were all blurred beneath a layer of perfect, floating contentment. Subspace. He knew the term academically, but felt it was something else entirely. It was safety. It was surrender. It was the absence of all fear.

Ilya held him through it, his chest a solid, steady rise and fall against Shane's back. He said nothing, just stroked a hand slowly, rhythmically, from Shane's shoulder down to his hip and back again. A possessive, soothing metronome. He was waiting. Watching. Calculating.

He felt the precise moment Shane's breathing evened out from ragged pants to something deeper, more restful. The omega's scent, which had been a frantic, sweet storm of arousal and release, was mellowing into something sleepy and satisfied. But the pheromonal claim Ilya had released - the one that had pushed Shane so deep under, still lingered in the air, a subtle, binding perfume. It was time to move.

"Come," Ilya murmured, his voice a low vibration against Shane's skin. He shifted, disentangling their limbs with a care that felt incongruously tender. Before Shane could protest or even fully process the movement, Ilya had slid an arm under his knees and behind his back, lifting him from the sweat-damp sheets as if he weighed nothing.

Shane made a soft, confused sound, his head lolling against Ilya's shoulder. "Wha...?"

"Shower," Ilya said simply, carrying him effortlessly through the dim bedroom into the attached bathroom. He nudged the light on with his elbow—a soft, golden glow from a single fixture—and set Shane down on the closed toilet lid, keeping a steadying hand on his shoulder. Shane blinked up at him, his eyes still glassy, his expression soft and unguarded. Beautifully wrecked. His.

Ilya turned and started the shower, adjusting the taps until steam began to billow, fogging the mirror. The practical reason was clear: to clean up, to soothe sore muscles, to help Shane come down gently from the intense subspace. The other reason coiled, cold and deliberate, in Ilya's gut. He needed to wash away the evidence. The chances of conception outside of a heat were statistically slim, but they were not zero. And the biological claim he'd just made - the unprotected knotting, the deliberate pheromone surge, was designed to maximize those slim chances. It was a primal gamble, and he couldn't leave the physical proof of it on Shane's skin or sheets for him to find later, when his mind was clear and panic could set in.

He turned back to Shane, who was watching the steam curl with a childlike fascination. Ilya crouched in front of him, framing his face with both hands. "Stay with me, kotenok," he said, his tone firm but not unkind. "Just for a few more minutes."

He helped Shane stand, his body pliant and trusting, and guided him under the hot spray. Shane gasped as the water hit his skin, a full-body shiver running through him. The heat seemed to jumpstart his nervous system; his eyes lost some of their distant haze, focusing on Ilya's face as Ilya stepped in behind him, crowding him gently against the warm tile wall.

"Okay?" Ilya asked, reaching for the body wash. He poured a generous amount into his palm, the clean, citrus scent a stark contrast to the musk of sex that still clung to them.

Shane nodded, his head tipping back against Ilya's chest as Ilya's soap-slicked hands began to move over his body. It wasn't sexual. Not at first. It was methodical, thorough. Ilya washed every inch of him, his touch firm and proprietary, rinsing away the sweat, the spend, the scent of their coupling. He paid particular attention to between Shane's thighs, his fingers gentle but insistent, ensuring nothing remained. Shane trembled under the intimate ministrations, a faint blush returning to his cheeks as full awareness began to trickle back, bringing with it a wave of shyness.

"I can... I can do it," Shane mumbled, trying to turn.

“I know,” Ilya said, his hands not stopping. “Let me.”

It was a command, softly spoken. Shane stilled, surrendering again, but this time with a flicker of conscious choice. The submission went deeper now, past biology into something more willingly given.

When Shane was clean, Ilya turned him around and began to wash himself under Shane’s watchful gaze. Shane’s eyes traced the water sluicing over the hard planes of Ilya’s chest, the old scars, the evidence of his own nails down Ilya’s back. A different kind of heat began to stir, low and insistent, cutting through the lingering lethargy.

Ilya saw it. He always saw it. He rinsed off and reached for Shane again, not to clean, but to pull him close. The water beat down on them, a private cocoon of sound and steam. Shane’s body fit perfectly against his, skin slick and hot.

“Rozanov,” Shane breathed, the name a question and an answer.

Ilya kissed him, deep and slow, tasting the clean water on his lips. His hands slid down Shane’s back, over the curve of his ass, pulling him closer until their erections slid together, a shock of renewed sensation that made them both groan.

“Again?” Ilya murmured against his mouth, one hand drifting to cradle the back of Shane’s head, protecting it from the tile.

Shane’s answer was to surge up, kissing him with a desperate hunger that belied his earlier exhaustion. “Yes. Please.”

Ilya’s control, already frayed by the monumental transgression of before, threatened to snap. He wanted to take, to claim, to bury himself in that heat again and again until the bond was so deep nothing could ever break it. But as he guided Shane’s leg up around his hip, as he pressed forward and felt the tight, slick resistance, Shane winced. A sharp, bitten-off inhale against Ilya’s neck.

Ilya froze. Every possessive, alpha instinct screamed at him to push through, to remind Shane who he belonged to, that a little pain was part of the claiming. But the memory of Shane’s tear-streaked face at the height of his pleasure, the trust in his glazed eyes, rose up like a dam.

Gentle. He had to be gentle. He’d already taken too much.

He forced himself to still, to breathe through the pounding need. He shifted his angle, pressed in with infinitesimal slowness, watching Shane’s face for every micro-expression. “Breathe,” he coaxed, his voice strained with the effort of holding back. “Just breathe into it, *kotenok*. I have you.”

Shane’s eyes were squeezed shut, his nails digging into Ilya’s biceps. But as Ilya slid deeper, with excruciating patience, the pain etched on his face gradually melted into a dazed sort of wonder. “Oh,” he whispered, his body relaxing incrementally, accepting the renewed fullness.

“Good,” Ilya praised, brushing his lips over Shane’s damp forehead. “So good for me.” He began to move, a shallow, rocking rhythm that was more about connection than frantic pursuit. The water cascaded over them, muffling their sounds, turning the shower into a world of its own. This wasn’t the earth-shattering possession of before; it was something slower, sweeter, more devastating in its intimacy. Ilya kissed him through it, whispering praise and filth in equal measure in Russian and English, watching as Shane came apart not with a shattered cry, but with a series of soft, broken whimpers, his release washed away by the spray almost instantly.

Ilya followed, his own climax a deep, rolling wave of satisfaction that was as much emotional as physical. He held Shane upright as they both shuddered through the aftershocks, the water finally beginning to run cool.

He turned off the shower and reached for a towel, wrapping Shane in it first with a care that felt almost reverent. He dried him meticulously, then himself. When he led a sleepy, pliant Shane back to the bed, he pulled back the soiled top sheet, revealing clean ones underneath. He tucked Shane in, then climbed in beside him, pulling him back into the shelter of his body.

In the dark, with Shane’s breathing deepening into sleep, Ilya stared at the ceiling. The guilt was there, a cold, sharp stone in his chest. He had manipulated him. He had lied by omission. He had tried to seed a life inside him without his knowledge, all to chain him irrevocably.

Shane shifted in his sleep, murmuring something unintelligible, and pressed closer, his hand fisting loosely in the hair on Ilya’s chest. A gesture of pure, unconscious trust.

Ilya closed his eyes, the guilt not dissolving, but being absorbed into the larger, darker, more powerful emotion: certainty. The ends justified the means. Shane was his. He would be protected, cherished, owned. And if a child came of this night, then the bond would be unbreakable. Shane might never forgive him if he found out, but he would never leave.

It was a terrible, beautiful calculus.

As dawn began to lighten the edges of the blinds, Ilya pressed a final, possessive kiss to the sleeping omega’s hair.

“Mine,” he whispered into the quiet, a vow and a verdict.

The first thing Shane became aware of was warmth. A solid, heavy warmth along his back, and an arm like an iron band settled over his waist, holding him close. The second was the scent- clean linen, his own shower gel, and underneath it, the deep, unmistakable pine-and-snow signature of Ilya Rozanov. It wasn’t a ghost or a memory on borrowed sheets. It was the man himself, asleep and real in Shane’s bed.

He lay perfectly still, afraid to breathe too deeply and break the spell. Sunlight, thin and pale with early morning, filtered through the blinds, painting stripes across the rumpled duvet. The events of the night unspooled in his mind, not as a frantic, overwhelming blur, but as a series of vivid, stunning impressions. The look in Ilya’s eyes when he’d appeared on the sidewalk. The devastating patience of his hands. The feeling of being so thoroughly known, so completely **wanted**, that every fear had simply burned away.

A deep, bone-deep soreness hummed through him, a pleasant, claiming ache that made his cheeks heat with a private, thrilling shame. He had done that. He had let that happen. More than that, he had begged for it.

Ilya stirred behind him, his breathing pattern shifting from sleep to wakefulness. Shane felt the exact moment he became aware, the arm around his waist tightening almost imperceptibly, a silent, possessive good morning. A nose nudged into the hair at the nape of his neck, and Ilya inhaled deeply, a low, satisfied rumble vibrating against Shane's spine.

"Dobroye utro, kotenok," Ilya's voice was sleep-roughened, the words a warm puff against his skin.

"Hmm," Shane whispered back, his own voice shy.

Ilya shifted, rolling Shane onto his back so he could look down at him. In the soft morning light, he looked younger, the usual sharp edges of his intensity softened by sleep. But his eyes were the same—that impossible, focused blue, taking in every detail of Shane's face with a quiet intensity that made Shane's heart stutter.

"You are still here," Shane said, as if confirming a miracle.

"Where else would I be?" Rozanov asked, a small, sleepy smile touching his lips.

He lowered his head and kissed him. It was nothing like the desperate, consuming kisses of the night before. This was slow, tender, a gentle re-mapping of territory already claimed. A silent conversation. You are here. I am here. This is real.

They lingered like that, trading soft, waking kisses until the reality of the day began to press in. Ilya was the one who finally broke away with a reluctant sigh, checking the time on his phone on the nightstand. A shadow passed over his face.

"I have a flight," he said, the words heavy.

"I know." Shane did know. The schedule was an immutable law. Practice was mandatory. The world outside this room demanded its due.

Ilya pushed himself up, the sheets pooling around his waist. He looked back at Shane, who lay watching him, and for a fleeting second, Shane saw something raw and unguarded in his expression—a reluctance so profound it bordered on pain. Then the mask of calm control settled back into place.

The process of leaving was agonizingly slow, a drawn-out ritual of reluctance. Ilya showered again, and Shane made coffee, moving in a happy, sore daze around his kitchen. He brought a mug to Ilya, who was pulling on his jeans, and received a kiss that tasted of toothpaste and gratitude. They didn't talk much. Words felt superfluous, fragile things that might shatter the delicate bubble of the morning.

Ilya's jacket was by the door, a sobering reminder of the outside world. He finished dressing, Shane grabbing his jacket and they got out the door together.

The space between them felt charged, final. Ilya closed it, and framed Shane's face with his hands, his thumbs stroking over his cheekbones.

"You will be okay today," he stated, his gaze searching Shane's. "You will rest. You will eat. You will not overthink."

It was an order, but it was wrapped in a concern so genuine it made Shane's throat tight. He nodded. "I will."

"Good." Ilya leaned in, kissing him again, a soft, lingering press of lips. "I will call you. From the airport. From the plane if I can."

"You don't have to--"

"I will."

Another kiss, deeper this time, a silent argument against the separation. Ilya's phone buzzed in his pocket, the taxi, waiting outside. He ignored it, kissing Shane once more, then resting his forehead against his.

"Rozanov," Shane breathed, his fingers curling into the front of Ilya's shirt. "Your flight..."

"I know." He sounded angry, not at Shane, but at the circumstance. He took a deep, steadying breath, inhaling Shane's scent as if to store it. "This is... inconvenient."

A weak laugh escaped Shane. "Yeah."

The phone buzzed again, more insistently. Ilya finally pulled back, his expression hardening into resignation. He picked up his bag, his eyes never leaving Shane's. He opened the apartment door, then paused on the threshold, the line between the world they'd built last night and the one waiting outside.

He turned back, one last time. He didn't kiss him again. He just looked, his gaze a physical touch, branding the memory of Shane standing there, sleep-rumpled and his, into his mind.

"Do not forget what you are," Ilya said, his voice low and fierce. "Mine."

Then he was gone, the door clicking shut with a soft, final sound.

Shane stood in the sudden silence of his apartment, the warmth of Ilya's kisses still on his lips, the ghost of his weight still on his skin. The room felt larger, emptier, but differently so. It wasn't a void anymore. It was a space that had been witnessed, claimed, and irrevocably altered.

He walked to the window, pushing the blinds aside just in time to see Ilya slide into a black town car. He didn't look up. The car pulled away, merging into the morning traffic, carrying Ilya toward the airport, toward practice, toward a life that didn't include Shane in the immediacy of his bed.

But as Shane let the blinds fall back, a slow, sure warmth spread through his chest, settling beside the pleasant ache. Ilya's scent was on his sheets, on his skin. His words were in the air. *Mine.*

For the first time in his life, Shane Hollander felt truly, completely, and terrifyingly owned. And the most shocking part was the profound, unshakeable peace that came with it. He was someone's. He was Ilya's. The thought wasn't a cage. It was the first solid ground he'd found in years. He hugged his arms around himself, a small, secret smile touching his lips as he turned to face the quiet, changed space of his morning. The world outside could wait.

The silence in Shane's apartment the next morning was a different creature entirely. It wasn't the peaceful, sated quiet of the day before. It was a loud, accusatory void. Everywhere he looked, he saw evidence. A faint dent in the pillow next to his. A water glass in the sink that wasn't his. The air itself, though scrubbed clean by hours of open windows, seemed to thrum with the ghost of pine and snow and *claim*.

He missed him.

The thought was a sucker punch, leaving him breathless against his kitchen counter. He missed the solid weight of him, the rumble of his voice, the way his focus felt like a physical shelter. It was pathetic. It was dangerous.

It was a one-time thing. He chanted it in his head like a mantra as he pulled on his workout gear. A spectacular, mind-blowing, life-altering one-time thing. That's all it could be. Ilya lived on the other continent. He was an alpha, a force of nature, something he told himself he wouldn't fall for until after he retired. Now they needed to drift back to their separate trajectories.

His phone buzzed on the counter. Ilya's name flashed on the screen. A text.

IGR- How do you feel?

Simple. Direct. Caring. It made Shane's chest ache. He stared at it until the screen went dark. He didn't answer.

He threw himself into his workout at the team facility with a violence that startled the few other players there. He pounded the treadmill until his lungs burned, lifted weights until his muscles screamed, all in a frantic attempt to outrun the memories. The feel of Ilya's hands. The sound of his voice, whispering praise and filth. The devastating, total fullness. Each memory was a hook in his flesh, pulling him back toward a cliff edge.

His phone buzzed again in his gym bag. Then, an hour later, a call. He let it go to voicemail. He couldn't hear his voice. If he heard his voice, the carefully constructed wall of one-time thing would crumble to dust.

After showering, still buzzing with nervous energy and unresolved panic, he did the only thing that ever truly grounded him. He drove out to the plot of land. The paperwork was nearly final. The sale would go through. He'd been quietly funneling money from a couple of his quieter, long-term endorsements into a separate account for over a year. This was his

future. Solid, real, his. A house he would build on the shore of this lake. A life of his own making. The antithesis of being consumed.

He walked the tree line, his boots crunching on last autumn's leaves, and emerged at the shoreline. The lake was still, a vast mirror reflecting the grey, cloud-scudded sky. He sat on a weathered log, pulling his knees up to his chest, and forced himself to look at the water, the trees, the future.

But his mind was a traitor.

It replayed the shower. The way Ilya had washed him with such devastating tenderness, then pinned him against the tiles and loved him with a fierce, gentle urgency that made Shane feel both cherished and utterly ravished. His body throbbed in remembered sympathy, a deep, sweet ache that was both a pain and a pleasure.

That was the core of the panic, wasn't it? The not knowing.

He had no frame of reference. He'd saved himself, not out of any grand principle, but out of caution, fear of complications, fear of the exact all-consuming feeling that was now choking him. Was that what sex was supposed to be? Was that the normal, human experience? A total annihilation of self and sense, a fusion so complete you forgot where you ended and the other person began? The pleasure had been so intense it bordered on pain, the intimacy so profound it felt like dying.

Or was it because Ilya was an Alpha?

Was it biological? Chemical? Had his omega biology, so long suppressed and managed, simply recognized its counterpart and short-circuited his higher reasoning, flooding him with endorphins and submissive bliss designed to bond him to the strongest mate? Was the earth-shattering pleasure just an evolutionary trick to ensure propagation? Was the feeling of peace, of rightness, just a hormonal lie?

The thought was a chilling splash of water. Had any of it been real? Had he been real in it? Or was he just a responsive organism, and Ilya the perfect key to his lock?

He remembered the haze, the subspace, the way the world had gone soft and quiet. Ilya's scent had been everywhere, a blanket. Had he been manipulated? Not in a malicious way, perhaps, but in a primal, inevitable way. An Alpha's influence.

A normal, good sexual experience, he imagined- was fun, exciting, pleasurable. You had a good time, you felt close to someone, you maybe slept well after.

What he'd had with Ilya hadn't been a "good time." It had been a spiritual event. It had rewritten his cellular code. It had left him sitting on the shore of his future dream, unable to see anything but the past.

His phone buzzed again in his pocket. He didn't even pull it out. He knew who it was. He could feel the pull through the device, a magnetic tug on the raw, exposed nerve endings Ilya had uncovered.

He wrapped his arms tighter around his knees, resting his chin on them, staring at the still lake. The reflection was perfect, but it was an illusion. Beneath the calm surface, the water was deep, dark, and cold. He'd built his entire life on control, on a calm surface. Ilya had plunged into his depths in a single night and stirred up everything hidden below.

He didn't know if it was love, or biology, or obsession, or destiny. He only knew the "one-time thing" was a lie he was telling himself to survive the minute. Because the truth was, if Ilya walked out of those trees right now and told him to get on his knees, Shane wasn't sure he'd have the strength, or even the desire, to say no.

The panic wasn't about what had happened. It was about the terrifying, thrilling certainty that it wasn't over. And he had no idea if the man he was missing was a person, or a force of nature he'd been foolish enough to invite in. All he knew was the hook was set deep, and the line was pulling taut.

The silence was an insult.

It grated against Ilya's nerves, a high-pitched, constant whine in the background of his every thought. Two days. Forty-eight hours of nothing. His texts sat unread, then read with no reply. His calls went straight to voicemail. The digital void where Shane's presence had been was now a glaring, infuriating blank space.

He told himself it was shock. Overwhelm. Omega skittishness after a profound first bonding. He could allow for that. For a day.

By the second morning, with practice a distracted blur of drills he performed by muscle memory alone, allowance curdled into a cold, simmering anger.

He sat in his condo, the lights off, and opened the encrypted feed on his laptop. The camera in Shane's apartment was a tiny, high-definition eye near the smoke detector. He watched the empty space. The neatly made bed. The clean kitchen. It was sterile, lifeless. Shane was not there.

A few keystrokes switched the feed. The camera at the Hollander family home in Ontario, a concession he'd extracted from a deeply paranoid - and well-paid, home security installer months ago, during his initial research phase. The living room was quiet. Shane's mother read a book. No Shane.

He pulled up the tracker on Shane's phone. The signal was stationary, pulsing from the team's practice facility. Good. At least he wasn't somewhere else, with someone else. The geofence alerts he'd set hadn't been triggered. But the silence was a violation of a different, more important rule.

Ilya's jaw ached from clenching. He watched the stationary dot, imagining Shane inside those walls, sweating, breathing, ignoring him. The urge to get on a plane, to storm into that gym and demand an answer, to put his hands on him and make him acknowledge the bond that had been forged, was a physical pressure in his chest. But it was the middle of the season. Games,

travel, mandatory appearances. His movements were tracked, his time not his own. The leash of his profession, which he usually ignored, felt suddenly, unbearably tight.

His eyes, almost of their own volition, kept cataloguing the little he could see on the feeds and extrapolating from the tracker. Was he eating? He'd ordered no food deliveries to the apartment. Was he sleeping? The bed remained pristine. Was he... was there any sign?

The thought was a quiet, desperate drumbeat underneath the anger. He found himself scrutinizing the fleeting glimpse of Shane's mother on the feed, looking for any change in her demeanor, any hint of a secret. He replayed the memory of that night with clinical precision—the timing, the biology, his own deliberate release of pheromones to encourage receptivity. The chances were low. But not zero. He wanted it. He wanted that undeniable, biological tether. A reason Shane would have to answer.

But there was nothing. No unusual purchases on his monitored accounts. No doctor visits. No shift in routine that suggested nausea or fatigue. Just the silent, stubborn defiance of his absence.

The anger tightened, sharpening into a blade of disappointment. He had planted a seed in the most primal way he could, and the earth gave no sign of life.

His own phone buzzed. Svetlana.

S- You are watching walls again. I can feel it through the phone.

I- I am working.

S- You are obsessing. It is unattractive. Come out. The club on 4th. Many pretty Betas who do not ignore texts.

I- Not interested.

S- This is the problem! You are a ghost. Before this omega, you would have been there already. You need to clear your head. Hunt something else for a night.

Her words were pragmatic, a callback to a previous version of himself. Ilya Rozanov, who took what he wanted and forgot it by morning. Who viewed entanglement as a weakness. That man felt like a stranger. The idea of someone else's hands, someone else's scent, was not just unappealing; it was viscerally repulsive. Every instinct he had was now oriented toward a single, frustratingly silent point on a map.

He didn't answer her.

The days bled into a week. The Olympic team announcements were a media circus he navigated by rote. His own selection was a foregone conclusion, a line item in a schedule. It meant nothing. It was just a different jersey, a different set of walls to feel caged by, farther away from Boston.

He was in his car after a late meeting, the notification lighting up his screen amidst a sea of congratulatory messages from people who didn't matter. He almost dismissed it without looking.

Then he saw the name.

Shane

The world narrowed to the glow of the display. He opened it.

It was not an apology. It was not an explanation. It was not a surrender.

It was two words.

S- Congratulations, Rozanov.

That was all. Acknowledgment of a professional milestone. Polite. Distant. Impersonal. The kind of thing a casual acquaintance might send.

The cold, coiled anger in Ilya's gut exploded into a white-hot rage. His fingers tightened on the phone, the plastic casing creaking in protest. He stared at the message, at the pathetic period at the end, as if it was a period on them.

He wanted to write back a novel of fury. To demand. To threaten. To remind Shane of exactly what had happened, of what he was, of what he belonged to.

Instead, he took a breath that sawed in his lungs. He looked out the windshield at the dark parking garage, his reflection a grim mask in the glass.

He typed back, his movements precise and controlled.

I- Thank you.

He sent it. Two could play at this sterile, maddening game.

But as he started the car, the cold fury settled into something harder, more determined. The Olympics. A controlled environment. A closed circuit. Team Russia would be there. Team Canada would be there.

Shane had broken the silence. He had reached out. It was a crack. A tiny, hairline fracture in his resistance.

Ilya would be there. And this time, there would be no quiet apartment, no easy escape. There would be no more silence.

He pulled out of the garage, the plan already crystallizing in the cold, obsessive clarity of his mind. The congratulations weren't an end. They were an invitation. And Ilya had every intention of RSVPing in person.

Chapter 10: Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Don't kill me when y'all get to the end! There is a reason for everything!
Didn't show this to my sister because she would have cut this chapter by a lot and take away my laptop.
Next up is them seeing each other again. and that's already half written.

Love love love all the reviews! They be making me blush and smile-better than any medicine.

Ilya woke before the alarm, though for a few slow seconds he did not remember where he was. The room sat in that strange blue-gray stillness of too early morning, the kind of quiet that made every small sound feel too intimate. Outside, Montreal was still half-buried beneath the storm that had blown through overnight, snow pressed against the windows and softening the city into something less sharp than usual. He stayed still, blinking at the unfamiliar ceiling while his body registered exhaustion first, then warmth, then the weight of someone sleeping beside him.

Shane.

The realization settled low beneath his ribs, steady and unfamiliar enough that he almost pushed it away out of instinct. Hollander was asleep half on his stomach, face buried awkwardly into the pillow like he had collapsed there sometime during the night without meaning to stay that way. The blankets were twisted around his legs, one arm shoved under the pillow while the other rested too close to Ilya's waist, fingers curled loosely into the fabric of his shirt. He looked messy and warm and real in a way that did not fit neatly into any category Ilya understood. Sex made sense. Want made sense. Competition, instinct, attraction, dominance, the sharp satisfaction of getting close enough to make someone break-those were simple enough. They had rules, even when people pretended they did not.

This did not feel simple.

The apartment still smelled faintly of laundry detergent, coffee grounds left in the kitchen from the night before, hockey tape, and underneath all of it, Shane. Muted scent patches or not, after hours in Shane's bed Ilya could still catch traces of something soft and warm that made him want to stay longer than he should. He should leave. His flight back to Russia was early, and the next two weeks were already crowded with federation obligations, media, sponsors, politicians, his father, and every other unpleasant thing that came with being useful to a country that wanted to claim him whenever he won. He should have been thinking about training. About Sochi. About getting out of Montreal before the roads became worse. Instead,

he watched the freckles across Shane's nose darken slightly in the weak morning light and found himself resisting the ridiculous urge to count them.

Shane's apartment had surprised him first. It was cleaner than expected, but cluttered in strange, specific ways. Hockey things perfectly organized while everything else looked like Shane had started a system and then abandoned it when it stopped being directly necessary. Books stacked unevenly near the couch. A mug left on the kitchen counter because Shane had apparently forgotten about it halfway through drinking tea. Sticky notes in cramped handwriting stuck to cabinets, one reminding him to eat breakfast, another reminding him to water a plant that looked mostly dead. Ilya had nearly laughed when he saw that one, and Shane had gone pink when he noticed him reading it, muttering that he forgot things sometimes and it helped. Like it was something shameful. Like forgetting small things mattered more than the fact that Shane Hollander could remember entire defensive systems after seeing them once.

The apartment felt private in a way hotel rooms never did. Not fancy. Not carefully staged. Just Shane. The careful organization fighting with chaos, the dim lighting because overhead lights apparently bothered him, the weighted blanket shoved messily onto the couch, hockey games playing quietly in the background even when Shane clearly was not watching anymore. Shane had been different there, still anxious and strange and careful, but softer around the edges. More willing to sit close without realizing he was doing it. More likely to talk without filtering himself, like sometime around midnight when he had curled sideways against the couch after dinner and spent twenty uninterrupted minutes explaining defensive rotations with alarming enthusiasm before abruptly stopping mid-sentence to apologize for talking too much.

Ilya had not understood that apology. He still did not. Shane did not talk too much. Shane stopped himself too often.

The warmth beside him shifted. Hollander made a small sound somewhere between annoyance and sleep and he shifted, moving closer to Ilya, burrowing his face to press against Ilya's neck, right over his scent gland. The scent of him, warm and uniquely *Shane*, filled Ilya's senses, a possessive calm settling deep in his chest.

His hand, which had been making slow, soothing circles over the omega's lower back, stilled. The desire was a live wire under his skin, a hungry, pulsing thing that focused with acute intensity on the man curled trustingly against him. The memory of taking him, of Shane's heat-clenched body yielding beautifully to his own, was fresh and vivid. A low, possessive rumble vibrated in Ilya's throat, almost inaudible.

Slowly, his touch changed. The broad, calming strokes narrowed, his palm sliding down the dip of Shane's spine, over the curve of his ass. The skin was so warm, so impossibly soft. Ilya's breath hitched, his own body responding fiercely. He needed to know. He needed to feel if that devastating, perfect heat was still there, if his omega's body, even in exhausted sleep, was still open and ready for him. The thought was primal, stripping away any pretense of patience.

His fingers trailed through the dampness at the crease of Shane's thigh, a leftover slickness that made Ilya's mouth water. He pressed a kiss to the sleeping man's temple, a silent apology

for the intrusion even as his own need mounted. With a tenderness that belied the ferocity of his want, he nudged Shane's thighs apart just a fraction, just enough.

He reached down, his touch now deliberate. One finger, slick with the evidence of Shane's own natural readiness, traced a feather-light path over his entrance, which was still swollen and sensitive from their earlier coupling. Ilya's heart hammered against his ribs. He applied the gentlest pressure, just the pad of his finger seeking to breach, to dip inside and test that incredible, clinging heat.

But as the tip of his finger began to press inward, Shane's body reacted. A sharp, involuntary tension seized the omega's muscles. In his sleep, Shane let out a soft, wounded sound, a faint cry -and his face, which had been serene in the crook of Ilya's neck, contorted. A clear wince of pain, swift and deep, flashed across his features. His brows drew together, his lips parting on a silent gasp, and he seemed to curl in on himself slightly, a subconscious retreat from the touch.

Ilya froze.

All the rampant hunger, the possessive drive, evaporated in an instant, replaced by a cold, dousing wave of something else. It was sharper than guilt, more visceral than concern. It was a protective fury - directed entirely at himself. His finger withdrew as if burned. He watched, stricken, as the pained lines on Shane's face gradually smoothed out once the pressure was gone, the omega settling back into deeper sleep with a shaky, exhausted sigh that sounded too much like relief.

The sight of that wince, so stark against Shane's peaceful slumber, carved something open inside Ilya. He had done that. His need had put that expression there. The man was spent, utterly drained, and here he was, pawing at him like a monster. A profound shame, hot and sour, coated the back of his throat.

He didn't pull away. Instead, he gathered Hollander closer, carefully, rearranging them so the omega was fully cradled against his chest, shielded. He brought his hand back up, not to explore, but to cradle Shane's head, his fingers threading gently through the damp hair. He pressed his lips to Shane's forehead and held them there, a silent vow breathed into his skin.

"Moy sladkiy," he murmured into the quiet dark, his voice rough with chastened desire. "Forgive me." The drive to claim was still there, a dull, persistent ache in his gut, but it was now encased in something harder and far more resolute. He would wait. He would let him rest. The claiming could come later, when Hollander was awake and willing and could take every bit of pleasure Ilya was desperate to give him, not a shred of pain. He settled, making his body a fortress around Shane's, and willed his own tumultuous hunger into a patient, watchful calm.

The freckles stood out more like this, his face unguarded and soft with sleep, the line between his brows gone completely. Relaxed, trusting. That was the part that sat strangest. Hollander trusted badly. Not with words, never emotionally, but physically he had let Ilya in. Into the apartment. Into his bed. Into the small routines he clearly protected carefully from everyone else.

He watched as Hollander woke up slowly, a soft smile brightening up his face until Ilya stroked his hip softly. He slowly opened his eyes and Ilya was fascinated yet again. Hollander had the most beautiful brown eyes he'd ever seen- Hollander had his mother's eyes from what he remembered.

Slightly almond-shaped, framed by dark lashes that looked almost unfair against his creamy skin. The corners tilted just enough to sharpen his expression whenever he frowned, which was often, though never mean enough to look intimidating. They softened quickly instead, too expressive to stay guarded for long. His irises were dark brown, nearly black in bad lighting, but warmer up close—layers of chestnut and dark honey hidden underneath if someone stood close enough to notice. Now, in the morning light, with him looking so soft and pliant, he saw more dark gold around the pupil.

"You have to leave soon," Shane said eventually, barely above a whisper.

"Da."

The silence stretched. Ilya watched Shane try to pretend it did not matter and fail in several small ways: the way his fingers curled once against the blanket, the way his gaze slid toward the window instead of meeting Ilya's eyes, the way his mouth tightened before smoothing out again. Most people would have missed it. Ilya did not.

"You'll text me when you land?" Shane asked after a moment, aiming for casual and missing by just enough to make something in Ilya's chest shift.

"Yes."

"We'll see each other at Sochi," Shane said, not quite a question but not confident enough to be fully a statement either. "And then a few weeks after that, when Montreal plays Boston."

Future. Something scheduled. Something expected. The was not temporary. Not one night. The thought settled easier than it should have. Ilya nodded once, and Shane seemed to relax at the confirmation, rolling out of bed with visible reluctance and dragging an oversized hoodie and sweatpants over himself before heading toward the kitchen barefoot. He moved slowly, sore despite trying to hide it, one hand braced briefly against the doorframe before he caught himself and straightened like dignity mattered after everything else had already happened.

"You want coffee?" Shane called, voice still sleep-rough.

"You don't drink coffee."

"If you're going right to the airport you can't do it without caffeine."

That stayed with him longer than it should have. Small. Domestic. Dangerous. Because suddenly Ilya could imagine it too easily: repeated mornings, coffee, Shane half asleep and irritated in oversized clothes, a routine that had no place inside the life Ilya had built for himself. He shut the thought down hard. Too much, too fast. He did not want a mate. Not officially. Not now. Not when the NHL was finally beginning and the Olympics were close and his life had finally become something he could direct himself. Mate meant permanence. Vulnerability. Obligation. Someone close enough to depend on him and be hurt by him. Someone he could ruin.

His mother's face rose uninvited, and he shoved the thought away before it could fully form.

By the time coffee was ready, Hollander looked only marginally more awake. He handed Ilya a mug while standing too close, apparently unaware of personal space again, and frowned when Ilya took too long to drink. "You'll be okay in Russia?" he asked eventually.

The question surprised him. "Yes."

"You always look..." Shane paused, rubbing awkwardly at the sleeve of his sweatshirt. "Stressed after talking about home."

No one usually noticed that. Ilya looked at him for a second longer than necessary before saying, "I survive."

Hollander frowned like he did not like that answer, which was inconvenient because it was the only one Ilya had. Instead of pushing, Hollander muttered something about not getting arrested before Sochi, and Ilya almost smiled as he promised nothing. The laugh Shane gave him then, quiet and sleepy and still a little embarrassed, stayed with him all the way to the airport.

It stayed with him after he landed too.

The plane to Moscow touched down through gray skies and dirty clouds, Russia below buried beneath weeks-old snow that no longer looked clean. Normally, coming home did not bother him. Not really. Russia was familiar, even when he hated parts of it. The language came easier here. Expectations made sense. There was comfort in understanding exactly what people wanted from him before they spoke. Today none of that landed properly, because before the wheels had fully settled against the runway, he was already reaching for his phone.

It took him a while to make his way out of the airport- people had found out he was coming home and fans swarmed him as he stepped to collect his baggage. The airline had sent security for him when they noticed the crowd, but it wasn't until police came that he managed to be led out of the building and to his car.

He took advantage of the chauffeur and tinted windows to take his hat and glasses off and he threw them on the seat next to him. He reached for his phone and texted Hollander that he landed. He wanted to ask how he felt, if he was still sore, if he took the time to have a hot bath to lessen the discomfort.

For one day, everything stayed normal enough to let him think the night had not broken anything. Hollander responded with a crying emoji and a comment about him being an asshole. Ilya reread it twice more than necessary and then locked his phone like that fixed anything. Ilya joked that next time he wouldn't take it easy on Hollander, that he'd find when they could spend more time together.

That text received no reply. He checked throughout the hour long car ride and when Hollander still hadn't replied when they pulled up to his neighborhood, Ilya checked the cameras. He saw Hollander move around slowly, then grabbing his phone off the charger and going to the kitchen. He frowned as the camera lagged but he figured it was fine. He switched back to look through the cell phone and saw that Hollander had missed messages from his parents and teammate. He started to read through some and went to delete the invitation to go out. Hollander didn't need to start having a night life now.

He sent another text, just to say hello but it wouldn't send, the reception gone as he reached the dead zone while crossing the final bridge.

The driver talked too much. Tomorrow's schedule, children's hospital, sports academy appearance, private dinner with ministers, press conference, family values, representing Russia abroad with strength. Ilya nodded at the right places without listening closely. He had learned young that most people did not need attention to feel heard. They only needed enough eye contact and a few low sounds of acknowledgment to continue talking themselves into satisfaction.

"Your father is very proud, I am sure, the whole of Russia is," the driver said warmly.

That made Ilya look up. The man smiled wider, mistaking attention for agreement. "It is good for a son to return home after success. Especially a son like you. Strong career, good reputation, no scandals. You are exactly what the country wants young men to look toward."

Ilya stared at him for half a second too long before smiling. "Da," he said, and the older man looked pleased.

Outside the car window, Moscow moved past in gray stretches, old buildings crowded beside new ones, snow shoved into dirty piles along the road. He had spent most of his life wanting to leave, and once he had, he discovered that leaving did not stop certain things from following. His father's voice, mostly. The particular way silence could feel dangerous. The instinctive need to know exits in any room. The belief that if something mattered, you kept it close enough to monitor.

He checked the phone again. Nothing.

By evening, he was expected at Grigory's apartment. He dressed in black trousers and a stiff collared black dress shirt. He checked his phone again but still no answer from Hollander.

He considered not going and then that thought went anyway, because avoiding his father made him feel like a boy again and he hated that more. The building had not changed. Same narrow stairwell, same sour smell of old smoke and boiled cabbage, same chipped paint near the door where someone had scraped furniture years ago and never repaired it. Ilya paused outside the apartment longer than necessary, listening to the television, the low voices, the sound of a glass set down too hard. Home, though not really. Close enough to make his shoulders tighten.

Polina was in the kitchen when he stepped inside, looking older than the last time he had seen her. She had been pretty once in a quiet, careful way. Still was, probably, if she had not spent so many years trying to make herself smaller in a space that punished anything soft. Her eyes lifted to his face and warmed briefly. Grigory sat in the living room with the television too loud, one arm stretched along the back of the couch like the room existed around him. He had aged, but not in ways that softened him. His face had thickened, hair grayed at the temples, body heavier than it had once been, but his eyes were the same. Sharp. Dissatisfied. Looking for weakness before anything else.

“You remember where we live,” Grigory said without standing.

“Good evening, Father.”

Polina’s hands stilled briefly in the kitchen. Grigory’s mouth tightened. “America made you funny?”

“Of course not.”

That earned him a look, but Ilya hung his overcoat near the door and crossed into the room anyway, letting his father look at him the way he always did. Assessment first. Approval never. Grigory’s gaze moved over his coat, watch, posture, face. Looking for excess. Looking for softness. Looking for evidence of success had changed him in some way he could criticize.

“You look tired.”

“I traveled the whole day.”

“You looked distracted in your last game. The American’s have made you lazy.”

There it was. Too fast. His father had always been good at finding places that bruised. Not because he understood people emotionally, but because he understood pressure. He knew where to push until something reacted.

“I am fine.”

Grigory snorted and looked back at the television, where hockey highlights played beneath a banner calling Ilya one of Russia’s greatest young exports. His father watched it like it belonged to him. “They praise you too much over there. You start believing it, that is when someone who is hungrier takes what you think is yours.”

Dinner began like most dinners with Grigory, which meant interrogation pretending to be conversation. Training. Contracts. Money. Whether his agents were competent. Whether Boston used him properly. Whether he was drinking too much. Whether women or omegas were distracting him. That last question came with a look, and Ilya lifted his eyes slowly.

“No.”

“No?”

“No.” He answered firmly.

Grigory leaned back, studying him. “Good. Women make men stupid. Omegas make them worse. You remember that when they start throwing pretty things in your path.”

Polina’s face went completely still. Ilya noticed. He always noticed when Grigory said something careless enough to cut someone else and then kept eating like no blood had been drawn.

“That hasn’t happened.” Ilya said.

Grigory laughed shortly. “You think they do not? You are famous now. Strong alpha. With money. A future. Everyone wants to attach themselves to that. You take what you want, but you do not let anyone take from you.”

The words settled badly because they sounded too close to thoughts Ilya had been having and trying not to examine. Take what you want. Do not let anything take from you. Shane’s unanswered messages flashed behind his eyes, and something in his grip tightened around his fork before he forced his hand still. Not the same. Completely different. Grigory used wanting like a weapon. Ilya had discipline. Control. He knew restraint. He had left the one Omega that had kept his interested only a few hours after sleeping when he could have changed his flight to stay longer, could have taken more time, could have pressed harder when Shane was still warm and trusting and half-soft from sleep. He had left because plans mattered. Future mattered. Because Shane had looked at him in the doorway and said Sochi like a promise.

“You are distracted,” Grigory said again, this time not observing but accusing.

“No.”

“There is someone.”

Polina looked down at her plate. The apartment seemed to shrink around the words. Ilya felt something in his chest go very still.

“It is nothing serious,” he said.

Liar. He thought to himself.

Grigory watched him for several seconds, then smiled in a way Ilya had hated since childhood. Not pleased. Worse. Knowing. “Good. You are not old enough to ruin yourself

over mating with just anyone. Not with career beginning. Your mother was distraction enough for one lifetime. You will be smart and mate with the person found for you.”

The room went silent, not because Grigory had raised his voice, but it would have been better if he hit Ilya. He felt his blood run cold. His father had said it casually, like mentioning weather. Polina’s fingers curled around her napkin. Ilya did not move. For a second, he was no longer in the dining room but small again, barefoot in the hallway, listening to his mother cry behind a closed door while Grigory sat in the kitchen drinking and muttering about weak people. He remembered the way she tried to be quiet even when quiet hurt worse, like if she made herself small enough, she could disappear without making anyone angry. He remembered her before Russia only in fragments because he had been young when she still smiled easily, but he had photographs. A woman from a small town outside Minsk, standing in a garden with dark hair braided over one shoulder and a softness in her face that Russia had slowly eaten away.

Arranged mating. Clean words. Respectable words. His father had taken her from everything familiar and called it duty. Called it family. Called it stability. He had brought her into a city where she knew almost no one, into a home where every mistake became proof she was ungrateful, every sadness became weakness, every wish became selfishness. He told her what to wear, who to speak to, how much to smile, how often to visit home until eventually visits became inconvenient and stopped completely. Ilya had been old enough to notice when she stopped singing in the kitchen. Old enough to notice when she started sleeping through afternoons. Old enough to notice how Grigory looked at her sadness like an insult. Not old enough to stop any of it.

The silence in the apartment after she died had been worse than the crying. Not because Grigory mourned. Because he was inconvenienced.

“Do not speak about her,” Ilya said quietly.

Grigory’s expression hardened. “I speak how I want in my house.”

Ilya looked at him then, really looked. There had been a time when Grigory seemed enormous, untouchable, the center of every room because everyone learned to move around his moods. Now he looked older. Still cruel. Still dangerous in the pathetic way men became dangerous when they had lost power and resented everyone for noticing. But not enormous. Not anymore.

“It is not your house,” Ilya said.

The words landed. Polina went very still. Grigory’s face darkened. “What did you say?”

“I brought this apartment. I send money for your food, for you the clothes on your back. If you choose to give most of it to that drug addict you favor, that is not my problem.”

Quiet. Simple. True. That made it worse. For a moment, Ilya thought his father might stand, and part of him almost wanted it. An old, ugly part that had waited years for Grigory to give him a reason as an adult that he had not been strong enough to take as a boy. But Grigory only stared, then laughed once without humor.

“Money makes boys brave.”

“No,” Ilya said, standing. “It makes them able to leave.”

He did not look at Polina as he took his coat from the door because that would have made something in the room softer than he could afford. Still, as he opened the door, her voice followed quietly, offering blini she had packed for him. He paused long enough to take the covered bundle, thanked her softly in Russian, then left before the satisfaction of saying anything else to Grigory could become something uglier.

The hallway was colder than the apartment and easier to breathe in. Outside, snow had started falling again, thin and mean under the streetlights. He stood beside the waiting car and checked his phone. No message from Hollander. Tracker still offline. Apartment feed was empty. His chest tightened before he could stop it, and then anger came to cover it. Good. Anger had structure.

At first, irritation came fast. Hollander forgot things sometimes. He got busy. He overfocused. Olympic preparation had begun for both of them, and the season had left everyone half exhausted. Silence could be explained. Then the tracker stopped working, the apartment camera showed nothing but dark rooms and absence, and the man Ilya paid to keep eyes on Shane admitted he had lost him at the airport.

No signal at first. Then bars. Then the tracker app, loading too slowly before giving him the same blank answer it had been giving for hours. Offline. No location.

The next day, he tried again. The text went through, but hours later,

Apartment empty. No messages. The investigator answered on the third ring, and the pause before he spoke told Ilya more than the words did.

“We lost him,” the man said.

Ilya went very still. “You lost him.”

“At the airport. We had eyes on him after landing, through security, and then he disappeared.”

Outside, the snow dragged across the empty street. Ilya stared past his own reflection and asked, very quietly, “How do you lose Hollander?”

The investigator had no good answer. Limited footage. He visited his family briefly. No apartment return. No confirmed location. Maybe he left the country. That last part settled under Ilya’s skin worse than the rest. Hollander had left the country after sleeping with him. After asking him to text when he landed. After saying Sochi like it meant something. Had he run? From Ilya? The thought came sharp and unpleasant enough that he almost rejected it immediately. Almost. But the question stayed, because Shane had gone quiet after intimacy, and silence after intimacy meant something. Ilya just did not know what.

He ordered the investigator to pay more, look harder, and find out who Hollander was with. He ended the call before the man finished responding and stood only when most of the other

passengers had already emptied into the aisle. Reporters waited beyond the building doors, cameras flashing hard enough that the lobby windows reflected white. Federation handlers smiled like they had been ordered to. A little boy in a red national-team jersey pushed forward with a pen in his shaking hand, and Ilya signed the front of the jersey because he had been raised badly in several ways, but not that one.

He smiled when expected. Answered when microphones came too close. Let them photograph him beneath dim lobby lighting while one of the federation men spoke loudly about Russian pride and what it meant for young athletes to see someone like him succeeding overseas. Ilya stood there in his expensive coat with his shoulders relaxed and his expression easy, and felt nothing except the weight of his phone in his pocket.

Still nothing.

He called the investigator again. "Find him," Ilya said when the man answered.

"We are still working-"

"Work better."

"Mr. Rozanov, he left the country-"

Ilya went still. "What?"

A pause. "We are in touch with people able to track his passport. I only mean it will take longer."

Left the country. Shane had left the country after sleeping with him. After looking sleepy in his kitchen. After saying Sochi like a promise. The thought moved through him slowly, sharp and then deeper. Did he run? From Ilya? Had Ilya scared him? Pushed too far? Wanted too much? He thought of Shane going still for half a second when things got intense, of the way he sometimes looked startled by his own wanting, like pleasure itself was a mistake he had not learned how to correct yet. He thought of Shane's hands gripping him too tightly, of the way he had hidden his face afterward, embarrassed and overwhelmed but not afraid. Not afraid. Ilya had checked. He had made sure. Hadn't he? Or had Hollander found out that he had removed the condom-had he run from him for that?

"Find where he went," he said.

"Yes, sir."

"And who he is with."

The words came out before he could decide not to say them. Silence followed. Then, carefully, "Understood."

Ilya ended the call and stood in the snow for several seconds, breathing slow through his nose until the cold burned faintly in his lungs. He did not want a mate. He repeated that to himself

in the car to the federation building for the banquet being thrown in his honor, watching Moscow smear past the window. He did not want it to be permanent necessarily. He did not want someone depending on him. He did not want to become the kind of man who saw softness and thought it existed to be owned. He did not want to become Grigory.

All lies he told himself. Hollander had let him in. Hollander had said they might see each other in Sochi or when they came back for the season. And now Hollander was gone.

That was not acceptable.

Not because Shane belonged to him. Not officially. Not like that. But because Hollander did not get to disappear after becoming important. Not without explanation. Not without answering. Not when Ilya still remembered exactly how warm he had been in the morning, barefoot in his own kitchen, pretending not to care that Ilya was leaving while asking him to text when he landed.

Not when Ilya had done exactly that.

And Shane had stopped answering.

Shane stayed in bed for hours after Ilya left.

Not sleeping. Just lying there while the apartment sat strangely quiet around him. Too quiet, maybe. The kind of silence that usually felt comforting but now only seemed to emphasize absence. Outside, snow pressed weakly against the windows, Montreal still buried beneath the morning storm, the city moving slower than usual. Shane barely noticed. The blankets still smelled faintly like *him*, like cold air and expensive cologne and leather underneath that Shane had spent entirely too much time trying not to think about over the last few months.

Rozanov.

The thought alone made something warm and deeply embarrassing settle low in his stomach. Last night had complicated things. A lot. He pulled the blanket higher over himself and stared at the ceiling instead, face warming despite absolutely no one being there to witness it. This was ridiculous. Objectively ridiculous. He had spent months trying very hard not to let this happen. Months carefully keeping distance, dodging opportunities, pretending he did not understand flirting that in hindsight had been embarrassingly obvious. Months telling himself whatever existed between him and Ilya worked better from far away- texting sometimes, arguing occasionally, circling around something neither of them named directly.

And then somehow last night had happened, and everything felt different. Worse. Better. He didn't know.

He shifted slightly beneath the blankets and immediately regretted it. Everything hurt. Not badly, just noticeably, every movement coming with a reminder he would very much prefer not to think about too hard. His shoulders felt heavy, legs sore in ways he absolutely refused to unpack emotionally, and even turning over required effort. He buried his face briefly into the pillow and muttered, "Jesus Christ," to no one at all.

Mortifying. Completely mortifying. And somehow worth it, which felt worse because if he admitted that to himself, then he had to acknowledge how badly he had wanted it in the first place. How badly he still wanted- no. Absolutely not. Too early for emotional honesty.

Getting up turned out to be significantly harder than expected. He moved slowly, wincing once before immediately pretending he had not done that despite being completely alone. The apartment felt colder now, too empty, like something important had been removed from it. Which was ridiculous and not something he would be thinking about today. Instead, he focused on practical things. Food. Coffee. Smoothie, probably. Something easy.

He caught sight of the bed halfway to the bathroom and stopped. A faint flush crawled immediately up his neck. There were small spots of blood against the sheets. Not much but enough to make embarrassment arrive violently. He frowned at it, mortified all at once by the evidence of his own body, of last night, of how much had happened and how little control he had actually had over his reactions.

Had Ilya noticed? Probably. Definitely. Maybe not. No, Rozanov noticed everything.

Great. *Fantastic*.

Shane grabbed the nearest robe and wrapped it around himself quickly like modesty suddenly mattered hours too late. The apartment felt too bright, too revealing, too aware. He stripped the bed fast, not because anyone was there, but because leaving evidence behind felt unbearable. He shoved the sheets into the washer with more determination than necessary, hands moving automatically before stopping halfway through setting the cycle. Later. He could do it later. Everything suddenly felt like too much effort.

Food first.

He moved toward the kitchen, opening cabinets automatically while trying very hard not to think about the fact that less than twelve hours ago, Ilya had been standing right there making coffee like he belonged in the apartment. Like he belonged anywhere near domesticity. The memory arrived annoyingly vivid: messy hair still damp from the shower, sleeves rolled up, looking deeply unimpressed by Shane's coffee setup and declaring the machine terrible while drinking from the mug anyway. The corner of Shane's mouth pulled upward before he could stop it.

Stupid.

He grabbed fruit from the fridge instead. Protein powder. Frozen berries. Something vaguely healthy enough to count as effort. While the blender worked, he unlocked his phone and finally looked at the pile of ignored notifications. His mother had texted three times and called once, asking if he slept and whether lunch tomorrow still worked. Guilt arrived

immediately, and he answered quickly that he was alive, sorry, and lunch sounded good. Then JJ's memes. A fantasy football argument he absolutely did not care about. Hayden's texts came next, several of them stacked together.

Club tonight? Celebrating Hill joining team. He seems cool. Come out loser.

Shane hesitated. A club sounded exhausting. Crowded. Loud. Too many people. Especially now, when his entire body felt heavy and weird and emotionally overcomplicated. He was halfway through typing an excuse when the message disappeared.

He blinked and frowned down at the screen. The whole text thread flickered strangely, then loaded again with one of Hayden's messages missing. He refreshed. Nothing. He turned the phone off and then back on. Still gone. Weird. He stepped out of the pantry, reaching automatically to call Hayden before stopping halfway. Hadn't Hayden mentioned this before? Messages disappearing. Calls not going through. Something weird with reception after travel. Maybe Shane's phone had finally given up. Honestly, that was probably a good excuse to replace it.

He should probably go see his parents anyway. His mother would guilt him if he stayed away longer, and maybe being around people would help. Distract him. Because currently every quiet second threatened to spiral directly back toward Ilya, the night, the morning, the stupid warmth of someone standing too close in his kitchen, the even stupider Sochi like it meant something.

Shane shoved that thought away hard enough to almost physically feel it and called his dad instead.

A few hours later, they were heading back toward his parents' house with shopping bags in the backseat. His mother had immediately placed the books he had brought her in the bookshelf in the den and hugged him tight in thanks. The new phone sat charging beside him, the old one shoved carelessly into his jacket pocket. Lunch had helped. The mall helped too. Normal things. Quiet things. Dad talking hockey. Mom talking about Rolex and Underarmor wanting to sign him. No pressure. No questions. No accidentally thinking too hard.

At least until nighttime. He ended up in his old bedroom after dinner, too tired to drive home and too relieved by the familiar quiet to make himself leave. Hayden answered on the second ring when Shane called from bed, immediately announcing that Shane was alive like this was breaking news.

"Unfortunately," Shane said, staring at the ceiling.

"You coming out?"

"No."

"You never want to come out with us. You need to live."

"Tired."

A pause followed, long enough that Shane knew what was coming before Hayden said, “You okay?”

Shane hesitated too long. “Yeah.”

“Bullshit,” Hayden said immediately.

Shane closed his eyes because how exactly did someone explain that he had slept with an emotionally confusing Russian, was now emotionally spiraling, had possibly ruined whatever strange friendship or rivalry or whatever it was between them, and definitely wanted to avoid all feelings for at least the next three to five business years? He could not. Absolutely not. Instead, he settled on, “Just a weird week.”

Hayden hummed knowingly, like someone who absolutely thought this involved feelings and thankfully decided not to say so. Then, abruptly, he asked, “Mexico?”

Shane blinked. “What?”

“Spur of the moment. Me, Jackie, JJ, Hill. Before the season starts. Come celebrate making Olympic team. Only for a couple days-Jackie has connections to get everything organized in a few minutes.”

Shane hesitated immediately. Travel sounded exhausting. People sounded exhausting. Thinking sounded worse. Hill was the new teammate Hayden had mentioned, traded because of the injury situation, quiet enough from what Shane had seen and apparently nice. Mexico sounded like too much. It also sounded like distraction, but distraction sounded safer than lying alone in Montreal with his phone in his hand and Ilya’s last text sitting there like an accusation.

“Okay,” Shane said quietly.

Hayden sounded genuinely shocked. “Oh my God, who are you?”

“Don’t make me change my mind.”

“Too late. Mexico happening.”

Shane laughed quietly despite himself. After hanging up, he lay back against the bed and stared at the ceiling for a long time. Then, before he could stop himself, he opened his texts and found Ilya’s message from the day before. Landed. Russia still terrible. The stupid warmth returned immediately. He typed a reply, deleted it, typed another, deleted that too, and eventually locked the phone without sending anything.

Tomorrow, he told himself.

Maybe tomorrow.

Another private dinner in Moscow happened three days after Ilya stopped pretending his concern was only irritation.

Officially, it was a celebration welcoming the Olympic teams. Unofficially, politics. The building looked exactly how government buildings always looked- the old Imperial grandeur while pretending to be democratic. Marble floors, dark wood, portraits of dead men who had almost certainly made life worse for someone. Security stood everywhere. Photographers waited near the entrance. A woman from the federation adjusted Ilya's tie before he entered like he was twelve and reminded him that he represented Russian excellence tonight.

Inside, the room glowed warm beneath low chandeliers, long tables arranged carefully beneath flags and expensive flower arrangements that looked like no one actually wanted them there. Politicians stood in clusters. Sports officials laughed too loudly. Wealthy donors drank good vodka while pretending patriotism came naturally. Ilya wanted to leave immediately. Instead, he smiled, shook hands, accepted compliments, and allowed himself to be photographed beside people whose names he forgot the moment introductions ended.

"Young men look up to you," one minister said warmly. Concerning. "You represent strength."

"You remind people what proper Russian values look like." Another said.

Ilya nearly laughed. If they knew him even slightly, they would stop saying that immediately.

Eventually, he found his assigned seat and paused when he saw the name card two places down. Dr. Sergei Morozov. Ilya recognized the name vaguely from the ministry briefings and the dinner schedule. Medicine. Omega health policy. Director-level. Important enough to be at the table but not a long serving politician. The doctor was older, sharp-eyed and composed, with silver at the temples and no performative smile. He noticed Ilya looking and inclined his head once. Not overly familiar. Not eager. Already better than everyone else in the room.

Dinner started slowly, courses arriving between speeches and too much vodka. Conversation shifted eventually, as Ilya had suspected it would, toward birthrates and national stability and family structures. The language changed first. Not the volume. Not the tone. Just the words. Omega stability initiatives. Cultural decay. Western influence. Delayed pairings. The room hummed with agreement while men who had never once feared being chosen discussed omegas like numbers in a report.

Then came the announcement.

The Omega Family Stability Act, though of course they called it something cleaner, softer, more patriotic. Education restrictions framed as protective accommodations. Marriage oversight framed as family preservation. Church and state approval. Mandatory pairing before twenty-one. Government intervention for those who failed to bond voluntarily. A minimum of three children, all presented as national recovery and demographic responsibility. Russia, unlike some countries that still pretended male omegas required different legal categories, would now treat all omegas equally.

Meaning all equally controlled.

Ilya thought of his mother before he could stop it. Young. Taken from the small town outside Minsk. An arranged mating, a promise of stability. Then trapped. Russia had already broken enough people. Now they wanted laws for it to make it legal.

Then Hollander arrived in his thoughts, fast and unwelcome. Hollander, who was scared of his own nature, under laws like this. Small and overwhelmed, trying to hide discomfort while everyone ignored it. Forced into a mating. Forced into dependence. Immediate rejection burned through him. No. Absolutely not. Not Hollander. Anyone but him.

But another thought followed too quickly, and that one made him go still.

Shane would be protected. Unavailable for any other Alpha. No rival alphas, no teammates touching him casually, no cameras, no Scott Hunter. No disappearing. No running. *His*.

The thought hit hard enough to make his stomach turn. No. Absolutely not. Too close. Too much like Grigory. Ownership disguised as care. He hated it instantly and he disgusted himself more that he did not dismiss it fully.

“You disagree,” Morozov said quietly beside him.

Ilya turned. The doctor was watching him calmly, not accusing, just observing. “You had his look about you that says you do not agree with these measures.” he added.

“Do you agree to force omega’s into mating with Alpha’s they do not want?” Ilya said.

“It would be for the greater good. For Russia. For every other country when they see our population growing. When they see that we are treating the males better.”

“Do you really think that male omega’s will be treated fairly?”

Something shifted in Morozov’s expression, recognition maybe. “You think the legislation is extreme.”

“I think people are not property.”

That earned him the faintest hint of amusement. “No,” Morozov said quietly. “They are not.”

Interesting, because that did not sound rehearsed. Morozov explained later, away from the worst of the table, that many doctors had fought parts of it. The original proposal had been worse: pairing at eighteen, restricted travel, reduced educational access almost entirely. Medical consultation had softened it, though not enough. Exemptions remained. Confidentiality protections. Delayed compliance. Special statuses. Privacy clauses. Morozov spoke clinically, but there was disgust under restraint if someone knew where to listen. He gathered that the doctor didn’t believe in the age restrictions.

Ilya asked questions he pretended were hypothetical. What if an omega refused? What if records needed to stay private? What protections existed for someone vulnerable? What if

foreign status complicated things? Morozov studied him for a long time and eventually said, “Someone specific?”

“No,” Ilya said. *Lie.*

Morozov clearly knew it and did not call him out. Instead, he said there were ways to protect people if one had enough resources, status, and the correct medical discretion. Protection. The word landed safer than possession. Kinder than ownership. Easier to justify. Ilya turned on the charm after that, because useful people responded better when they felt chosen. He listened more closely, poured vodka, smiled in ways that made politicians look pleased and Morozov look faintly wary. By the end of dinner, they had exchanged numbers.

“If you ever need advice,” Morozov said.

Ilya smiled. “Maybe.”

Because now he had options, and somewhere deep down, something darker had quietly started growing around one impossible thought. Shane kept disappearing. That might eventually need solving.

Three days turned into a week. Hayden had been right. He did enjoy himself. He grew closer to Hayden and Jackie, who had claimed Shane as her favorite person on the planet. They bonded over the past few days, with Hayden and Shane joking that Jackie would be their shared girlfriend.

At night, his thoughts were filled with memories of Rozanov. He wanted to text him, wanted to hear his voice desperately, but he stopped himself. He thought that maybe some distance would help both of them figure out what exactly they were really doing.

The Olympics was coming up close enough now that the entire hockey world seemed to shrink around anticipation, interviews, training schedules, and endless speculation from people who had never once stood on the ice themselves. Russia wanted dominance. Canada wanted redemption. America wanted a surprise. Every country convinced itself patriotism somehow translated into chemistry.

Shane sat next to Jackie on the lounge chair watching Hayden and Chris mess around the diving board beneath their sunglasses.

He told himself that he would text Ilya tomorrow. He didn't want to come off as a clingy omega. They weren't dating. They had both said they didn't want mates. They slept together once. He didn't know what that meant and didn't have anyone to ask what to do.

—

Ilya mostly wanted distraction. That had turned out to be harder than expected because Shane Hollander, apparently, had become difficult to stop thinking about. It felt ridiculous. Embarrassing, even. He had survived far more complicated things than one quiet Canadian who apparently did not know how to answer messages in reasonable timeframes. He had survived Grigory. Survived losing his mother. Survived Russia and everything sharp-edged about growing up inside systems built to punish softness. Survived the NHL while older players waited impatiently for him to fail loudly enough that confidence could be relabeled arrogance and everyone could move on comfortably.

And yet ghosting unsettled him.

Mexico made everything worse. At first, relief arrived hard enough to surprise him. Alive. The investigator's voice had sounded almost cautious over the phone when he said they found him. Something unpleasantly tight inside Ilya loosened immediately before he could stop it. Mexico. Vacation. Friends. Nothing catastrophic. Nothing dangerous. Nothing wrong. He had slept better that night for exactly one night.

Then the photographs started arriving.

At first, they looked harmless. Too harmless. Shane sitting beside Hayden at breakfast in some resort restaurant, sunglasses pushed awkwardly into messy hair while he frowned down at something on his phone. Another showed him half asleep near the pool, shoulders pink from too much sun despite obvious sunscreen. JJ looked mid-sentence in most of them, Christopher Hill laughing beside him while Hayden's wife leaned back in her chair looking deeply entertained by something no one else could hear. Vacation. Normal. Fine.

The problem sat quieter than that. Shane looked relaxed. Actually relaxed. The kind of relaxed Ilya had only seen inside the apartment. The version of Shane who softened around the edges when he forgot to guard himself too carefully. The one who laughed without immediately looking embarrassed afterward. The one who leaned unconsciously toward people he trusted. That part unsettled him because he had assumed some of those things were private. Private enough to matter. Ilya couldn't help but focus on Hollander's lower belly. How soon do male omega's start showing? Ilya had no real reference but it had only been a few weeks. But Shane did have a pretty athletic but slender build.

Then Christopher Hill started appearing too often.

At first, Ilya barely registered him. Tall. Broad shoulders. Dark hair. Forgettable face. Another teammate. Nothing special. Then the investigator kept sending photographs, and Hill kept appearing. Standing beside Shane in the airport. Walking next to him on the beach. Too close during dinners. Too easy. One picture arrived three days later showing Shane laughing hard enough to duck his head while Hill leaned close beside him saying something only Shane could hear. Friendly. Normal. Nothing objectively wrong. That somehow made it worse because objectively wrong would have been easier. Easy to justify. Easy to hate.

Friendship settled under people's skin unexpectedly. Friendship turned into trust. Trust turned into dependency. Shane trusted badly. Carelessly. Not emotionally, never fully, but practically and socially in all the ways that mattered most. He let people crowd him. Accommodated discomfort until he disappeared underneath it. Apologized too easily. Avoided confrontation like it physically hurt. He folded around stronger personalities without meaning to. Easy to overwhelm. Easy to influence. Easy to hurt.

The photographs kept coming. Hill passing Shane a drink. Hill touching the small of Shane's back while crossing a crowded street. Hill leaning close enough during dinner that Shane had to tip his head sideways to hear him. One photo sat worse than the others. Shane half asleep in some lounge chair while Hill sat beside him reading something on his phone, Shane's shoulder pressed lightly against Hill's arm. Accidental, probably. Innocent. Ilya stared at that picture for too long.

Something ugly shifted beneath his ribs. Shane had taken months to soften around him. Months of awkward texts, distance, careful pushing, too much patience, too much restraint. Shane looked startled every single time closeness happened too naturally. And now this man, this quickly? No. Impossible. Unless Shane trusted him. Worse, Shane liked him.

The investigator reassured him repeatedly that nothing romantic was happening, which should have helped and did not. Romantic implied obvious. Predictable. What unsettled him sat quieter than romance. Ease. Routine. Comfort. The kind that arrived before anyone noticed it becoming important. But that was an idiotic statement. Hollander wouldn't be openly affectionate with someone like that.

Then a new set of pictures came in. Shane dancing in a dark club, another man grabbing his waist with his head bent down to Hollander's face. Ilya had destroyed his apartment then.

Later that night, long after Moscow had gone mostly quiet outside of the hotel room he had had to go stay in, something darker festered in his mind. It started as just a thought, brief and ugly and quick enough to almost disappear. If Hill stopped showing up, if he became unavailable for a while, if something minor happened- an injury, perhaps, nothing permanent, nothing but enough to get him away from Hollander- then whatever this friendship was becoming would have space to die before Shane folded too close into it. The man who had touched him so intimately would also have to be dealt with.

The thought landed so naturally that Ilya physically went still, phone in his hand, Mexico photographs open. His stomach turned unpleasantly because immediately there was Grigory. His father's voice. His father's logic. Ownership disguised as care. Control disguised as protection. *I only want what is best for you.* Immediate disgust followed. No. Absolutely not. Too far. Hollander would hate that, he would fear it. And worse, Hollander would never forgive him.

That thought mattered. Buried beneath irritation and bruised pride and increasingly humiliating emotional dependence sat one quiet truth Ilya disliked examining too closely: he wanted Hollander to choose him.

Instead, he stayed in Russia.

Two weeks remained before athletes arrived in full, which meant camps, coordination, politics, and endless federation obligations that somehow always multiplied once national pride got involved. Officially, he stayed to train. Unofficially, Sochi meant he would at least see Hollander, even if from a distance. The Olympics meant that they'd be close enough to stop wondering. Close enough to look directly at him and ask what happened.

Then captaincy complicated things. The announcement came quietly at first, leaked, rumored, then confirmed. Captain. Russia. At nineteen. Predictably, the older bureaucrats and other athletes hated it. Too young. Too arrogant. Had gotten used to the North American way of playing. Too independent. One federation official apparently described him during a private meeting as talented but insufficiently patriotic, and that one almost made him laugh because he should have taken the offer to play on the American team. Still, players listened. Older teammates respected consistency even when they disliked personality. Younger ones followed naturally. Ilya cared about winning with enough sincerity to make people uncomfortable, and somewhere along the way, leadership settled onto him without permission.

He trained harder after that. Stayed later. Watched the teams chemistry develop- who clashed, who avoided pressure, who needed pushing, who needed patience. Team first. Winning first. Distraction helped, though not enough, because every night there was still his phone, Hollander and messages going unanswered, silence, and the photographs he told himself not to open again before opening them anyway.

When Olympic housing opened, Russia settled loudly into its assigned section like they always did, players already arguing about rooms within twenty minutes. Ilya unpacked quickly, then casually, too casually, learned where Canada would stay. Three buildings over. Close enough. The knowledge settled low in his chest, dangerous and comforting at the same time. Shane would be here soon. Actually here. Reachable. No more guessing. No more photographs. No more Mexico.

That thought unsettled him enough that he called Morozov three nights later.

The doctor agreed to dinner immediately. The restaurant sat private enough that athletes rarely bothered with it, expensive vodka and heavy food under quiet lighting, the kind of place where conversations disappeared naturally into walls. Morozov arrived looking amused already and said he had wondered when Ilya would call. Ilya poured vodka and let the doctor talk himself warm. Politics first. The Olympics. The stupidity of bureaucrats. The omega legislation. Enough vodka softened Morozov around the edges without making him sloppy, which was perfect.

Then slowly, carefully, Ilya began asking questions again.

"If someone vulnerable needed help," Ilya asked evenly, "what options exist?"

Morozov studied him over the rim of his glass. "There is someone."

"No."

The doctor smiled slightly. "Of course."

Ilya said nothing.

“Depends on what kind of help,” Morozov said.

“Protection.”

“From what?”

Ilya almost said from himself. Instead, he shrugged and said, “Wrong people.”

An interesting silence followed. Morozov set his glass down carefully. “Protection becomes dangerous when people confuse it with control.”

The words landed harder than expected. Too close. Too accurate. Grigory flashed briefly through Ilya’s thoughts: his mother growing quieter, smaller, sad enough to disappear eventually. No. Not the same. Completely different. Hollander needed care. Someone paying attention. Someone making sure he was safe. Someone making sure he stopped trusting people too quickly. Christopher Hill appeared in his mind again, too close in photographs, too easy, too comfortable.

Ilya poured more vodka.

“And if someone needed discretion?” he asked quietly.

Morozov looked at him for a long second, not alarmed, just careful. “You care about this person.”

Not a question. Observation. Ilya looked down briefly, then said, “Maybe.” It felt too honest.

The doctor sighed softly. “Ilya Gregorovich, speak plainly please. I am sure you know that right now, there is nothing that you cannot ask from anyone in the whole of Russia that wouldn’t be given to you.”

Dangerous sentence. Because Ilya already knew that. The frightening part was that he was beginning not to care.

Ilya let the silence stretch before speaking again, voice controlled enough to sound almost bored. “How much would it take?”

Morozov’s expression changed by degrees. Not shock. He was too experienced for that. Something quieter. Understanding, maybe, and disappointment underneath it. “For what?”

“For private services. Under the table. No registry. No official questions. If an omega needed help and could not go through normal channels.”

The restaurant noise seemed to dull around them. Morozov did not reach for his glass this time. He watched Ilya with the kind of careful attention that made it clear he understood this was no longer hypothetical, and Ilya let him. There was no point pretending completely. Not anymore. Not when the games were days away and Hollander would be close enough to speak to, close enough to avoid him in person, close enough to look at him with those startled

brown eyes and pretend Mexico had not happened, pretend silence meant nothing, pretend Christopher Hill did not stand too close in photographs.

“You are asking for dangerous favors,” Morozov said.

“I am asking how dangerous they are.”

“That depends on whether the omega wants them.”

Ilya’s jaw tightened slightly. There it was. The line. The one that mattered. The one he had been trying not to cross even in thought. Hollander choosing him, Hollander wanting him. Hollander not being forced. But he was past that when he saw the last round of photos. Them at the airport on their way back home. Fucking Hill’s arm over his omega’s shoulder, pulling him closer.

“It’s not a bad thing that I want. It will be for his benefit.” Ilya said.

Morozov did not answer immediately. “Men usually say that before they start making the wrong decisions.”

The words should have angered him. Instead, they stayed. Ilya looked down at the vodka glass, at the clear surface catching warm restaurant light. He thought of Hollander asleep in the apartment, soft and trusting, their scents mixed together. Then a few days later laughing in Mexico beside another man. Shane saying Sochi like a promise and then disappearing into silence. He thought of his mother, taken from her small town outside Minsk because a man with power decided wanting mattered more than consent. He thought of Grigory calling it family.

“I am not my father,” Ilya said quietly.

Morozov’s gaze sharpened, but he did not ask.

Ilya looked back up. “Answer question.”

For a long moment, the doctor only studied him. Then he reached for his glass, not drinking yet, fingers resting against the stem. “Everything has a price,” Morozov said carefully. “But before you decide to pay one, you should decide whether you are protecting this person or protecting your access to them.”

Ilya smiled then, small and controlled, because charm was easier than honesty and because the doctor was useful even when he was irritating. “Good,” he said.

Morozov did not smile back.

“So, I need..” Ilya started, leaning in closer.

The heat of Mexico clung to them even at night, a humid blanket that made every piece of clothing feel like too much. The club was a throbbing heart of sound and light, a cavern of swirling colors and a bassline that vibrated up through the floor into Shane's bones. He stuck close to Jackie, a fixed point in the chaotic sea of bodies. Her smile was encouraging, her hand firm around his wrist as she pulled him through the press of people.

"You're thinking too much!" she yelled over the music, her voice a bright thread in the din. Her eyes sparkled with reflected neon. "Your shoulders are up by your ears! This is fun, remember? Fun!"

Fun. Right. Shane tried to unclench his jaw, to let the rhythm find him. It was so loud, so *much*. Every brush against a stranger made his skin prickle with a vague alarm.

Jackie didn't wait for him to adjust. She started to move, a natural, confident sway of her hips, her hands in the air. She grabbed his hands and placed them on her waist, guiding him. "Just follow! Don't think, just move!"

He tried. The music was infectious, a pulsing beat that demanded motion. Slowly, awkwardly at first, he began to mirror her, their movements a small, private island in the crowd. A smile, tentative and real, touched his lips. This was okay. This was just dancing.

Chris materialized beside them with two small, clear glasses, condensation beading on the sides. "Medicine for the overthinker!" he announced, handing one to Shane. It smelled sharp, citrusy, and very alcoholic.

"I don't really-" Shane started.

"One sip," Jackie insisted, clinking her own glass *where had she gotten that?* against his. "For courage. For loosening the knot in your spine. Just one."

So he drank. The tequila was a smooth, fiery burn down his throat, settling in his stomach like a small sun. A few minutes later, another appeared in his hand, this time from a passing waiter Chris flagged down. "To vacation!" Chris toasted, and Shane, feeling the first drink already softening the hard edges of his anxiety, drank again.

The world gained a pleasant fuzz. The lights blurred into beautiful streaks. The music wasn't an assault anymore; it was a current he could ride. He laughed at something Jackie said, the sound feeling freer in his own throat. He was dancing, actually dancing, his movements less stilted, his body beginning to understand the language of the beat.

That's when Chris moved in. Jackie had spun away to dance with Hayden, and suddenly it was just Chris in front of him, closer than before. Chris was smiling, but it was a different smile- more focused, more intent. His hands came up to Shane's hips, ostensibly to keep time, but his thumbs pressed inwards, possessive.

“See? Told you you’d have fun,” Chris said, his voice low enough to be intimate despite the noise. His breath smelled of lime and alcohol. “You’re a natural.”

Before Shane could process the change in tone, Chris leaned in. It wasn’t a question. One hand slid up to cradle Shane’s jaw, and he kissed him.

It was all wrong.

The lips were too soft, the technique too practiced. The scent was wrong - cologne and sweat, not the deep, leathery, *safe* scent of Ilya. A bolt of pure, visceral revulsion shot through Shane. He froze for a second, stunned, then wrenched his head back, pulling out of Chris’s grip as if electrocuted.

“What are you doing?” Shane gasped, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. The pleasant alcohol buzz curdled into nausea. The music felt suddenly hostile again. He felt a sickening lurch in his gut, a profound sense of betrayal- not just of himself, but of Ilya. Ilya, who was thousands of miles away. Ilya, whose kiss felt like a claim and a homecoming. This felt like theft.

Chris held up his hands, the picture of placating confusion. “Whoa, easy! It’s just a kiss, Shane. We’re all friends here. Having fun.”

“That’s not-” Shane shook his head, the words choking him. He couldn’t articulate the violation, the deep wrongness of it. He just turned and pushed his way through the crowd, away from Chris’s knowing smile, seeking the darkness at the edges of the dance floor and another drink.

He found a quieter corner near a bar manned by a disinterested bartender. His heart was hammering, the taste of Chris still lingering, a toxic film. He needed to scrub it away. He needed to forget. When a shot glass appeared in front of him, he didn’t ask what it was. He just threw it back, welcoming the new, cleaner burn that scoured his mouth and throat. Then another. The sharp edges of his guilt and panic began to blur, sanded down by the alcohol. The memory of the kiss became a distant, unpleasant thing. The memory of Ilya’s face, however, remained crystalline, a painful, beautiful ache in his chest.

He pulled his phone out, fumbling to find the text thread that had been transferred to his new phone. He scrolled the messages until he landed on one from a couple months ago. Rozanov being an asshole like usual, ordering him around. That pissed him off again. Ily-Rozanov wasn’t his boyfriend, or keeper, or mate. He had the nerve to order him around constantly. Shane wouldn’t do that. He was his own person. He would do whatever he wanted. He downed the drink in front of him. It hurt being away from Rozanov though. He shouldn’t ignored him for so long.

Fueled by a new, reckless determination to outrun that ache, he shoved back into the crowd. This time, he didn’t need Jackie. The drinks had lit a fire in his veins, melting his inhibitions into a liquid courage. He closed his eyes and just moved, letting the beat take over, becoming another anonymous body in the pulsating mass. He danced for one song, then another, lost in the cathartic, mindless physicality of it.

A presence settled in front of him. He opened his eyes. A man was dancing with him, matching his rhythm effortlessly. He was taller than Shane, with dark hair swept back and eyes that seemed to catch the fractured light, holding it. He wasn't aggressively close, but his space was intimate, intentional. He smiled, not like Chris had, but with a quiet, assured confidence.

The man said something in Spanish that he didn't understand, his voice a rich, warm baritone that cut through the music with a heavy, melodic Spanish accent. "You are very beautiful to watch."

Shane, breathless, just shook his head, a denial he couldn't voice.

The man moved closer, not touching, but leading with his body. His movements were hypnotic, all controlled power and fluid grace. "You let it go, little by little," he murmured, his accent curling around the words, making them sound like a secret, a romance. "That is what the music is for."

And as they danced, Shane felt a strange, disorienting pull. It wasn't the man's words, though they were lovely. It was something else. The way he held himself- a certain unshakeable solidity. The way his gaze remained steady and focused, missing nothing. The faint, clean scent of him, cutting through the club's miasma- not the same as Ilya's, but it spoke of the same kind of assured masculinity, a quiet dominance that was felt, not announced.

It was in the shape of his hands. The set of his shoulders. An echo, a haunting, half-heard chord of something painfully familiar. It reminded him of Ilya, and he didn't know why. The realization was a splash of cold water in the warm, drunken haze. It drew him in and repelled him at once, leaving him spinning on the dance floor, tethered to a ghost and a stranger all at once.

The man's hand was on his elbow, not gripping, but guiding- a firm, inescapable pressure that cut through the haze of music and alcohol. Shane didn't resist. The part of him that should have been drowned, muted by tequila and the desperate, screaming echo of Ilya's memory that this stranger somehow invoked and betrayed at the same time.

"Too loud," the man said, his accent a warm, close thing by Shane's ear. It wasn't a question. He was already moving, cutting a path through the sweat-slick bodies with an authority that parted the crowd. Shane followed, a leaf in a current, his heart pounding a frantic, confused rhythm against his ribs.

They slipped through a heavy curtain into a narrow, dim alcove meant for storage or stolen moments. The music became a muffled throb here, a distant heartbeat. The air was cooler, smelling of dust and spilled liquor. A single, low-wattage bulb cast everything in deep amber shadows.

The man turned to him. In the semi-darkness, his features were even more pronounced, that haunting echo of a familiar strength now sharpened into a focused intent. He didn't speak. He simply looked at Shane, his gaze traveling over his flushed face, his parted lips, the rapid pulse at his throat. Then his hands went to the button of Shane's jeans.

Shane's breath hitched. A weak noise of protest died in his throat. This was wrong. This was so profoundly wrong it made his soul feel thin. But his body, traitorously, was alight with a confused, aching need. The wrongness and the need twisted together, a paralyzing knot.

The man worked with a quiet, efficient certainty. He didn't ask. He didn't coax. He simply knelt, the motion fluid and graceful, and took Shane into the warm, shocking cavern of his mouth.

Shane's head thudded back against the rough plaster wall, a gasp ripped from him. Pleasure, immediate and intense, jolted up his spine. It was skilled, devastatingly so- a masterful, relentless pressure and suction that had no business feeling this good. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to block it out, but the physical sensation was a tidal wave, washing over the crumbling walls of his guilt.

His mind fractured. One part was here, in this dark, dirty alcove, arching into a stranger's mouth. Another part was thousands of miles away, in a quiet bedroom, feeling Ilya's worshipful, possessive touch. The two images bled together sickeningly. The Spanish-accented murmur of "está bien" from the man between his legs blurred with the memory of Ilya's guttural Russian praise. The hands on his hips were not the right hands. The scent was not the right scent. But the technique... it was designed to obliterate thought.

And yet, his body, for all its drunk, eager response, held back the final surrender. Climax coiled in his gut, a tight, urgent spring, but it wouldn't release. Shame was a colder, stronger drug. The face behind his eyelids was Ilya's- Ilya's hurt, Ilya's betrayed confusion if he could see this. The pleasure became a torture. Each expert flick of the tongue, each deep, pulling suck, felt like a nail being driven into the coffin of something pure he'd had. He whimpered, a sound of agony and building ecstasy.

The man seemed to sense the blockade. He changed rhythm, his hands coming up to grip Shane's thighs, holding him firmly in place. He took him deeper, until Shane felt the hit of the back of his throat, and a low, approving hum vibrated through him. It was the final, brutal push.

With a broken, choked-off cry that was more sob than shout, Shane came. It was a violent, convulsive release that felt less like pleasure and more like a system purge—a wretched, guilty expulsion of everything he'd drunk and everything he'd done. His knees buckled, and only the wall and the man's grip kept him upright.

The man pulled away, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. The word was the trigger. Reality crashed back in, cold and vicious. The taste of bile joined the taste of tequila in his throat. Shane fumbled, yanking his jeans up with trembling, clumsy hands, the fabric sticking to his damp skin. He couldn't look at the man. He couldn't speak.

He just fled.

He shoved past the curtain, back into the wall of sound and light, which now felt like a physical assault. He stumbled through the crowd, a ghost with a pounding heart, seeing

nothing. The main doors appeared. He burst out into the humid Mexican night, the relative silence a roaring in his ears.

He made it three steps past the bouncer before his body rebelled. He lurched to the side of the building, into a dim alleyway reeking of garbage and urine, and fell to his hands and knees. The convulsion was brutal and total. He vomited up the tequila, the sour mix of drinks, the fleeting memory of Chris's kiss, and the slick, shameful climax he'd just given to a stranger. It came in heaving, painful waves, tears streaming from his eyes, mixing with the sweat and spit on his face.

When it was over, he slumped against the rough brick wall, spent and shaking. The cool night air did nothing to cleanse him. He felt hollowed out, filthy, and utterly, devastatingly alone. The echo of the accent was gone. All that remained was the crushing, silent weight of what he had done, and the pristine, distant image of Ilya's face, now feeling more out of reach than ever.

The opening ceremony would happen the next day. Ilya sat back in the shadowed alcove as he watched Hollander walk to his room, pale faced and with sunglasses and his hat pulled low over his face.

Two small camera's were already in the room, and a complementary welcome basket was on the table. His roommate would be delayed for several hours, thanks to an overly friendly customs officer who wanted to impress his wife with a signed jersey from Ilya.

Ilya watched on his phone as Shane moved around the room setting his bags down and removing the fleece team Canada. Ilya smiled as he watched the omega carefully cold the jacket and hang it over the chair.

Slowly he took a water bottle and sat on the bed, pitching the bridge of his nose. He had sat with his cell phone and Ilya noticed that it was a new one.

S- Hi. Just made it to the village.

Ilya's eyes narrowed. *Too late moy kotyonok.* He watched as Shane opened the bottle and start drinking the water.

Ilya opened his messages and sent out a quick text to the good doctor and sat back again to watch.

Ten minutes later, Ilya let himself in with the key card he had asked her and walked up to Hollander. The water had fallen to the floor. So he picked it up and dumped the remaining water down the sink in the small bathroom.

Slowly, he took stock of Hollander after so long without seeing him in person. He had a tan now, his hair a little longer, freckles darker-even more beautiful. He manouvered him to be under the blankets, brushing a hand through the soft dark hair. He went to the small back and took out the lancet, picking Hollander's finger briefly. A few drops of blood and the liquid in the vial would tell him if he was pregnant in about 20 minutes according to Morozov.

He waited for the knock at the door and went to answer. The doctor walked in and stopped short. "Shane Hollander! Mr. Rozanov- you did not-"

"I am not asking for permission. Get to it. And remember-a word of this to anyone and I will end you."

Ilya climbed into the bed and sat against the headboard, moving Hollander's head to rest on his lap. He stroked the omega's soft cheek, running his fingertips over the freckles again. Morozov approached with a frown, holding an alcohol swab and a thick syringe.

"Hold him still." Ilya raised the dark hair at the base of Shane's neck and held him down just in case. The drugs in the water were enough that he'll sleep through it and not feel much pain, but he followed the directive.

A soft click and shudder and it was done. He watched as Morozov ran a small screen over the area until they heard a high pitched beep. He turned and got a small clear bottle from his bag. "Surgical glue. The implant is the size of a large grain of rice but he wont really be able to tell unless he knows exactly was to look for."

Ilya nodded, locking down and stocking Hollander's face again. "Mr. Rozanov, I hope you know that-"

"You can leave now. I will wire your payment when I get back to my room."

Ilya watched the other man leave and pick up the small locator. It looked like a GPS screen and he smiled. Now he would know exactly where Hollander would be. His heartrate, his temperate-everything he could want.

He saw the time and knew that he would need to leave soon if he didn't want to get caught. He bent down and placed a soft kiss on Hollander's temple, pulling the blanket up to his chest.

He opened the new cell phone and downloaded the mirroring apps he had had in the old phone before placing it back carefully to exactly where it had been. He looked back again before quietly closing the door behind him, looking forward to seeing Hollander again soon.

Chapter 11: Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Dropping this off tonight. Next chapter will be up on Wednesday most likely-it's 80% done but its one that will possibly make people really really hate Ilya for a while so I have to sit on it and read it over a few times.

Big fat juicy kisses for all the reviews and kuddos-I repeatedly read all of them while kicking my feet and giggling. Luv yall. Ugh

Chapter Notes

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

Shane woke up feeling out of sorts. He usually didn't have time for naps in the middle of the day but judging by the sunlight seeping through the window, he must have slept for a few hours. He didn't feel sick exactly. Not injured either, though there was a heaviness in his body that made everything feel slower than usual, like someone had quietly replaced all his muscles with versions slightly less cooperative. His head felt packed with cotton, thoughts moving sluggishly behind his eyes while the room remained frustratingly too bright around him. For several seconds, he lay perfectly still beneath unfamiliar blankets, staring up at the ceiling and trying to remember where he was.

The Sochi Olympic Village. Right. The realization settled slowly. Opening ceremonies. Media. Practice. Team meetings. Russia. Ilya would be close soon.

That last thought woke him up more effectively than anything else.

Shane groaned quietly and dragged a hand over his face before immediately regretting moving at all. His neck ached faintly. Everything felt heavy in that irritating way exhaustion sometimes settled after too much travel and not enough sleep.

Mexico, he thought vaguely. Jet lag, too much tequila, too little sleep. Possibly punishment from the universe for making consistently bad decisions.

"Cool," he muttered to absolutely no one.

His roommate was already gone. Good, Shane wasn't emotionally prepared for human interaction before caffeine.

The bedside table held an empty bottle of water he barely remembered opening. Weird. He stared at it for a second before dismissing the thought entirely because honestly, the last week had blurred together enough that forgetting water felt pretty normal.

Mexico had ended in disaster.

The club. Chris. That random man with the accent who somehow reminded him too much of someone he absolutely should not have been thinking about. His stomach rolled when he thought about what happened but he pushed it out of his mind. He needed to focus now, he needed to figure out what to say to Rozanov after ignoring him for weeks. Annoyingly, every thought somehow circled back to Ilya.

Which was stupid, Objectively stupid. Shane sat up slowly and immediately regretted it when dizziness rolled unpleasantly through him.

“Jesus.” Definitely dehydration. Or jetlag. Or karma.

Probably karma.

He grabbed his phone before he was fully awake, thumb already moving without permission.

No messages. Well, that was disappointing. He frowned at the screen longer than necessary.

The text thread still sat there awkwardly, unfinished in the way things between them had suddenly become unfinished.

Montreal had complicated everything. That was the problem. Before Montreal, things had been weird but manageable. He thought they had started to get along even. The occasional feeling that Ilya Rozanov paid way too much attention to him for reasons Shane still didn't fully understand.

Then they slept together and Shane still hadn't fully processed that and he would need to decide very soon on how to approach Rozanov with his mind made up. Normal people knew what to do after that. Probably. But Shane did not.

Still, he should say something. Normal people texted. Normal people communicated. Normal people did not disappear emotionally for weeks and then pretend confusion counted as emotional maturity.

Before he could stop himself, he typed:

S - I checked into the Village. How have you been?

He stared at it. Was it too eager? Too obvious?

He almost deleted it, but didn't. He hit send before he could chicken out.

He immediately regretted it. *Fantastic*- amazing start.

He dropped the phone beside him and dragged himself toward the bathroom before he could stare at the screen like someone deeply embarrassing.

The mirror was unkind.

His hair looked terrible. The Mexico tan somehow made the dark circles under his eyes more obvious. He looked tired in a way that vaguely irritated him.

Olympics. Actual Olympics. He should have been more focused than this. It was an honor for a rookie to be on a team.

Instead, apparently he was thinking about one terrifying Russian hockey player too much.

Embarrassing.

The shower helped a little, but not enough. He checked his phone before even getting dressed.

Nothing.

Okay. Busy. He wouldn't be attached to his phone obviously.

Rozanov had captain responsibilities and media and terrifying Russian hockey obligations.

That was fine. Normal. Completely reasonable.

Still. He checked again before leaving the room. Nothing.

Dinner in the Olympic Village dining hall somehow managed to feel surreal and aggressively normal at the same time.

Too many people. Too many languages. Too many athletes pretending they definitely weren't sizing each other.

The dining hall buzzed with noise, trays clattering, conversations overlapping in different accents while muted sports coverage played overhead. Someone from speed skating laughed too loudly nearby. A gymnast walked past carrying what looked like enough fruit to feed an entire village.

Shane grabbed food mostly because elite athletes were supposed to eat and not because he actually wanted any of it.

His appetite had apparently stayed in Mexico.

Or maybe Montreal.

Hard to say. He sat alone at first, the table under the Canadian flag had been empty since they all arrived on the same flight hours ago.

Mistake. Because sitting alone meant thinking. Thinking meant checking his phone. Checking his phone that no response.

Still. Fine, he had done the same so he probably deserved it.

He typed again before he could stop himself.

S- Made it to the dining hall. The architecture is amazing.

Pause.

Then:

S: Good luck

Too much? Probably. Definitely. He tossed the phone face down beside his tray. Then looked up. And froze. Russia occupied nearly an entire section near the windows.

Of course they did.

Loud without actually being messy about it, confident in a way that somehow made every other team feel younger. Coaches spoke sharply between bites. Federation staff floated nearby looking mildly stressed.

And there, near the middle like gravity had decided to become a person, sat Ilya.

Black hoodie.

Damp hair.

Coffee in one hand.

Relaxed in the deeply unfair way he somehow always looked relaxed. Shane's chest tightened stupidly.

He looked fine.

Beautiful. And completely unaffected. Which somehow annoyed Shane more than it should have. Because Shane felt affected. Shane felt weird and distracted and vaguely pathetic.

Meanwhile apparently Ilya Rozanov woke up looking terrifying and emotionally stable.

Unfair. Completely unfair. As if sensing the stare, Ilya looked up. Their eyes met. The entire room seemed to go strangely quiet for one awful second. Shane forgot what he had been doing. Forgot breakfast. Forgot literally everything except the deeply unfortunate reality that Ilya somehow looked unfairly good from across a crowded room. Ilya held eye contact. Steady. Unreadable. Then someone beside him said something into his ear he looked away. Just like that.

Shane stared down at his eggs.

Rude. Honestly rude. But he wasn't blameless so he would just have to accept it.

His phone buzzed. Immediate relief hit before before it fell and he saw it was his mother.

Not Ilya.

His mother.

He almost texted again, but didn't and he texted his mom that everything was fine, and that yes, he was wearing the new reebok sneakers with the underarmour.

Five minutes later:

S: I wish we could at least say hello to each other.

He stared at it.

Too vulnerable.

Deleted.

Retyped.

S: You looked very Russian today. Very slavic.

Better.

Weirder somehow. But better- he hoped it would make Rozanov smile at least.

Sent.

Nothing. No response. No typing bubble. Cool.

Cool cool cool.

By lunch, Shane had checked his phone enough times to genuinely embarrass himself.

Practice helped.

Sort of.

At least hockey forced focus for short bursts. But even then, distraction lingered annoyingly close to the surface. Every time they crossed shared training areas, he found himself looking.

Not intentionally. Just automatically, as if he had an internal radar that told him whenever Rozanov was near.

Sometimes he spotted Russia across the rink.

Sometimes he caught glimpses of dark hoodies and sharp voices and entirely too much confidence moving through hallways.

Sometimes he found Rozanov right in his line of sight, sometimes he didn't.

Every single time, his stomach reacted before his brain caught up.

Which felt medically concerning. "You look miserable." Shane looked up from his tray.

Scott Hunter stood there looking unimpressed.

“That’s supportive.”

“You look like someone stole your puppy or something kid.” Carter added, appearing seemingly from nowhere.

“Love that for me.”

Scott nudged out a chair with his foot. “Sit with us.”

“I’m fine.”

“Come on Hollander. You’re going to be carrying your countries flag. You guys are going to medal during your rookie season and you’ll most likely get to play center for a bit.” Carter said immediately.

Scott nodded once. “Very true. You need to be happy about that at least.”

Shane considered resisting.

Then glanced toward Russia again. Mistake. Ilya sat with his teammates looking entirely too comfortable, saying something quietly to another player while absently scrolling through his phone. Probably ignoring him. Rude- again.

“You need to practice your pissed face if you’re going to stare at them over there.,” Carter said.

“I do not.”

“You fully do. You look like a little angry rabbit or something.”

Scott raised one eyebrow. “Come eat before you become weird in public.”

Unfortunately, that felt fair.

Shane sat.

Lunch helped.

A little.

Carter complained about literally everything- the smell in their rooms. The weather. The social restrictions that only the athletes and coaches were allowed in the village.

The beds. The food. A skier who apparently kept stealing yogurt. Scott contributed occasionally in dry comments that somehow only encouraged Carter to become more dramatic.

It helped enough that Shane almost stopped checking his phone every ten seconds.

Almost. But still nothing after half an hour.

No replies. No acknowledgment. And for reasons Shane absolutely did not want to think about too hard, being ignored bothered him way more than it should have.

Which didn't make sense to him, because he'd done the same thing too. Because it implied caring. Because Shane refused to be one of those Omegas who begged and pleaded for an Alpha's attention.

Also, Shane was pretty sure caring about Ilya Rozanov sounded like the beginning of a genuinely terrible idea.

Shane had had a terrible game. He was only put on the line during the 3rd quarter and had scored Canada's only two goals but it wasn't enough. His parents were thrilled still, texting him affirmations and how proud everyone back home was. He watched Russian annihilate all their opponents and was genuinely proud of Rozanov, but he wished it was him at the medal ceremony. They didn't interact after posing for the obligatory pictures and Shane had struggled to answer the few reporters that he couldn't shake off.

Dinner time came with still no reply so Shane just wanted to stay in bed, but Scott practically kidnapped him into it. Not literally. Mostly.

Shane had fully intended to grab something quick and disappear back to his room under the excuse of being tired, emotionally exhausted, and internationally disappointed in himself. Bronze still sat strangely in his chest. Not bad exactly, because a medal was still a medal, but wrong enough that every congratulations felt slightly undeserved.

He had not played badly. Just... not well enough. Not focused enough. And unfortunately, the part of his brain responsible for honesty kept whispering exactly why. Because apparently becoming emotionally invested in a terrifying Russian hockey player right before the Olympics had been a bad strategic decision.

Who could have predicted.

"Hollander."

Shane looked up from the deeply questionable sandwich he had been considering.

Scott stood three feet away holding a tray and looking unimpressed.

Before Shane could argue, Carter appeared out of nowhere already mid-conversation with himself.

"Oh my God," Carter said immediately. "Chin up, Rook. You'll be winning gold in four years. I've not heard one negative thing about your playing all day."

"Thanks."

"You'll be fine," Scott said.

Shane sighed loudly enough to qualify as suffering.

“You guys are weirdly committed to making me feel terrible.”

Scott nudged a chair out with his foot.

“Sit.”

Some of the younger Canadian players joined the American table and Shane laughed more than he expected to from Carters jokes.

Not enough to feel better. But enough to stop checking his phone every thirty seconds.

Mostly.

Then the television overhead shifted coverage.

News anchors.

Government buildings.

Russian subtitles.

A headline stretched across the bottom of the screen.

International concern grows over Russian omega legislation

The room around them stayed mostly normal. Athletes moved through dinner. Coaches talked too loudly. Someone nearby argued about hockey statistics.

But Shane felt something tighten low in his stomach instantly.

Carter glanced up.

“Oh,” he said. “That thing again.”

Scott looked toward the television but said nothing.

The anchor spoke beneath subtitles about national stability, protests, proposed restrictions, international backlash.

Shane stopped eating. Carter shrugged slightly.

“Everyone keeps freaking out about it.”

Something in Shane’s chest tightened.

“What do you mean?”

Carter looked over.

“I mean obviously some of it sounds intense, but every country has weird laws.” He gestured vaguely with his fork. “Media always makes stuff sound worse than it is.”

Scott stayed quiet.

Shane put his fork down carefully.

“I don’t think governments deciding who people should mate with counts as normal.”

The sharpness in his own voice surprised him.

Carter blinked. “Okay. Wow.” Silence stretched awkwardly.

Scott glanced sideways at Shane briefly. Not judgmental, just observant.

Carter shifted in his seat.

“I just meant headlines are sometimes exaggerated.”

“Mandatory pairing before twenty-one sounds pretty bad,” Shane said quietly.

Carter frowned. “Wait, that’s real?”

Shane immediately regretted saying too much.

Too invested. Too personal. “My mother mentioned something about it this morning. It’s all over the news everywhere,” he muttered.

Scott finally spoke. “Laws like that usually sound reasonable to people they don’t affect.”

Carter looked uncomfortable. “Okay, yeah, fair.”

Shane looked down at his tray again. Because that was the problem. For most people, this stayed theoretical. Politics, international news.

Something happening somewhere else.

For Shane, it is different. Because secrets changed things. Because suppressants changed things. Because medical forms and locked bottles and carefully controlled distance from teammates suddenly felt much more fragile when governments started talking about omegas like logistics problems.

If other countries started to adopt stricter Omega controls, Shane didn’t know what that would mean for his future.

His appetite disappeared completely. The television showed protest footage now. Arguments, signs. Politicians smiling in ways Shane instinctively disliked. And suddenly, irrationally, horribly, one thought hit harder than the rest.

What if people knew? What if something happened? The fear came fast enough to make his chest feel tight.

And then, annoyingly, embarrassingly, another thought followed immediately:

Ilya wouldn't let anything happen. The certainty arrived too quickly. Too naturally, but was dashed when he looked back to the TV and saw Rozanov sitting among the government officials that were announcing the new laws.

Shane was apparently an idiot. Of course Rozanov wasn't different then most alphas.

Great. Fantastic. Emotionally healthy choices all around.

"You okay?"

Scott's voice pulled him back.

Shane blinked.

"What?"

"You went quiet."

Cater leaned forward slightly.

"Like *really* quiet."

"I'm fine."

"You look like you're going to be sick," Carter said immediately.

Scott nodded once.

Shane rubbed a hand over his face.

"Just tired."

Not technically a lie.

Scott studied him for a second too long.

Then, mercifully: "You should sleep."

Carter nodded. "Yeah, you look like existential dread won."

"Fuck off." Shane replied with a weak smile. Despite himself, Shane laughed quietly.

The tension eased enough to breathe again.

Enough to survive dinner. Until he looked across the dining hall. Russia occupied the same corner. And there, near the center, sat Ilya. Relaxed. Unfairly attractive. Talking quietly to another player like he had not spent the entire day ignoring Shane's existence.

Shane looked away sadly.

His phone stayed silent in his pocket.

No response.

Again.

Which should not have bothered him.

Really.

It shouldn't have.

They weren't... anything.

Not technically.

It was a one night stand apparently.

But still. By the time Shane got back to his room, disappointment had shifted into something sharper. Embarrassment. Because apparently he cared too much. Enough to text again.

Against his better judgment.

S- I'm not well versed in one night stands like you, but let me know if I need to do anything before the season starts. I know condoms were used but I would like not to wake up with a herpes sore on my lip from our other activities.

There sent. He threw the phone on the desk and paced. Immediately, he regretted it.

Again. Honestly, at this point, humiliation felt like part of the routine.

He picked up the phone, no response of course, so he tossed it onto the bed and went to shower.

When he came back twenty minutes later, steam still clinging to the room, his screen lit up.

Heart traitorously fast, he grabbed it.

Nothing. Spam email. He stared at the ceiling for a long second.

"This is embarrassing," he muttered.

The next morning somehow felt worse, the air felt heavier.

Like sleep had happened around him instead of to him.

He rolled onto his side and checked his phone before he fully woke.

Nothing. Seriously? Fine. Whatever. Maybe Russia confiscated phones.

Maybe Olympic gold had gone directly to Rozanov's head. Maybe he died. Or was in a massive orgy with whores and puck bunnies.

By breakfast, Olympic Village had shifted into something quieter. Hockey and skyng were the bigger drawls and those games were over..

Everyone carried that weird middle-of-the-Games exhaustion now.

Excitement mixed with disappointment depending on medal counts and expectations.

Shane grabbed coffee first. Scott found him halfway through breakfast.

"You look sick."

"Why does everyone keep saying that?"

"Because you do."

Carter arrived seconds later already talking.

"I almost got into a fight with a skier."

Scott blinked once.

"Why?"

"He insulted hockey."

"That doesn't sound real."

"It was extremely real."

Despite himself, Shane laughed. "Do you guys want to come with me to the male figure skating event this morning? It starts in like 20 minutes. A buddy of mine is competing and I'd like to support him."

They both agreed and made their way out soon after.

Okay.

Maybe this helped.

A little.

At least Scott and Carter felt easy.

Familiar enough now that silence wasn't awkward.

Unfortunately, easy meant his brain wandered.

Which meant noticing.

Russia sat at their usual table again.

And there he was. Ilya. Again. Relaxed. Unfairly composed. Still apparently emotionally stable while Shane continued quietly losing his mind.

Their eyes met briefly. Ilya looked away first.

Again.

The dismissal landed harder than Shane wanted to admit.

“Earth to Shane!?” Carter asked suddenly.

“What?”

“You keep staring into space.”

Scott glanced sideways.

“You distracted?”

“No.”

The lie came too quickly.

Carter narrowed his eyes dramatically.

“Olympic crush?”

Shane nearly choked on coffee.

“No.”

Scott raised one eyebrow.

“That sounded defensive.”

“It wasn’t.”

“Very defensive,” Carter said.

“Oh my God.”

Scott looked thoughtful for one deeply unfortunate second.

“No.”

“That hesitation was suspicious.”

“Guys.”

“Russian team? The figure skaters are pretty cute.” Scott asked mildly.

Shane almost dropped his coffee.

“No.”

Too loud. Too fast. Too horrified.

Both of them stared.

Carter slowly lowered his fork.

Carter looked delighted. “You are being unbelievably weird.”

Scott studied him for one second too long before letting it go.

“For now,” he said.

Across the dining hall, Ilya stood.

Conversation shifted naturally around him.

Someone said something. He answered briefly.

Then looked over, straight at Shane. Again. This time, he didn’t immediately look away. The eye contact lingered. Steady. Unreadable, a challenge in his eyes.

Enough that Shane forgot Carter was talking entirely.

Then Ilya glanced once toward Shane’s phone sitting beside his tray.

Back to Shane.

And walked away.

Shane frowned.

What the hell was that?

His phone buzzed.

Hope hit instantly.

Embarrassingly instantly.

He grabbed it too fast.

IGR- Be in your room in half hour.

Shane stared.

Then immediately looked across the room.

Gone.No explanation. No greeting. No acknowledgment of any previous texts.

Just an order.

Unbelievable. Completely unbelievable.

And somehow, horrifyingly, Shane smiled anyway.

Ilya read every text. That was the humiliating part. Not that Shane texted but that when Shane texted and Ilya immediately stopped whatever he was doing to read them.

He just refused to answer. Which felt different. Important distinction.

At breakfast, his phone buzzed while one of the assistant coaches reviewed strategy nobody actually needed reviewed.

He wanted to be angry. He wanted to have Shane desperate for a reply from him like he had been for weeks.

That last text though-that made him grin. He had been disappointed that the omega was not pregnant yet, but that would come. Like the Americans say: Practice makes perfect.

But that last text, it was adorable how bratty Hollander sounded.

Ilya stared at the message longer than necessary.

He imagined Shane typing it.

Deleting things first.

Rewriting.

Overthinking.

Probably making that irritated little face he made whenever he got trapped inside his own head.

Something warm and deeply inconvenient moved low in Ilya's chest.

Then immediately hardened. No. Absolutely not. Hollander disappeared after they fucked. Hollander got silent for so long and he would need to apologize properly..

Strategic silence. He locked the phone. Did not answer. Then spent the next fifteen minutes checking the dining hall entrance every time the doors opened. Ridiculous.

He knew that Hollander had watched his matches. He wanted to impress the other man. Hollander was the only player he knew that matched his own skills, that offered him a challenge and he was disappointed that they wouldn't be playing against each other.

Ilya looked away from the cameras before anyone noticed the shift in his expression.

He almost replied a few times after the medal ceremony but he couldn't. This will serve as a lesson for Hollander.

He wouldn't be forgiven immediately. That would be too easy, too forgiving.

No.

Hollander had earned uncertainty. He wanted Hollander uncomfortable. Wanted him missing something.

Wanted proof Montreal had not only mattered to one of them.

That they both had wanted it.

But the next day, he took a good look at Hollander and suddenly punishment became more difficult. Because Shane looked tired. Too tired.

Paler than usual beneath the Mexico tan, dark circles under his eyes, movements slower somehow. He carried exhaustion like something heavy, shoulders tighter than normal, attention scattered.

Ilya noticed immediately. Of course he noticed. He noticed everything about Shane now. Dangerously. Annoyingly.

Shane sat alone at first. That bothered him. Then Scott Hunter arrived- that bothered him more. Carter shortly after- worse.

Ilya told himself he disliked the situation for practical reasons. Hunter observed too much. Carter talked too much. Neither felt good enough to be around someone like Shane. Not because they were dangerous. Because eventually people noticed things. Patterns, stressors, avoidance.

The things someone worked very hard to hide. Still- Hunter sat too close. Carter laughed too loudly. Shane relaxed around them in ways that unsettled Ilya unexpectedly.

Then Shane looked up. Their eyes met. The entire dining hall narrowed.

He looked startled.

Caught.

Like he had been staring longer than intended. Good.

Ilya held eye contact deliberately.

Let him sit in it. Let him feel the silence.

Then someone beside him asked a question and he looked away first.

Not because he wanted to. Because if he kept looking, he might have crossed the room.

And that would ruin everything.

Ilya nearly smiled. Nearly. Hollander was going to fall right into his hands.

Instead, today, hockey only gave him more opportunities to look for Shane.

Canada trained nearby.

Not always visible.

Still close enough.

Ilya caught glimpses through shared hallways and rink entrances.

Red jersey.

Messy hair.

The familiar shape of him moving too quickly when distracted.

Shane looked off.

Less sharp.

Half a second slower during drills.

Too inside his own head.

Because of me, Ilya thought.

The realization settled somewhere dark and unpleasantly satisfying.

Then immediately became concern.

Had Shane slept?

Eaten?

Why did he look exhausted?

One of the coaches said something sharp in Russian.

Ilya realized belatedly he had stopped paying attention.

Again.

This was becoming a problem.

The phone buzzed after practice.

Ilya actually laughed.

Quiet.

Brief.

Dangerously fond.

He imagined Shane saying it with that dry expression he used when pretending not to be nervous.

He almost answered. Almost. Then stopped himself. No- *not yet*.

Let him work harder. Let him explain. Let him come closer willingly this time.

Then he looked over to him again and he immediately hated what he was seeing.

Not rationally.

Completely irrationally.

He knew Hunter had done nothing wrong - Hunter seemed decent enough but he was too close.

Protective.

Observant.

Probably safe.

Which somehow made it worse.

Dangerous people were easier to dislike.

Kind people stayed.

One of his teammates asked if something was wrong.

“No.”

The answer came too quickly.

Across the room, Hunter touched Shane's shoulder briefly while saying something.

Too familiar.

Ilya looked away before he did something embarrassing.

Like walk over there.

Or say something insane.

Or start a problem during the Olympics.

Later that evening, the news changed everything.

He noticed Shane immediately.

Dining hall.

Television coverage.

Omega legislation.

Hollander went still -too still.

The kind of stillness that looked controlled from far away but wasn't.

Shane's shoulders tightened. Fear, Ilya recognized it instantly. His stomach turned unpleasantly.

The laws. Of course they would announce it after a big win. He had not considered what this looked like from Shane's side. Not fully.

To Ilya, it was politics, complicated. Temporary since it wouldn't affect him in his life in America.

To Shane? It probably felt personal, threatening.

Real.

A cold kind of anger settled low in his chest. Not at Shane. Not even entirely at Russia.

At the idea itself. At the possibility of Shane afraid.

The thought arrived before he could stop it:

No one touches what is mine.

The possessiveness of it should have unsettled him.

Instead, it felt obvious.

He watched Shane too long.

Watched him stop eating.

Watched him retreat quietly into himself.

Watched him leave dinner looking smaller somehow.

Ilya almost texted then.

Almost said something reassuring.

Something steady.

Instead, he waited.

Because if Shane was unsettled, Shane would eventually come closer.

And Ilya, unfortunately, wanted that very badly.

Shane had sounded annoyed.

Good.

Annoyed means invested.

He waited anyway.

Breakfast gave him exactly what he wanted.

Shane looked for him.

Immediately.

Instinctively.

Eyes drifting toward Russia before he even sat down.

Then Scott.

Then Carter.

Then laughter.

Then Shane staring again.

Ilya stood when he caught him watching.

Held eye contact deliberately. Long enough, steady enough.

Then glanced once toward Shane's phone before walking away.

Message sent.

Minutes later, he finally texted.

He imagined Shane smiling immediately.

The thought lingered unpleasantly warm for the rest of the morning.

Which was deeply inconvenient.

Because now, apparently, Olympic gold felt less satisfying than making Shane Hollander smile for five seconds at breakfast.

That realization annoyed him enough to ignore the next text for another three hours.

The figure skating events were being held in the same rinks as hockey had been hosted. The lighting was softer somehow. The crowd moved differently too, quieter between performances, applause replacing shouting, excitement settling into something gentler than the violent loyalty hockey crowds specialized in.

Shane still felt weird being there.

Not unwelcome.

Just out of place.

He sat between Scott and Carter, high enough in the stands that the entire rink stretched bright beneath them, lights glinting against ice while skaters warmed up below.

“You definitely owe me for this,” Carter said, sinking deeper into his seat. “I love you, Hollander, but if anyone falls dramatically in slow motion for three hours, I’m blaming you.”

Shane huffed a quiet laugh.

“My friend’s competing.”

“You’ve said that seven times,” Scott replied.

Carter pointed immediately.

“And every time you say it, somehow it sounds more emotional.”

“I’m being supportive.”

“Good on you for wanting to show support to an Omega after the announcement,” Carter corrected.

Shane rolled his eyes.

His old friend had messaged him weeks ago when Olympic qualifiers finalized, excited and nervous and somehow exactly the same as when they were younger. Shane had promised he would come if schedules worked.

Schedules had worked.

Mostly.

Mentally?

Questionable.

Because unfortunately, his brain remained deeply occupied elsewhere.

The arena lights dimmed slightly as another performance started.

Carter muttered something about “too much artistic suffering for one evening,” while Scott watched quietly beside him, more invested than he pretended.

Shane tried, really tried. But distraction lingered annoyingly close to the surface.

The Olympics had shifted strangely over the last few days.

Too many stolen glances. Too many unanswered texts.

Too many brief interactions that somehow felt bigger than they should have.

And then there was Russia.

Gold.

Of course.

Shane had watched the final match from Canada housing after their own bronze finish, jaw tight while commentators praised Rozanov like he had personally invented hockey.

They weren't wrong.

Annoyingly. Ilya had played terrifyingly well. Controlled, sharp. And Shane hated how much pride had mixed unpleasantly with disappointment while watching. Because Canada had lost. Because bronze still sat strangely in his chest. Because some part of him had looked at Ilya on television and thought:

Of course he won.

Which felt dangerously close to fond.

Terrible.

Objectively terrible.

“Hey.”

Scott nudged him lightly with an elbow.

“You disappeared again.”

“What?”

“You keep staring into space.”

Carter leaned around him dramatically.

“Do we need to call a doctor?”

“I’m fine.”

Scott narrowed his eyes slightly.

Shane looked down at the ice.

“I’m just tired.”

That excuse felt increasingly useless.

Carter crossed his arms.

“Nope.”

“What do you mean nope?”

“I mean you’ve got weird sad divorced energy.”

Scott actually laughed once under his breath.

Shane looked horrified.

“What?”

“You do,” Carter continued. “Like someone emotionally damaged you.”

“No one emotionally damaged me.”

Scott gave him a look.

“That sounded defensive.”

“Oh my God.”

Carter pointed accusingly.

“There *is* drama.”

“There is not.”

“There absolutely is.”

Scott stayed quieter.

Observant.

Too observant.

“Something happen in Montreal?” he asked casually.

Shane nearly choked.

“No.”

Thankfully, before Shane could embarrass himself further, the announcer introduced the next skater.

His friend. The familiar nerves hit immediately. Focus shifted. For a while, at least, Shane managed to forget himself. The performance was good. Really good, enough that pride briefly replaced everything else.

By the end, Shane found himself standing with everyone else clapping, grin slipping out before he could stop it.

“Okay,” Carter admitted reluctantly. “That was kind of cool.”

Scott nodded once.

“Your friend’s good.”

“Told you.”

The adrenaline faded quickly after.

Too quickly.

Because once things quieted again, Shane looked up.

And froze.

High above the lower stands.

Near the back.

Alone.

Ilya.

It took Shane a second to recognize him.

No hoodie this time.

Russian jacket half unzipped.

Sitting alone in the rafters while the rest of the world celebrated around him.

Watching the ice.

Or maybe not watching.

Something about it felt strange.

Wrong almost.

Russia had won.

He should have been downstairs with teammates.

Enjoying the attention from the media. Celebrating.

Instead, he sat by himself.

Like someone avoiding people.

Scott followed Shane's gaze.

"What are you looking at?"

Shane looked away too fast.

"Nothing."

"Hm."

Carter stretched beside him.

"I'm getting food after this. Figure skating made me emotional."

"You're emotional every day," Scott said.

"True."

Shane stood before he could think too hard.

"I'll be back."

Scott looked at him for one second too long.

"Where are you going?"

"Bathroom."

Carter pointed vaguely.

“You better not abandon us.”

“Would never.” The lie came embarrassingly easy.

The walk upstairs felt longer than it should have.

Stupidly nerve-racking.

Every step gave him more opportunity to turn around.

This was weird.

Objectively weird.

They weren’t... Whatever they were.

Still, the image of Ilya sitting alone kept bothering him.

By the time Shane reached the upper level, the crowd noise had dulled into something distant.

He spotted him immediately.

Of course he did.

Even sitting down, somehow Ilya occupied too much space.

One arm rested lazily across the seat beside him. Head tilted slightly back. Expression unreadable.

He looked tired.

Which somehow unsettled Shane.

Ilya looked up before Shane even reached him.

No surprise.

Just immediate attention.

“What are doing here Hollander?”

Not hello.

Not what are you doing here.

Shane crossed his arms automatically.

“You ignored me.”

The corner of Ilya's mouth twitched faintly.

"You sent boring texts."

Shane stared.

"Fuck off you damn asshole."

"You disappeared."

The words landed heavier than expected.

Shane hesitated. The irritation slipped unexpectedly. Because underneath the dry delivery sat something else. Something quieter. Hurt maybe.

"You ignored me for like four days."

"Da."

"I told you I would see you here. I thought we agreed."

Shane sat down despite himself.

Not too close.

Close enough.

Below them, applause echoed through the arena.

Neither paid attention.

"You won gold," Shane said eventually.

"Yes."

"You don't sound excited."

Ilya shrugged once.

"It happened."

"That's the most insane response to Olympic gold I've ever heard."

Ilya looked over.

"You watched?"

The question landed strangely soft.

Shane looked away immediately.

“Obviously.”

Something unreadable shifted across Ilya’s face.

Brief.

Gone.

“You played well,” Shane muttered.

“You watched,” Ilya repeated.

“Oh my God.”

“You watched.”

“Yes!”

The tiniest hint of satisfaction crossed Ilya’s expression.

Embarrassing.

“You still ignored me,” Shane muttered.

Ilya looked back toward the ice.

“You left first.”

And there it was again.

That same strange heaviness.

Shane exhaled quietly.

“I didn’t know what to say.”

“Why?”

Because everything got weird.

Because silence felt easier than figuring out what any of this meant.

Shane rubbed a hand over his face.

“Things got complicated.”

“Because of we fucked? Its not that dramatic, Hollander.”

The way he said it made Shane glance over.

Careful. Focused. Too focused.

“Can you please act like we’re both human beings here with feelings?”

Ilya stayed quiet.

Which somehow made it easier to keep talking.

“I didn’t know what to do after.”

“You pick up the fucking phone and answer me when I write to you. Is simple.”

“You make everything sound easy.”

“No.” Ilya looked over finally. “You make disappearing look easy.”

That one hit hard.

Harder than Shane expected.

Because suddenly, embarrassingly, painfully, he realized Ilya had actually cared.

Enough to be angry.

Enough to sit alone in the rafters instead of celebrating.

Shane swallowed.

“I’m sorry.”

Ilya said nothing.

“I just...” Shane exhaled hard. “I didn’t know what to say after.”

“You could say anything.”

“I know.”

Silence stretched.

Then quieter: “I was scared.”

Ilya looked at him immediately.

“Of me?”

“...Kind of.”

Something strange shifted in Ilya’s expression.

Not hurt. Something darker. Quieter. Like the answer mattered more than expected. Below them, applause thundered again. Neither moved. Neither looked away.

“I thought I was gentle with you. I tried to take it easy and not cause you pain.”

“You-” Shane tried to start a few times but couldn’t find the words.

“I will come to your room tonight. We’ll talk then.”

Shane blushed and nodded, turning to leave.

“Hollander-if you keep letting Hunter close to you and touching you, I’ll break his arm when Boston plays New York next week.”

That night, suitcases appeared outside doors. Teams drifted through hallways carrying medals and exhaustion in equal measure. Conversations shifted from schedules to flights, from competition to reunions back home. People traded numbers they probably would not use. Promised visits they probably would not make.

Everything suddenly felt like ending.

Shane hated that more than expected. Mostly because endings implied distance. And distance suddenly felt complicated. The rafters conversation had unsettled something in him in the worst possible way. Because now things felt... less broken. Not fixed- definitely not fixed.

But there was a promise of them talking.

Now Shane kept thinking. About their night together. About the Olympics. About how absurdly relieved he had felt after finding Ilya alone in the rafters. About the way Ilya had looked at him after Shane admitted he was scared. Not angry, not offended. Just... focused.

Like the honesty mattered. Which somehow made things worse. Or better, it was hard to say. He had spent the rest of the day pretending not to think about it.

His flight home was tomorrow.

Then distance. Three months until Montreal would play Boston again.

The realization sat strangely heavy.

Not because three months sounded long.

Because suddenly it did.

He hated that.

Hated how quickly things had shifted.

His thoughts were laser focused on Rozanov, on his expectations.

Dangerous. This was very dangerous, but he couldn't bring himself to care much.

Shane showered, packed half-heartedly, and eventually left to grab food after realizing he had forgotten dinner existed.

Olympic Village moved quieter at night.

Less energy. More exhaustion from the past week.

People lingering in hallways with coffees and medals and temporary friendships.

By the time he made it back upstairs, he mostly just wanted sleep.

The door opened easily.

Shane stepped inside.

Then stopped.

For one long second, his brain failed entirely.

Because someone sat in the desk chair.

Calm.

Comfortable.

Like he belonged there.

Dark sleeveless tank top.

Long jean clad legs stretched slightly.

Phone loose in one hand.

Ilya.

Shane stared.

“What the fuck?”

Ilya looked up slowly.

“You took too long.”

“That is not an answer.”

“You asked no question.”

“You’re in my room!”

“Yes.”

“How?”

Ilya shrugged slightly.

“I arrived.”

“What are you doing in my room? Who let you in?”

“Congradulate me, Hollander. It's my special week.”

Shane shut the door automatically behind him, still staring.

“You can't just break into people's rooms.”

“I did not break anything.”

“That's not what I mean!”

Something deeply inconvenient happened then. Relief- immediate, warmth spreading fast through his body at being alone with Rozanov after so long. Because somehow seeing him here felt less surprising than it should have. Like maybe some part of Shane had expected this eventually, which felt deeply unhealthy.

“You're unbelievable,” Shane muttered.

“Yes.”

“That wasn't a compliment.”

“I know.”

Shane dropped his bag beside the bed.

Only then did he notice Ilya looking toward the packed suitcase.

Something unreadable shifted across his face.

Briefly then gone.

“You packed already.”

Shane frowned.

“Yeah?”

Silence.

Then quieter:

“You leave tomorrow.”

Something about the way he said it made Shane pause.

Not accusation. Not irritation. Something stranger. Like the fact itself bothered him.

“You also leave tomorrow,” Shane said.

“Da.”

Another silence.

The room suddenly felt too quiet. Too small.

A distant laughter and doors opening somewhere down the hall.

Neither moved. Finally:

“Why are you here?” Shane asked quieter.

Ilya looked at him for a long second.

“You disappeared.”

There it was again. That strange heaviness beneath everything.

“You’re still on that?”

“Yes.”

Shane exhaled hard.

“I apologized.”

“You think that was apology?”

“As a matter of fact, I do. We aren’t together Rozanov. You can’t just expect me to move my life around to accommodate when you want to communicate with me.”

“You really think that?”

Despite himself, Shane laughed quietly. “You’re fucking unbelievable.”

Okay. Fine. Maybe deserved. “I just...” Shane rubbed a hand over his face. “I didn’t know what to say after that night.”

“Why?”

“Because everything got weird.”

Ilya tilted his head slightly. Ilya stood slowly and walked over to Shane. He crowded the smaller man against the wall, his hand coming up to hold his jaw up firmly so he’d had no choice but to look directly into his eyes. “Use your words. Tell me what happened.”

“We slept together.”

“Da. Of course. And you wanted it.”

“I didn’t say no,” Shane said immediately. “But it’s too much.”

“How?.”

That startled a laugh out of him. Which somehow made this easier. A little.

“We slept together,” Shane repeated quieter now. “And then suddenly you mattered too much.”

The honesty slipped out before he could stop it.

Immediately regretted. Ilya went still.

“What does that mean?”

Shane looked down, but Ilya forced his face back up again.

“It means I kept thinking about you,” he muttered. “And then getting annoyed at myself for thinking about you. Neither of us can have mates right now. I can’t get found out, my parents would be in trouble with me, I can’t, Rozanov. I don’t know what I’m doing when I’m around you and it literally hurts sometimes when I think about it. ”

The room was quiet now except for their breathing. When Shane looked up again, Ilya was watching him too carefully. Like the answer mattered too much.

“You disappeared,” Ilya said quietly.

“I know.”

“You scared me.”

That was hard to hear. Because somehow, impossibly, Shane believed him. And worse?

Part of him liked hearing it.

Which felt dangerous.

“I’m here now,” Shane said quietly.

Something shifted in Ilya’s expression.

Small. Gone too quickly to understand.

Then quieter: “Three months is too long.”

Shane blinked. “What?”

“The game schedule.” Pause. “I checked.”

“You checked?”

“Da.”

“That’s concerning.”

“Little bit.”

Shane huffed a laugh despite himself. God. He was so unbelievably weird.

And somehow, impossibly, standing here now, Shane realized he did not really want this to end tomorrow either.

Which felt like the beginning of another terrible idea.

“We will make this work to see where it goes. We meet when we are not busy. I fly to you, you fly to me. Get all this figured out.”

Ilya’s words hung in the space between them, a plan, a promise, a bridge thrown across the chasm of the next three months. The sheer, arrogant certainty of it -I fly to you, you fly to me, should have been infuriating. It was the kind of statement that ignored logistics, distance, and the fragile, complicated thing they were barely admitting existed.

Instead, it acted like a key turning in a lock deep inside Shane’s chest.

A low, warm shudder worked its way through him. The constant, buzzing static of *what now, what next, what is this* quieted, replaced by a single, clear frequency: Rozanov, here, now. The man who checked game schedules. Who sat alone after winning gold. Who was currently crowding him against a wall in a dim bedroom, looking at him like he wanted to consume him entirely.

“Figure it out,” Shane repeated, his voice barely a whisper.

“Da.”

Ilya didn’t move away. His thumb, still resting against Shane’s jaw, stroked once, a rough, deliberate caress of the smooth skin. The touch was a live wire. It connected directly to the base of Shane’s spine, pulling everything tight and hot. The space between them, already minimal, became unbearable. Like a vacuum begging to be filled.

Shane saw the decision in Ilya’s eyes a second before he moved. It wasn’t a question. It was a descent.

Ilya’s mouth crashed into his.

The first contact was less a kiss and more a claiming. A hard, desperate press of lips that stole the air from Shane’s lungs and the sense from his head. It was all heat and insistence, the faint, familiar taste of Ilya- spearmint gum, cigarette smoke and something darker, uniquely

him, flooding Shane's senses. A ragged sound, half-gasp, half-moan, tore from Shane's throat and was swallowed immediately.

He didn't just accept it; he surged into it. His hands, which had been hanging uselessly at his sides, flew up. One fisted in the soft cotton of Ilya's tank, crumpling it, pulling him closer until not a sliver of light could pass between their bodies. The other hand slid up the solid, unforgiving plane of Ilya's back, feeling the shift and coil of muscle beneath warm skin.

Ilya responded with a low, approving grunt that vibrated through both of them. He angled his head, deepening the kiss, his tongue sweeping past Shane's lips. It was wet, deep, and shamelessly carnal. Shane tried to meet him thrust for thrust, but gave up and let Rozanov control the kiss, a dizzying, escalating rhythm that had less to do with tenderness and everything to do with weeks of pent-up frustration, anger, and a longing so acute it felt like sickness. This was the answer to every ignored text, every stolen glance across a cafeteria, every lonely, furious night spent replaying their first night together.

Their breaths grew ragged, loud in the quiet room. The kiss broke, not from lack of want, but from sheer need for air. They stayed forehead-to-forehead, panting harshly into the shared space, a haze of lust and something sharper, more dangerous, clouding the air.

"Bed," Ilya growled, the word a rough scrape against Shane's swollen lips.

It wasn't a request. In one fluid, terrifyingly strong motion, Ilya's arms banded around him, one across his shoulders, one hooking behind his knees, and he was lifted clean off the floor. Shane's world tilted, a yelp of surprise caught in his throat as he was carried the three short strides to the narrow single bed. He was deposited onto the stiff covers, Ilya following him down immediately, his weight a delicious, anchoring press that made the bedsprings complain.

There was no more pause. Ilya reclaimed his mouth, kissing him with a renewed, frantic hunger. His hands were everywhere- tangling in Shane's hair, sliding down his neck, skimming over his ribs through his t-shirt. Every touch was electric, a spark that lit a new fuse under Shane's skin. He arched up into it, his own hands roaming the impossibly broad terrain of Ilya's shoulders and back, learning the landscape he'd only glimpsed before.

Ilya's mouth left his, trailing a scorching path down the line of his jaw, to the frantic pulse pounding at the base of his throat. He sucked there, hard, and Shane cried out, a sharp, unfiltered "*Ah!*" that was pure sensation. The bite of pleasure-pain made his hips jerk up involuntarily, grinding against the solid weight between his legs. A thick, ragged groan was his reward, vibrating against his skin.

"You drive me fucking insane," Ilya muttered, his voice thick and slurred against Shane's collarbone as his hands slid down. They found the hem of Shane's t-shirt and rucked it up, his palms, hot and slightly rough, sliding over the bare skin of Shane's stomach. Shane shuddered violently, his own fingers scrambling for purchase on Ilya's back.

The world narrowed to sensation: the drag of denim against his thighs, the crush of Ilya's body, the wet, open-mouthed kisses being branded along his sternum. Ilya's hand dipped lower, fingers tracing the waistband of Shane's sweatpants, and Shane's brain, which had been blissfully offline, short-circuited into a white-hot buzz of *yes, finally, more*.

Then, those fingers hooked. Not just tracing, but tugging. The intent was unmistakable. A direct line to where Shane was hard and aching.

A jolt of pure, cold terror lanced through the heat.

It was instant. Paralyzing. It froze the moan in his throat and turned his muscles to stone.

Mexico.

The word exploded in his mind like a flashbang, bleaching out all the color and heat. The secret, the lie of omission, sat in his gut like a lead weight. He was here, kissing Ilya like he owned him, letting himself be unraveled, while holding onto a truth that could change everything. Rozanov, who was talking about flying across country to "figure this out." Rozanov, who was hurt by silence, who deserved... what? The truth? Or the fantasy of the omega who was only his?

Ilya, sensing the sudden rigidity beneath him, pulled back just an inch. His eyes, dark and heavy-lidded with desire, searched Shane's face, now pale and tense. "Hollander?" His voice was rough, confused.

Shane's hand shot out, his fingers wrapping around Rozanov's wrist, stopping the downward progress of his hand. The grip was tight, desperate.

"Stop," he breathed. The word was barely audible, but it hung between them like a physical barrier.

Rozanov went perfectly still. The heat in his eyes didn't vanish, but it was overlaid with a wary, sharpening focus. The shift from lover to predator was subtle and instantaneous.

"What?"

"I... just... stop for a second." Shane couldn't meet his gaze. He stared at the ceiling, his chest heaving for reasons that had nothing to do with passion anymore.

The tension in the room crystallized. The air, once thick with want, now felt thin and brittle. Ilya slowly, deliberately, removed his hand from Shane's waistband, though he didn't move off him. He braced himself on his forearms, caging Shane in, his entire body a question mark of coiled frustration.

"You tell me to stop," Ilya said, his voice dangerously low and even. "Now. After that. Explain."

I have to tell him. I have to say it. About the club. About the other alpha. About what happened, and I didn't tell you before we got into bed, and I've been carrying it like a stone ever since. The confession gathered on his tongue, bitter and sharp.

And then, the universe, with its impeccable, cruel timing, intervened.

From the discarded pile of his clothes on the floor, Shane's cell phone erupted into sound. Not a buzz. A shrill, obnoxious ringtone- the generic one he'd never bothered to change - that sliced through the silence like a knife.

Both of them jerked at the sound. The spell, already fractured, shattered completely.

Shane's eyes squeezed shut. A wave of cowardly, overwhelming relief washed over him, so potent it felt like nausea. The decision was taken away. For now.

The phone rang again, insistently.

Ilya's expression darkened, his jaw tightening. He looked from Shane's closed eyes to the source of the noise and back, the conflict between anger, concern, and sheer irritation plain on his face.

"Aren't you going to answer your fucking phone?" The words were gritted out.

Shane took a shaky breath and opened his eyes. He couldn't look at Ilya directly. He focused on the shoulder of his tank top. "It's... probably just my mom or Scott. Or Carter. Checking in." The excuse was pathetic.

The ringing stopped. The sudden quiet was somehow louder.

In the blanketing silence, Shane found a sliver of courage. Not enough for the truth. Just enough for a retreat. "Roza-" he started, his voice thin. "Can we... can we just talk in the morning? Everything's... my head's a mess. I can't... not right now."

The words hung there, weak and inadequate. He was pushing him away. Again. After pulling him in. After kissing him like he was drowning.

For a long, terrible moment,

Rozanov said nothing. He just watched him, his blue eyes scanning Shane's face, reading the panic, the evasion, the guilt. The heat in his gaze cooled, hardening into something opaque and unreadable. The man who had been kissing him with possessive fury was receding, replaced by the guarded, untouchable hockey star.

Finally, with a slow, controlled exhale, Rozanov pushed himself up. He didn't do it angrily. The movement was deliberate, almost graceful, as he swung his legs off the bed and stood. He looked down at Shane, who remained frozen on the mattress, a monument to his own indecision.

"Morning," Ilya repeated, his tone flat. He gave one short, uninterpretable nod. "Da. Okay."

He didn't say another word. He turned, walked to the door, and let himself out. The click of the latch engaging was the softest, most final sound Shane had ever heard.

Shane lay there, staring at the closed door, the ghost of Ilya's weight still pressing him into the mattress, the taste of him still on his lips, and the ringing silence of his own cowardice filling the room.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading ❤️

I am once again putting these two emotionally constipated disasters in situations and seeing what happens.

I'd love to hear what you thought of this chapter! Favorite scene? Biggest "oh no"? Are we defending Shane today or putting him on trial? And what do we think Ilya is about to do next? Hehe. He'd go to jail in most states for what he's about to pull.

Your comments genuinely make my day and help motivate me to keep writing faster 🥰

Chapter 12: Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

I had to split the chapter into two this time; some trigger warnings and the fact that I might have to reread the chapter and make some tweaks there and there for continuity and grammar.

dubious consent, violence and cray cray Ilya in this chapter

Last one until Shane grows a pair and really starts to stand up for himself.

Love love loved all the reviews of course - I appreciate each and every single one

They didn't get to talk the next morning. Ilya was called into a press conference that ran late and they barely saw each other leaving the village. The goodbye had been harder this time for Shane, the image kept replaying itself in Shane's head during boarding. Rozanov standing there in his Russian team jacket with his duffel slung over one shoulder, blue eyes fixed too intently on Shane's face while the hallway around them buzzed with departing athletes and staff. Shane still wasn't sure what expression he had been making at the time. Whatever it was, it must have looked bad because Ilya's mouth had tightened almost immediately.

"You text me before plane takes off," he had said finally texted.

Not asked, told.

Shane, exhausted beyond reason and emotionally too fragile to argue properly, had just typed 'Asshole.' but added a smiley face.

"You do not disappear again." Because beneath the rough demand sat something real. Something vulnerable enough that Shane had felt guilty all over again for how he had ignored Rozanov for so long. For the silence. For how badly he kept handling this thing between them.

"I won't," Shane had answered.

And he had meant it this time.

The flight attendants had started calling final boarding shortly after. Shane remembered standing there awkwardly for another second too long, giving Rozanov one final glance over his shoulder, Shane's stomach had flipped embarrassingly hard at that. For one brief second, Ilya's expression had softened in that rare way Shane was beginning to realize almost nobody else ever saw.

Then someone from the Russian staff had shouted something in Russian down the hall and the moment shattered.

Ilya looked irritated immediately.

IGR - You go before I decide Canada cannot have you back.

S - You're a jerk.

IGR - Da.

Shane had boarded his flight with a smile on his face. As promised, he texted Rozanov right before take off. For the first time, his parents weren't the ones he sent a message too. Now he had someone else. Now, nearly twelve hours later, stepping off the plane in Vancouver, he still felt wrung out from the entire Olympics and long flight.

His body ached with exhaustion that sleep had not fixed. His head still felt too full, too loud with his thoughts. Too much had happened in too short a time. Without Rozanov to focus on, his mind had begun to spiral. The terrifying realization that somehow, impossibly, Rozanov mattered now. Really mattered. Enough that Shane had spent half the flight staring at his phone, rereading all their messages.

S: Landed.

Three minutes later:

IGR: Good.

Followed immediately by:

IGR: Send picture when you are out of airport.

Which was objectively ridiculous.

Shane had smiled anyway.

By the time he exited customs, exhaustion had settled deep into his bones. The airport itself was chaos already, far louder than he felt prepared for. Fans crowded near the barriers with hockey jerseys and signs and phones raised high. Reporters clustered near baggage claim exits. Camera flashes hit almost immediately the second someone recognized him.

“Oh my God, Shane Hollander!”

“Shane! Over here!”

“How does it feel bringing home bronze?”

“Shane, one photo!”

“Any comments on next season?”

The noise hit him all at once- bright lights, loud people rushing towards him and getting way too close. Shane froze for half a second beneath the overwhelming crush of voices and

flashing cameras. His chest tightened instantly, irritation and exhaustion mixing into something dangerously close to panic. Someone shoved a jersey toward him to sign. Another person nearly walked directly into him while filming.

He swallowed hard and forced himself to keep moving. Smile, wave.

Be polite-normal.

The photographers kept shouting questions while following him toward arrivals. His medal suddenly felt unbearably heavy from his pocket. His backpack dug painfully into one shoulder. His suppressants and medication sat tucked safely in his carry-on and suddenly the entire airport felt suffocatingly crowded.

Someone grabbed lightly at his sleeve.

“Shane, one quick interview-”

His stomach turned unpleasantly.

Too close.

Thankfully, airport security finally intervened after noticing the crowd beginning to swell around him.

“Alright everyone, give him space please.”

Relief hit hard enough to make Shane dizzy.

One guard guided him quickly through a side exit while another blocked several photographers attempting to follow. Shane muttered exhausted thanks under his breath and escaped outside into the freezing Canadian air.

Cold immediately filled his lungs. Better. Much better. And then he spotted them.

His parents stood near pickup, both bundled in winter coats despite Vancouver not even being that cold compared to most Canadian cities. His mother spotted him first.

“Honey!”

Something in his chest loosened instantly.

Yuna reached him first, arms wrapping tightly around him before he could even properly drop his bag. Shane nearly sagged into her automatically, exhaustion suddenly feeling heavier now that he was safe.

“Oh honey,” she murmured immediately. “You look exhausted.”

“Love you too.” She laughed softly against his shoulder.

His father hugged him next, firm and proud and warm in the familiar steady way only his dad managed. "Olympic medalist," he said, sounding faintly emotional about it. "That sounds pretty good, kid."

Heat climbed into Shane's face immediately. "It's bronze."

"It's the Olympics," his father corrected instantly, pulling him into another hug.

Yuna pulled back just enough to cup his face between cold hands. "We are so proud of you." The sincerity of it hurt a little. Because suddenly Shane felt strangely fragile.

The drive home blurred together softly after that. His parents filled most of the silence naturally, talking about neighbors and interviews and family members losing their minds over seeing Shane on television. Apparently half of Vancouver had opinions about his rookie season now.

Shane answered where he could.

Mostly he just listened.

And texted Ilya whenever his parents weren't looking too closely.

S: On my way home.

IGR: Took too long.

S: Canada is far away from Russia actually.

IGR: Unfortunate.

That stupid warmth hit again immediately.

Dangerous. Very dangerous. By the time they reached home, night had already settled fully over Vancouver. Snow lined the edges of neighboring yards in soft frozen piles while warm yellow light spilled from windows across the quiet street.

Home.

The realization hit unexpectedly hard stepping through the front door.

Everything smelled the same.

Rice. Laundry detergent. His mother's candles. Winter. Safety. His chest tightened painfully.

"Are you hungry?" His mother asked after taking her coat off and reaching for Shane's to put in the closet.

"I could eat."

His old bedroom looked almost untouched upstairs. The same dark comforter. The same hockey trophies lining shelves. Photos from junior leagues and national teams still pinned to

the wall. His childhood desk shoved beneath the window exactly where he left it.

Shane dropped onto the mattress heavily and exhaled long and slow into the familiar room.

God, he was tired. His phone buzzed almost immediately.

IGR: Show me your room.

Shane snorted quietly.

S: Why.

IGR: Curious.

S: About a bedroom?

IGR: About everything when it comes to you.

Shane ended up sending a blurry picture of the room anyway.

Three dots appeared immediately.

Then: IGR: Tiny bed.

Shane stared at the screen.

S: Fuck off.

IGR: You sleep there entire childhood?

S: Yes.

IGR: Explains many things.

Shane laughed despite himself, quiet enough that nobody downstairs would hear.

The conversation stretched through most of the evening after that. Strange little messages back and forth while Shane unpacked half-heartedly and lay sprawled across his childhood bed still wearing sweatpants and an old Team Canada hoodie.

Nothing overly serious. Nothing overly romantic either.

Just... easy.

Shockingly easy.

At one point, after nearly twenty straight minutes of silence, another text appeared.

IGR: I do not like when photographers touch you.

Shane blinked.

S: What?

IGR: Airport videos online already.

Of course he already looked. Possessive asshole. Heat crawled slowly up Shane's neck anyway.

S: They weren't touching me like that.

Long pause.

Then:

IGR: Still

Shane stared at the message longer than necessary before eventually locking the phone and pressing it against his chest like an idiot.

The next morning he woke to the song his mother usually played softly while cleaning. .

He smiled at the memories growing up - he would sneak out of his room and hide behind a corner, watching his parents dance around the kitchen or living room.

Now, he gave them a few extra minutes, coming out when his father pulled away to grab the insulated mug of coffee. His father left for work after breakfast, kissing Yuna's cheek before heading out while Shane remained curled half-awake at the kitchen island nursing his tea.

"You're still tired today," Yuna informed him immediately afterward.

"I'm alright, I just feel drained."

"You flew internationally after the Olympics, you should just have a lazy day honey."

"Maybe. I should go for a run though, then I can take it easy."

By early afternoon, exhaustion finally caught him fully. Shane ended up back in his bedroom beneath heavy blankets while winter light filtered softly through the curtains.

His phone rested against his chest.

Another unread text from Ilya waiting there.

IGR: Practice tomorrow.

IGR: Hate conditioning coach.

Shane smiled faintly. S- I go in tomorrow. Coach will have us doing bag skates.

Then sighed.

Because underneath everything else sat that awful heavy uncertainty again.

Mexico.

The almost-confession, the panic. The way Ilya had looked at him before leaving the room that night. Everything still sat unfinished between them. His chest hurt thinking about it too long. He was tried to avoid bringing it up until they were face to face, or at least until he knew exactly how to say what he really wanted to say.

The bedroom door opened quietly.

Yuna stepped inside carrying folded laundry before immediately pausing when she saw his expression.

“Mmm,” she hummed softly. “I’m going to sit out with a fire- would you like to join me?”

Shane frowned slightly. “Isn’t it too cold?”

“Not for you. Bring your blanket and it’s a date.”

Shane smiled-this was something they did all the time before he moved out.

He followed after pulling on some sweatpants and a hoodie, the old quilt in his arms. He saw her sitting down, the fire in the pit already started. She sat back on the chaise there and moved the cushions around to make room for him.

He walked over and laid down with his head in her lap and wrapped them both in the quilt. “Thank you, Mama.” he said after a few minutes.

“You don’t need to thank me, honey. I don’t know what’s going on, but you seem out of sorts recently.”

Unfortunately unbeatably true.

Her hand moved automatically into his hair, brushing slowly through messy strands.

“You’re carrying something heavy,” she said quietly.

Shane swallowed, suddenly, irrationally emotional.

Her fingers just slid slowly through his hair before trailing lightly down his back, nails scratching gently through the fabric of his shirt.

The touch nearly undid him immediately. Safe. Warm. Home. Shane closed his eyes. Yuna Hollander was like his North Star. No matter what, he knew that being near her would make everything alright.

“You want to talk about it?” she asked softly after a while.

Long silence as he fought to form the words. Then finally: “I think I messed something up.”

Yuna’s hand never stopped moving. “Hm.”

“I’m kind of…” Shane hesitated awkwardly. “Seeing someone. Maybe.”

Her fingers paused briefly. Then resumed. “A maybe?”

“Mom.”

“I’m listening.”

Shane stared at the wall. “I don’t know what we are yet.”

“Okay.”

“And I think I handled some things badly.”

“That happens.”

“It’s complicated.” Shane groaned into her lap immediately.

“Oh no,” she laughed quietly. “That serious?”

“I don’t know.” Which was the problem. Because somehow Ilya had become important frighteningly fast. Enough that Shane missed him already, enough that thinking about him with anyone else made something twist low in his chest.

Enough that Shane was genuinely terrified of ruining whatever this was becoming.

“I really like him,” Shane admitted finally, voice quieter now.

Yuna’s fingers slowed gently against his back.

“Then why do you sound so sad saying it?”

That one hurt. Because Shane didn’t fully know how to explain it.

The secrecy, the fear, the pressure. Not knowing if his feelings were real or if it just because Ilya Rozanov was an Alpha. It all could be just a trick of his secondary sex and he could have the same feelings for any other Alpha with the right mix of pheromones.

The impossible aching certainty that once Shane fully attached himself emotionally there would be no halfway point anymore. “He’s intense,” Shane whispered eventually.

Yuna laughed softly under her breath. “You always do like intense people.”

“That’s definitely not true.”

“You’re a professional hockey player. Part of the game is being intense.”

“...okay maybe.”

Silence settled again after that, comfortable and warm.

Then quieter: "I'm scared I'll hurt him- that he'll hurt me."

Yuna's expression softened immediately. "Oh, honey."

"I already kind of did."

"Did you mean to?"

"No."

"Then fix it."

"It's not that easy."

"It usually isn't."

Shane swallowed hard.

"What if everything gets complicated?"

Yuna looked down at him carefully then, fingers still brushing lightly across his hairline.

"Shane," she said softly, "all your father and I want is for you to be happy."

His throat tightened instantly.

"No matter what?"

"Of course no matter what."

Emotion climbed painfully fast into his chest.

Yuna smiled sadly then, like maybe she understood more than Shane realized.

"We would support you through anything," she continued quietly. "Anything. Do you understand me?"

Something in the way she said it nearly made him cry.

Because suddenly Shane wondered if she already knew. Or maybe mothers simply always knew when their children carried fear too heavy to say aloud.

He looked away quickly before emotion fully reached his face.

Yuna's fingers scratched lightly down his back again the same soothing way she used to when he was small and overwhelmed and frightened of things he could not explain yet.

And for the first time since the Olympics ended, Shane finally let himself breathe.

Two weeks passed faster than Shane expected, too fast but not fast enough at the same time. Somehow, despite daily practices, commercial deals, travel schedules, and the exhausting rhythm of NHL life settling back into place, Rozanov had quietly threaded himself into Shane's daily routine.

Texts came constantly, sometimes bossy, sometimes almost romantic:

IGR: Wake up.

At six-thirty in the morning.

Or: IGR: Eat breakfast.

Followed inevitably by: IGR: Send picture of you.

Which Shane refused on principle for nearly four days before eventually giving in because apparently Ilya Rozanov possessed the emotional persistence of a particularly aggressive guard dog.

Calls happened too- sometimes only to say hello, other times for hours on end talking about their days. Sometimes they barely spoke at all, but a call would be preferred over a text.

Sometimes Shane just listened to the familiar sound of Ilya moving around his house in Boston while muttering in Russian about coaches or teammates or whatever television show he had decided was "stupid but acceptable."

Shockingly, the distance had somehow made things easier, less overwhelming. No looming physical closeness to influence his moods. No terrifying chemistry waiting one accidental touch away.

Just conversation, slowly figuring things out and getting to know each other.

Slowly building something neither of them quite had words for yet.

Still, things sat unresolved between them.

Mexico, Shane ignoring Rozanov and leaving when things got complicated.

The interrupted confession. He thought about it more than he wanted to admit.

Especially after following his mother's advice.

Be truthful. Fix it.

It sounded annoyingly simple when she said it. Harder in practice. Especially when the truth had the potential to ruin things before they properly started.

And the entire hockey world collectively lost its mind. Tickets sold out within 3 minutes. Sports media practically treated the matchup like a war. Olympic aftermath. Boston versus Montreal. Rozenov versus Hollander. The rookie phenom against the Russian gold medalist. Every sports network suddenly had opinions. Analysts replayed Olympic clips side-by-side with NHL footage while debating who held the advantage now.

Commentators called it “the rivalry of the century.”

Locker room tension climbed steadily all week. Practices ran longer, harder. Every hit landed heavier. Every mistake got called out louder.

The Voyageurs locker room buzzed constantly with anticipation, reporters circling like sharks before and after practice.

“Biggest game of your rookie season?” someone asked Shane after morning skate.

“All games are equally important,” Shane answered automatically.

The reporter blinked.

“No?”

“It’s hockey,” Shane replied simply. “Every game matters.”

Professional. Boring. Yuna Hollander’s stellar media training on full display.

Internally?

Complete lie.

Because somehow this game felt massive. Not only because Boston always mattered. Not only because Rozenov always mattered.

But because for the first time since the Olympics, Shane would see him again. Would be face-to-face against the only player in the league who was a match for him in skill.

In person- actually see him.

Not through FaceTime.

Not through interviews.

Not through late-night calls that somehow stretched until two in the morning without either of them meaning to.

The flight to Boston somehow made Shane more anxious than actual game day. Which felt ridiculous. He should have been focused on hockey. Strategy. Game tape. Line changes.

Instead, his stomach twisted every time his phone buzzed.

Especially when one particular name appeared.

IGR.

He opened the message immediately.

IGR: Before game, you come home to me. I will send car to hotel to pick you up after your practice.

Shane blinked. Then immediately: S: You need to stop ordering me around.

Three dots appeared instantly.

IGR: I send car to hotel. You stay with me after the game.

Then: IGR: We talk. Spend time together.

The wording alone made Shane nervous.

Not bad nervous. Just... aware.

Aware that whatever this was between them probably shifted after tonight. Aware that unresolved things stayed unresolved too long already. Aware that he genuinely wanted to see where Rozanov lived. What his space looked like.

The weird little details people accidentally revealed in private. Whether he folded laundry. Whether he owned more than black hoodies. Whether his fridge contained actual food or only protein drinks and terrible life decisions.

Shane exhaled slowly and typed back.

S: Okay. I want to clear some things up too.

The reply came immediately.

IGR: Good.

Pause.

Then:

IGR: I miss you.

Shane froze.

Just briefly.

Because Ilya almost never said things like that outright.

The honesty landed strangely hard in his chest.

Embarrassingly hard.

S: I missed you too.

The typing bubble appeared.

Disappeared.

Appeared again.

IGR: Good.

Which somehow felt deeply him.

By the time Boston came into view beneath the plane windows, Shane's nerves sat uncomfortably high.

Not because of the game. Okay. Partially because of the game.

Mostly because today felt important. Like standing at the edge of something. Something that either got stronger after honesty or cracked entirely beneath it. His mother's words replayed quietly in his head. *Did you mean to hurt him? No. Then fix it.*

Simple.

Terrifying.

Necessary.

The black car slid to a silent curb in front of a sleek, modern single story house. Shane's stomach was a tight knot of anxiety and a treacherous, fluttering anticipation. The driver merely nodded as Shane slipped out, the heavy door thudding shut behind him before the car purred away along the driveway..

He rang the doorbell, not stopping from looking around. The hedges offered pricey all along the yard and the windows were treated with a reflective coating of some sort to prevent anyone from looking in. When the doors opened, the Ilya was there, shirtless, black low slung trousers making him look insanely sinful. He'd been waiting.

"You came," Ilya said, his voice a low rumble in the vast, open space.

"I said I was. We're supposed to talk," Shane replied, his own voice sounding too small.

For a long moment, they just looked at each other. Two weeks of waiting for this moment, of sold-out arena hype and journalists screaming their names in hypothetical battles, of lying awake in separate cities- it all condensed into the ten feet of polished stone between them. The tension wasn't hostile; it was a live wire, humming with everything left unsaid since the Olympics.

Then Rozanov stalked closer.

He crossed the space in a few strides, and his hands were on Shane's face, his mouth descending before Shane could form a thought. It wasn't a greeting kiss. It was a reclamation. Hard, desperate, and hungry, pouring two weeks of frustrated want into a single, consuming point of contact. Shane gasped into it, his own hands flying up to clutch at Ilya's hair, his body arching into the solid wall of him as if magnetized. The taste of him- spearmint, smoke and that unique, darkly familiar scent- unraveled Shane's resolve instantly. Logic drowned in a flood of pure sensation.

They stumbled further into the living room, a tangled mess of grasping hands and feverish kisses. Shane's back hit a wall, and he used it as leverage to grind against Rozanov, a low groan vibrating from his chest into Ilya's mouth. Shane's head was spinning, heat pooling low and urgent in his gut. This was easier. This was what his body screamed for. To lose himself in this, to let the physical need burn away the complicated, painful conversation they owed each other.

But a sliver of clarity, sharp as glass, pierced the haze. His mother's calm voice in his memory: *Just be truthful, Shane. You can't build anything on a lie.*

With a force of will that felt like tearing his own skin off, Shane wrenched his mouth away. He planted his hands on Ilya's chest and pushed, not hard, but with a definite finality. "Ilya. Stop."

Ilya stilled, his breath coming in ragged gusts against Shane's lips. His eyes, dark and dilated with desire, searched Shane's face, confusion and a flicker of irritation replacing the heat. "What?"

"We need to talk." Shane's voice was breathless but firm. He extracted himself from Rozanov's embrace, putting a precious foot of space between them. The absence of contact felt like stepping into a cold void. "We have to talk. Before... before this goes any further. It can't happen like last time."

Ilya's jaw tightened. The switch from passionate to frustrated was instantaneous. He raked a hand through his hair, his gaze sweeping over Shane with simmering intensity. "Fine. Talk," he said, the word a flat command.

Shane's heart hammered against his ribs. He walked a few unsteady steps into the living room, needing to move. The apartment was predictably stunning- all clean lines, expensive art, and a breathtaking view of the skyline- but it felt like a cage. He turned to face Rozanov, who had followed him, a predator waiting.

"In Mexico," Shane began, the words sticking in his dry throat. "I didn't tell you everything."

Ilya said nothing. He just watched, his stillness more unnerving than any movement.

“Chris Hill. He... he kissed me. At a bar. I was drunk, and he just... did it.” Shane forced himself to hold Ilya’s glacial gaze. “I turned my head away. I pushed him off. It lasted two seconds. But it happened.”

A muscle ticked in Ilya’s jaw. His hands, which had been loose at his sides, slowly curled into fists.

“And then later,” Shane continued, getting up and starting to pace back and forth, the words rushing out now, a toxic stream he had to fully empty. “I was a mess. I kept drinking. I was trying to forget everything, and... and a stranger. An alpha. He... he gave me a blowjob.”

The air in the room turned to iron.

“I was so out of it. I don’t remember saying yes. I don’t remember too much of *anything* clearly except the feeling of... of it happening, and feeling disgusted, and frozen. I didn’t want it. Not like that.” He was pleading now, needing him to understand the distinction. “But it still happened.”

The silence that followed was absolute, so deep Shane could hear the blood roaring in his own ears. Ilya’s face underwent a terrifying transformation. All the heat, the irritation, the intensity- it drained away, leaving behind a blank, terrifying slate. His eyes, fixed on Shane, saw right through him.

He turned, slowly, as if in a trance. His gaze landed on a tall, abstract crystal vase on a side table, a cold, sharp modern sculpture. Without a word, without a change in expression, he picked it up.

Then he spun and hurled it with the full, vicious force of a slapshot across his own living room.

It wasn’t aimed at Shane. It was aimed at annihilation. The vase sailed several feet past Shane’s head and exploded into the massive, floor-to-ceiling mirror that dominated one wall. The sound was catastrophic- a shocking, violent symphony of shattering glass that rained down in a glittering avalanche onto the marble hearth.

Shane cried out, flinching and throwing his arms up as if the devastation could reach him.

Ilya wasn’t done. A guttural, inhuman sound tore from his throat. He turned to the heavy, low-slung coffee table- a solid slab of polished walnut. He hooked his powerful hands under its edge and, with a roar of pure rage, heaved. The table flipped end over end, crashing onto its side with a sound like a bone breaking, skidding and gouging a deep scar into the pristine hardwood floor. Suddenly, Shane was yanked up by his arm and Ilya dragged him down the hallway and shoved him into a room, slamming the door closed and leaving Shane inside.

Shane pressed his ears to the door hearing glass breaking and heavy objects hitting the walls.

Then, stillness. After several minutes, Shane slowly opened the door and silently walked out.

Ilya stood in the center of the wreckage, his back to Shane, his shoulders heaving. The destructive fury had been terrifying in its precision and ferocity. Slowly, he turned. The calm on his face now was the most frightening thing Shane had ever seen. It was the quiet of a deep, frozen lake, hiding unimaginable currents beneath.

Shane stepped into the edge of the room, his hands clasped tightly in front of him, his eyes fixed on the floor between his feet. Ilya stood across the room, his arms crossed over his chest, his expression stormy. The air in the room was thick with tension, the scent of Ilya's anger heavy and overwhelming. Shane took a deep breath, steeling himself for what he was about to say.

The room went silent for a long moment. Ilya's expression cold, his eyes narrowing as he stared at Shane. "You let someone else touch you, Shane," he said, his voice quiet and dangerous. "After I claimed you. After I told you that you were mine."

Shane nodded, his eyes filling with tears. "I know. I know it was wrong. I'm sorry, Ilya. I didn't mean for it to happen. I was confused and scared, and I made a mistake."

Ilya's expression turned dark, his hands clenching into fists at his sides. "A *mistake*," he repeated, his voice mocking. "You think this is a mistake, Hollander? You think I'm just some lovesick puppy, crying over a lost toy?"

Shane flinched at the words, his voice barely a whisper. "No. No, I don't think that."

"Fuck!" Ilya shouted, his voice loud and angry as he kicked over a chair, sending it crashing to the floor. "You think you can just tell me this?"

Shane shrank back, his eyes wide with fear as he watched Ilya's anger. "I...I don't know. I just...I wanted to be honest with you. I didn't want to keep it from you anymore."

Ilya turned back to him, his expression dark and dangerous. "Honest," he repeated, his voice mocking. "You think this is honest, Hollander? You think telling me about someone else's hands on you, someone else's mouth on you, is honest?"

Shane nodded, his voice barely a whisper. "I...I thought you should know. I thought you deserved the truth."

Ilya's expression turned cold, his voice dropping to a low, dangerous growl. "The truth? The truth is that you betrayed me."

Shane's heart pounded in his chest, fear and something else, something dark and forbidden, coiling in his stomach. He knew he should be scared, should be running for the door, but all he could feel was the stress leaving his body, the relief of having confessed, of having finally told Rozanov the truth.

Shane flinched as Ilya advanced on him, but he didn't back down. He stood his ground, his expression turning defensive. "Ilya, wait," he said, his voice steady despite the fear coursing

through him. "I didn't do anything wrong."

Rozanov stopped in his tracks, his eyes widening in shock. "What do you mean, you didn't do anything wrong?" he growled. "You let someone else touch you, Hollander. You let someone else's hands on you, someone else's mouth on you. How is that not wrong?"

Shane shook his head, his expression turning stubborn. "Because we're not mates!. We only slept together once. Our relationship isn't defined. I didn't do anything wrong."

Ilya's expression turned dark, his voice dropping to a low, dangerous growl. "You think this is about definitions, Hollander? You think this is about labels?"

Shane held his ground, his expression steady. "I think it's about honesty. And I was honest with you. I told you what happened."

Ilya's eyes flashed with anger, his hands clenching into fists at his sides. "You think this is about communication, huh? You think telling me about someone else's hands on you, someone else's mouth on you, is good communication?"

Shane shook his head, his voice firm. "I think it's about respect. I think it's about trusting me to make my own decisions. And I made a mistake, but it doesn't change anything. We're not mates. We're not even in a relationship. I didn't do anything wrong."

Ilya's expression turned cold, his voice dropping to a low, dangerous growl. "You think you can just decide what's wrong and what's not, Hollander? You think you can just decide what we are to each other?"

Shane hesitated, then shook his head. "No. I don't think that. But I think I deserve to make my own decisions. I think I deserve to have a say in what happens to my body. And I didn't do anything wrong. I don't need permission to go on vacation with my friends. You think I haven't seen you go out with men and women hanging all over you?"

Ilya's expression didn't change at Shane's words. The cold, frozen calm held, but his eyes, those arctic blue chips darkened, not with heat, but with a profound, chilling understanding. He took a slow, deliberate step forward, his boots crunching on the debris.

"You think this is about permission?" Ilya's voice was a soft, deadly scrape. "About definitions on paper? No, *zaychik*. This is about fact. You are an omega. I am the alpha who took you. That is the only definition that lives in your blood, whether you admit it to your boring little mind or not. You are mine until I decide I don't want you anymore."

He closed the final distance until he was looming over Shane, the scent of his rage now mingled with something else: a dark, possessive certainty. "You can say we are nothing. Your body knows the truth. It remembers. It *wants*. And it will learn its place."

Shane's heart hammered, pure rage gathering force. "Fuck-"

“You came here to be honest,” Ilya interrupted, his voice dropping to that low, terrifying growl. “So be honest now. You look at the wreckage of my home, and you tell me you feel nothing. You tell me my anger means *nothing* to you.”

Shane’s gaze flickered to the shattered mirror, the overturned table, the glittering, violent evidence of Ilya’s fury. He couldn’t lie. A treacherous, shameful heat coiled in his gut. It *did* mean something. It meant everything. It was proof, terrible and magnificent, that he mattered this much.

Seeing the conflict on Shane’s face, Ilya smiled. It was a cold, cruel curve of his lips. “There is your honesty.” He brought a hand up, not to strike, but to curl his fingers loosely around the base of Shane’s throat, his thumb resting on his pounding pulse. “Now, you will show your respect. And you will learn the cost of your... independence.”

He applied the slightest pressure, not choking, but guiding, turning Shane and walking him backward until his knees hit the arm of the heavy, overturned sofa. “On your knees.”

The command brooked no argument. It vibrated in the air, alpha-rough and absolute. Shane’s mind screamed a weak protest, but his body, traitorously, was already moving, sinking down onto the plush rug amidst the fine dust of broken glass.

Ilya unbuckled his belt with sharp, efficient movements, the rasp of leather and metal loud in the silent room. He didn’t hurry. He made a show of it, his eyes locked on Shane’s face, watching every flinch, every rapid blink. He freed himself, already thick and heavy, and took a step forward.

“You want to claim your body is your own?” Rozanov murmured, his voice deceptively soft. “Then use it. Use your mouth to apologize for letting another use what is mine.”

He didn’t push. He waited. The silent command was worse.

A sob caught in Shane’s throat, part terror, part something horrifyingly like arousal. His hands trembled as he reached out. The act felt less like sex and more like a ritual of surrender. He leaned forward, his lips parting.

The moment he made contact, Ilya’s hand fisted in his hair. Not to pull him closer, but to hold him in place, to control the pace. “Wider,” he growled, and then he pushed forward, not allowing Shane any tentative exploration.

It was rough, impersonal, and punishing. Rozanov set a brutal, driving rhythm, using his grip on Shane’s hair to steer him, his hips pumping shallow, sharp thrusts that hit the back of Shane’s throat. Shane gagged, tears springing to his eyes as he struggled to breathe through his nose, his own hands coming up to clutch uselessly at Ilya’s thighs.

“That’s it,” Ilya gritted out, his own breath becoming ragged. “Take it. This is what honesty earns you. This is taste of your freedom.”

There was no real pleasure in it for Shane, only a suffocating, overwhelming sensation of being used, claimed, and rewritten. The intimacy of the act was stripped away, leaving only

the raw mechanics of dominance and submission. Yet, underneath the burn in his throat and the panic for air, that same dark, secret part of him thrilled at the absolute loss of control, at the sheer magnitude of Ilya's possession.

Ilya's movements became more erratic, his grip tightening painfully. A low, warning groan rumbled in his chest. With a final, deep thrust, he held himself there, pulsing, as his release flooded Shane's mouth. Shane swallowed convulsively, the bitter taste another layer of his punishment.

Ilya pulled out, his hand still tangled in Shane's hair, forcing his head back. Shane gasped, strings of saliva and cum clinging to his lips and chin, his eyes watery and dazed.

For a long moment, Ilya just looked down at him, at the ruined, obedient picture he made on his knees. The cold anger in his eyes had banked, replaced by a grim, satisfied exhaustion. He released Shane's hair with a slight push, letting him sway back onto his heels.

"The car is waiting," Ilya said, his voice flat, all emotion spent. He tucked himself away, fastening his belt with the same efficient coldness. "You will go back to your hotel and think about how we will move past this."

He turned and walked away, leaving Shane kneeling in the wreckage, the taste of him still stark on Shane's tongue, the lesson carved deep into his bones. The truth was out. And it had cost him a very high price.

The game itself passed in flashes of adrenaline. Boston fans somehow more unbearable than usual. Every hit between him and Ilya felt intentional. Every stare lingered slightly too long. The cameras loved it. Of course they did. The tension, the rivalry. The impossible chemistry neither of them hid particularly well anymore. Late in the third, after a brutal board battle, Ilya had leaned closer under the guise of repositioning.

"You will come back to my house tonight," he muttered low enough only Shane heard as the referees came to break them apart.

Shane just nodded, the warmth spreading embarrassingly through him. "Yes."

The certainty in his voice settled something uneasy in Shane. "I will send same car"

Because despite everything, despite the fear sitting heavy in his chest, he wanted this too.

He wanted answers. Wanted honesty. Wanted to stop feeling like something unfinished lived between them.

After media finally ended, after locker room cleanup and endless post-game obligations, Shane found the black SUV waiting exactly where promised outside the hotel.

The drive now was finished too quickly. Instead of dropping him by the front door again, They drove around to the back and in front of a smaller house.

That made sense since he was sure Rozanov had destroyed most of his living room.

He should have ran, but he needed to face this. He wasn't a child anymore to run away from his problems. If they needed to end whatever 'this' was, he would face it head on and have it be the end.

If they were to continue this thing at all, they needed to establish some type of boundary. The door opened and Ilya was there, an icepack in his hand. They stood close to each other for a while before Rozanov offered him a seat and the ice. "For your ribs. You took that last hit full on."

Shane nodded and was silently thankful for the ice on the said ribs. Shane's throat tightened. "Why am I here?"

Ilya exhaled once through his nose. Low. trying to establish control.

"You did nothing wrong." His thumb moved once against Shane's skin. "Nothing I'm sorry for what I did today."

The certainty of it nearly undid something inside Shane immediately.

"I should not have done that," Rozanov began, the words coming out in a low, strained rush. He didn't look at Shane; his gaze was fixed on a point on the wall past Shane's shoulder. "What I did..." He finally forced his eyes to Shane's face, and the raw shame in them was a shocking, vulnerable thing. "It was not... it was not right."

Shane said nothing. His arms were crossed tightly over his chest, a defensive barricade. The relief of confession had been incinerated by what followed. He waited.

Ilya's jaw worked. He looked like a man being physically torn apart by the words. "My anger... at what you told me... it was real. It is real." He was careful not to move, not to crowd him. "But it was mine to carry. Not yours to fix. Not like that. Using my strength, my... my position... to make you..." He trailed off, unable to say it. A muscle ticked violently in his cheek. "It was cowardice. It was cruel. I used your body when you were not willing." Shane could see him trying to find and use his words carefully.

The admission landed like a stone in the quiet room. It was the core of it, the unforgivable parallel he had drawn with his own hands.

"I wanted to break you," Ilya whispered, the confession so quiet it was almost inaudible. "To break your, your... your idea that you could be separate from me. To make you feel as

shattered as I felt.” He finally looked down, his shoulders bowing under an invisible weight. “I disgust myself.”

Silence stretched, tense and fragile. Shane’s own anger was a cold, hard knot in his stomach, but beneath it, he could feel the sharp edges of Ilya’s pain. They cut in different directions.

“You don’t get to do that,” Shane said, his own voice quiet but clear. “You don’t get to be the judge, jury, and executioner for my mistakes. We are not mates. That isn’t how this works.”

“I know.” Ilya’s response was immediate, defeated. “I know this. In here,” he tapped his temple, “I know this. But in here,” he pressed a fist against his sternum, the gesture violent in its despair, “it does not matter. It feels the same. The thought of another alpha....” He shook his head, a sharp, pained motion. “It makes me animal. A stupid animal with no control. For that, I have no excuse.”

He took a slow, deliberate step back, increasing the space between them, making himself smaller. “I am not asking for your forgiveness, Hollander. I have no right to it. I am telling I am sorry. And I am telling you it will not happen again. If you want to leave me, I will leave. If you want to never see me after today, I will accept this. Choice is yours.”

He stood there, waiting for his sentence. The powerful, terrifying alpha from this morning was gone. In his place was a man standing in the ruins of his own honor, offering Shane the one thing he’d never truly given him before: a real, unimpeded choice when it came to them.

Shane looked at him - the exhaustion, the shame, the careful distance. The memory of the kiss that had started the morning, the desperate, hungry one before everything went to hell, flashed in his mind. The complexity of it all was a tangled knot he couldn’t unravel now.

“I should never want to speak to you again.” Shane said finally, his tone flat.

Ilya nodded once, a sharp dip of his chin. “Da.”

Another nod. Ilya turned toward the door, his movements heavy. His hand was on the handle when Shane spoke again.

“Rozanov.”

He stopped, but didn’t turn.

“Your apology,” Shane said. “It’s a start. But it’s just a start. It doesn’t fix what’s broken.”

Ilya’s head bowed lower. “I know,” he said. The silence was different this time. It wasn’t filled with the echo of shattering glass or choking humiliation. It was thick with the echo of an apology that had, against all odds, felt real. Shane stood frozen in the center of the room, the cold knot of anger in his stomach slowly unraveling into a confusing, weary ache.

Ilya was still there. He hadn’t gone to the elevators. He looked braced for a blow. “I cannot leave it like this,” he said, his voice still rough. “it will be like poison if we leave it like this.”

Shane wanted to say no. To tell him he’d had his chance to talk. But the hollowed-out look on Ilya’s face, the visible struggle, held him back. He sat down on the sofa.

This time, Ilya walked over turned to face him. He sat down next to Shane but still gave him space. He stood, hands deliberately held open at his sides, a conscious effort at non-threat. “The things you said. Before. That we are not mates. That it was only once.” He swallowed hard. “This is truth, as you see it?”

Shane hugged his arms around himself, his gaze dropping to the carpet. It was easier to talk to the floor. “It’s the truth, period. That’s what it was.”

“Look at me, Hollander.”

The command was there, but softer, frayed at the edges. Shane’s eyes flicked up, then away.

Ilya closed the distance between them, but slowly. He didn't grab. He lifted his hand and gently, firmly, took hold of Shane's chin, tilting his face up until their eyes met. His touch was unyielding, but not painful. It was an anchor. "Here. Look at me when you say these things. Do not hide from them. Do not hide from me."

Trapped in that blue gaze, Shane felt his defenses waver. It was terrifying, this forced connection. "Let go."

"I will. When you use your words. Properly." Ilya's thumb stroked once, a barely-there caress on his jaw. "You said it was only once. A single night. But you carry it. I see it in you. So do I. So why do you say it means nothing, just push me away?"

The directness, the physical insistence on eye contact, short-circuited Shane's usual retreat into mumbled deflection. The truth, pressured and hot, bubbled up. "Because its hard, Rozanov!" The words burst out, sharper than he intended. "You have no idea how hard it is for me to be like this. You dont know how it feel to have this secret that is eating me up inside. I dont know if one day I'm going to wake up and have everything taken away from me. If one day someone finds out about us or what I am.."

Ilya's gaze intensified, searching his face. The anger wasn't there. It was a painful, focused curiosity. "You think I haven't thought the same?"

"What else was I supposed to think? I saw magazines with you going out like nothing." Shane shot back, trying to twist his chin away. Ilya's hold tightened, just enough to keep him there.

"You were supposed to think I was giving you space you clearly needed. That I was... managing my own... feelings." Ilya's admission was gruff. "It was a mistake. A bad one. I see this now." He said the word as if it tasted foreign. "I will work on this."

Hearing his own chaotic feelings framed so clearly, so accurately, was disarming. Shane's struggle ceased. He just stared, exposed. "Yes."

Ilya's breath left him in a slow sigh. The fight seemed to drain from his own posture. "And then Hill. And then the stranger." He said it not as an accusation, but as a grim timeline of cause and effect. "You are right. We were not mates. We had no promises. But Hollander..." His thumb stroked his jaw again, the gesture now unmistakably tender. "You must see. For me, from the moment I had you, the promise was made. In here." He tapped his own chest with his free hand. "I did not know how to tell you. I only knew how to... want. And then to be angry when you wouldn't talk to me."

"I'm not a thing to be owned," Shane whispered, the heat gone from his voice, leaving only exhausted conviction.

"Nyet," Ilya agreed quietly, finally releasing his chin. His hand fell away. "You are not. But you are a man I want. There is a difference. One I have behaved very badly in forgetting." He took a half-step back, giving Shane space. "So. We start again. From here.. You tell me what you need. Truly. And I will try... I will *try*... to listen. Not as an alpha who owns you. But as a man who wants you."

Shane rubbed his jaw where Ilya's fingers had been. The phantom pressure felt like a brand, but a clarifying one. The fog of hurt and anger was beginning to clear, leaving a daunting, empty landscape where they had to build something new.

"I need you to not shut down," Shane said, the words feeling clumsy but necessary. "I need you to not use your strength or your... your alpha-ness... to scare me into agreement. Even if you're angry."

Ilya nodded, a single, sharp dip of his head. "Da. I can try this."

"And I..." Shane took a deep breath, forcing himself to meet Ilya's eyes without the physical prompt. "I will try to say the hard thing to your face. Before I run or... or let someone else distract me from it."

A ghost of something- approval, relief, hope flickered in Ilya's eyes. "This is good deal."

They stood there, two warriors in the aftermath, surveying the emotional wreckage. The path wasn't clean. The game loomed, a collision waiting to happen. But for the first time, they were standing on the side, looking at the same cracks, both willing to see where this could go.

The prepaid phone felt like an extension of his hand now. The first call had been to the man in Moscow. The second was to a different kind of specialist, one who operated in the digital shadows.

"The bar on Calle Humboldt. Four weeks ago, night of the twenty-second. Exterior and interior CCTV," Ilya stated, his voice devoid of inflection as he drove through the Boston night. "I need a face. A man who stepped out with an omega around 1:30 AM. The omega was drunk- dark hair, Asian, athletic build. Find the man."

The cost was higher. The process took forty-eight hours. An encrypted file arrived: grainy black-and-white stills of a man in his forties, leaving the bar's back alley exit alone, adjusting his clothes. A few clearer frames from a traffic camera a block away gave a license plate. From there, it was simple. A name. An address. A flight attendant connected out of San Diego with a layover pattern that had placed him in Puerto Vallarta that night.

Ilya's schedule was a weapon. Boston played in Anaheim in five days. It was perfect.

The logistics were handled by the first contact, the man who understood erasure. The day before the game, Ilya stood in a sterile, rented storage unit in an industrial park near Long Beach. The air smelled of concrete dust and rust. In the center of the empty space sat a single metal chair. He waited.

The door rattled up. Two large, silent men ushered in a confused, then terrified, flight attendant. He was shoved into the chair. One man zip-tied his wrists behind the back of the chair, the other his ankles to the chair legs. They left without a word. The door rolled down with a final, metallic thunder.

The man's eyes bulged, darting around the bleak space before landing on Ilya, who leaned against the far wall, arms crossed. He was dressed all in black—thermal shirt, sweatpants, no logos.

“What is this? Who are you? The interview -” the man stammered, his voice heavy with an accent and high with panic.

Ilya pushed off the wall. He didn't speak. He walked to a duffel bag in the corner and unzipped it. He pulled out a roll of heavy-duty duct tape.

“Please, you've got the wrong man! I have money-”

Ilya tore a strip of tape with a sharp, ripping sound that echoed in the unit. In three swift strides, he was in front of the man. He slapped the tape over his mouth, silencing the pleas. He stepped back, studying his work. The man's muffled screams were now just a weak, nasal hum.

Only then did Ilya speak, his voice a soft, deadly monotone. “You were in a bar in Puerto Vallarta. You found an omega in a corner. He was crying. You put your mouth on him.”

The man's eyes widened impossibly further, pure recognition and horror dawning. He shook his head violently, a frantic, negative jerk.

Ilya's expression didn't change. He reached back into the duffel and pulled out a crowbar. He hefted it in his palm.

“You did not ask. He could not consent.” Ilya took a step closer. “He belongs to me.”

The first swing was for principle. It cracked against the man's ribs. A choked scream fought against the tape. The second swing was for the memory Hollander carried. It shattered the man's collarbone with a wet, crunchy snap.

What followed was not rage. It was a grim, surgical dismantling. Ilya worked with the cold efficiency of a mechanic removing parts. The sap rose and fell, a brutal metronome. Strikes to the limbs- *thwack*- the knees- *crunch*- the forearms- *snap*. The man's body jerked and shuddered in the chair, his screams becoming wet, bubbling sounds behind the tape, then fading to whimpers, then to shallow, hitched breaths.

Ilya didn't target the head. Not yet. This was about pain, not immediate oblivion. This was about imprinting a lesson on every nerve ending.

Finally, the man hung slack in his bonds, head lolling, consciousness flickering. Blood soaked his shirt, dripped from his nose, pooled beneath the chair. Ilya dropped the now bloody crowbar. It landed with a dull thud.

He crouched in front of the broken man, grabbing a fistful of his hair to yank his head up. The man's eyes were glazed, unfocused.

"If you live," Ilya whispered, his face inches from the man's, "you will change your name. You will leave the country. You will never speak of that night. You will see an omega on the street and you will cross to the other side. If you do not, I will know. And I will finish this."

He released the man's hair, letting his head drop. He walked to the duffel, pulled out a towel, and meticulously wiped his hands. He tossed the towel onto the man's lap. He then retrieved a cheap, disposable phone and placed it on the concrete floor, just within the man's limited sight if he regained focus. "The door will unlock in one hour. The phone has one number. Call for an ambulance, or bleed out here. Your choice."

Ilya zipped the duffel, slung it over his shoulder, and walked to the rolling door. He didn't look back. He emerged into the California twilight, the salt air a stark contrast to the iron-and-copper scent now staining the storage unit behind him.

He drove to the team hotel, showered, dressed in a suit. At the arena the next night, he scored two goals and an assist in a 4-1 win over the Ducks. He played a clean, physical game. He was focused, brilliant, untouchable.

In the quiet of his hotel room after, he looked at his knuckles—unmarked, clean. He thought of the storage unit, the chair, the precise, rhythmic sound of the sap. He thought of Shane, who was now, in every way that mattered to Ilya's world, cleansed. The past had been cauterized. The future was his to shape.

He slept soundly for the first time in weeks. One more to go.

"It's Ivan's friend," Ilya said, his voice low and flat, using the old code. "The bar on Calle Humboldt. In Puerto Vallarta. The one with the blue neon scorpion."

A pause. The sound of a lighter flicking, a long inhale. "I know it."

"I want it gone. A complete loss. Electrical. Make it look like the wiring finally gave up. Tomorrow night, after closing. No one inside."

"Cost is twenty. Half now."

"Ten now. Ten after I see the news reports. The scorpion must be in the rubble." Ilya's tone brooked no negotiation. It was the voice of a man stating facts.

Another pause, then a sigh of acquiescence. "Wire the details to the usual account. It will be a smoking hole."

"Good." Ilya ended the call, powered off the phone, and placed it in the glove compartment. He felt nothing. It was a logistical task completed.

The other target required a more personal touch.

Chris Hill was not difficult to find. His routines were those of a professional athlete during the season: predictable, and public. Ilya observed for three days. The upscale gym in Back Bay where Hill trained at noon. The trendy coffee shop he visited afterwards. The bars in Seaport he frequented at night, always with a rotating cast of acquaintances, never alone for long. Ilya watched, a shadow in a rental car with tinted windows, his patience infinite.

He needed him alone. He needed him afraid.

The opportunity came on the fourth night. Hill, perhaps overconfident after a few drinks, decided to take a shortcut through a dimly lit parking garage near his condo, texting as he walked, headphones in.

Ilya moved like a current of cold air. He fell into step behind him, silent in soft-soled shoes. He'd chosen the weapon carefully: a heavy metal tube, dense, familiar, final. It felt right in his hands.

He tapped Hill on the shoulder.

Hill turned, annoyance flashing across his features, which then crumpled into confusion, then dawning, "Rozanov? What the f—"

Ilya didn't speak. He swung the bat in a short, vicious, horizontal arc. It connected with a sickening, wet *CRACK* against the side of Hill's left knee. Hill started to scream, a high, shattered sound, and collapsed, his leg buckling out at a grotesque angle.

Before the scream could fully escape, Ilya was on him, a knee planted in the center of his chest, driving the air from his lungs. He leaned down, his face inches from Hill's, which was contorted in agony and panic.

“You kissed him,” Ilya said, his voice a calm, conversational monotone that was infinitely more terrifying than a shout.

“What? Who? I don’t- ” Hill gagged, trying to suck in air.

Ilya shifted his weight, eliciting another choked cry. “Shane Hollander. In Mexico. You put your mouth on what is mine.” He said it as simply as stating the weather. “You touched him.”

“It was nothing! A drunk mistake! He pushed me away!” Hill babbled, tears of pain and fear streaking his face.

“I know he did,” Ilya said, almost gently. “This is not for his actions. This is for yours. For the thought. For the attempt.” He raised the bat again. Hill threw his arms up, sobbing.

“Please! I’m sorry! I’ll never go near him, I swear!”

“Nyet,” Ilya agreed. “You will not.” He brought the pipe down, not on Hill’s head, but on his other leg, just above the ankle. The sound this time was drier, more final. Hill’s body arched off the concrete in a silent, breathless seizure before he crumpled, whimpering.

Ilya stood up, looking down at the broken man. He felt a remote, clinical satisfaction. A problem was being corrected. He leaned the bat against the wall and crouched again, pulling a terrified Hill up by his collar until their eyes met.

“Listen very carefully,” Ilya murmured, his breath ghosting over Hill’s face. “You will tell the doctors you fell down the stairs. You are a drunk. You are clumsy. If one word about me, about Shane ever leaves your lips...” He glanced meaningfully at the metal pipe. “I find you again. And I will not stop at your legs. Do you understand the silence I require?”

Hill could only nod, his entire body shuddering with shock and pain.

“Good.” Ilya released him, letting his head thump back on the concrete. He picked up the pipe, pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, and meticulously wiped the handle clean of his prints. He dropped the cloth on Hill’s chest.

“Remember this one chance,” he said one last time, his voice fading as he walked back into the shadows of the garage, leaving the two sources of his rage-one destined for ash, the other for a long, painful convalescence-behind him. The world felt cleaner. More in order. Shane’s past had been edited, his future threats neutralized. It was, in Ilya’s mind, the purest form of an apology he was capable of making.

Now that his revenge was complete, he could go with a clear head to talk to his little omega.

Chapter 13: Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

So sorry for the delay on posting this one. I spiked a fever and then my laptop died. New laptop thanks to husband and this chapter is thanks to my cat laying with me while I type and my gay bestie cheering me on with the smut tips lol.

Some of your reviews have me straight cackling. Love you all.

Next chapter is typed. It's an important one for the plot. I'll reread it one more time then post-either tonight before bed or tomorrow morning.

Chapter Notes

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

Shane woke up to a text from Rozanov.

That should not have surprised him anymore. It should not have done anything to him at all, really, considering everything that had happened between them. The game, the house, the confession, the ruined living room, the apology, the conversation where they both sat too far apart but still somehow closer than they had been in weeks. It all sat heavy in Shane's chest when he opened his eyes, the hotel room dim around him, Hayden still asleep in the other bed with one arm hanging off the mattress. Over the past couple of weeks, they had been communicating better. He didn't let himself think too deeply on how his instincts had taken over when Rozanov had treated him roughly. Whether he liked it or not wasn't the point. He needed to be respected and he thought they were getting to know each other better so he would not have a problem expressing that next time they were face to face.

Shane reached blindly for his phone before he fully let himself think.

IGR: Are you awake?

Shane stared at it for a few seconds, thumb hovering over the screen.

S: Unfortunately.

The reply came almost immediately.

IGR: Ribs?

Shane glanced down at himself. The bruise from the game had darkened overnight, spreading ugly and tender along his side. It annoyed him that Rozanov had noticed. It annoyed him more that some part of him liked being noticed.

S: Just sore.

IGR: You should move faster.

S: He should be less massive.

IGR: Small omega cute like a kitten.

Shane snorted quietly into the dim room and immediately pressed his lips together, glancing toward Hayden to make sure he hadn't woken him. He hadn't. Good. Shane rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling for a moment, phone resting against his chest, heart doing something stupid and traitorous behind his ribs. They were not fixed. Not even close. Whatever had broken in Boston had not magically repaired itself because Rozanov said sorry and Shane decided not to walk away. But somehow the apology had shifted something. The anger was still there. The fear too. The memory of what had happened still sat between them, sharp and ugly, but so did the choice Ilya had given him afterward. Real choice. Awkward, imperfect, probably still too late, but real.

His phone buzzed again.

IGR: Did you sleep?

Shane swallowed.

S: A little.

IGR: Bad dreams?

S: No.

IGR: Liar.

Shane rolled his eyes.

S: You don't know that.

IGR: I know many things about you.

S: Asshole.

IGR: Da.

Shane smiled despite himself, which was exactly the problem. Rozanov could be terrifying, impossible, possessive to a degree that should have sent Shane running directly into witness protection, he knew things about Shane that he shouldn't, and then somehow he would text one stupid little word and Shane would feel warmth bloom low in his chest like an idiot. He hated that. He hated how quickly his body and mind settled when Rozanov reached for him, even through a phone screen. He hated that the silence between them had felt like punishment and now the steady return of texts felt like something being carefully rebuilt brick by brick.

They did not talk about Boston again. Not directly. Instead, Ilya complained about his coach. Shane complained about the hotel food. Ilya asked what he ate for breakfast and called him pathetic when Shane admitted he had only had a banana and coffee. Shane told him he sounded like a Russian grandmother. Ilya said Russian grandmothers were powerful women and Shane should respect them. Somehow, by the time Montreal's bus left for the airport, Shane had actually ordered eggs because apparently being harassed into protein by a man who had destroyed his own coffee table counted as romance now.

It continued like that for days. Not normal exactly, because nothing about them had ever been normal, but steadier. Safer in small increments. Calls happened late, usually after practice or games, sometimes for hours, sometimes only a few minutes before one of them had to sleep. Shane learned that Ilya hated fruit unless it was baked into pastry, considered most American television "loud nonsense," liked black-and-white movies because the English was slower, and had once broken a teammate's nose in practice and still considered it "a misunderstanding." Ilya learned that Shane liked tea more than coffee but drank coffee when tired because it made him feel like a real adult, that Yuna still managed his calendar when his schedule got too chaotic, that he hated mushrooms with an intensity Ilya found unreasonable, and that Hayden could talk for forty straight minutes without requiring oxygen.

IGR: You are too skinny.

S: I am literally a professional athlete.

IGR: Skinny professional athlete.

S: You are banned from commenting on my body.

IGR: I like your body.

Shane nearly walked into a wall outside the practice facility.

S: That is not the point.

IGR: Is good point.

S: You're impossible.

IGR: You still answer.

That was also the problem.

He did still answer.

Every time.

Somewhere in Boston, Ilya noticed that too.

He noticed everything now- something between them had switched and had become a problem because if Ilya thought he was obsessed before, it was reaching new heights now. Hollander's practice schedule. Travel days. Morning skates. When his answers got shorter because he was tired. When he used sarcasm to hide nerves. When he said "fine" or "sure" and meant anything except fine. Ilya had always been observant on and off the ice, trained to read shoulders, hips, stick position, hesitation, weakness. Reading Hollander was different. Harder. More fun and engaging. More satisfying. There were no clean rules, no obvious systems, no coach explaining what to do when an omega looked at you like he wanted to stay but expected punishment if he did.

So Ilya began looking for rules.

First, he hired the English tutor.

That decision had been irritatingly practical. His self taught English was good enough for interviews, contracts, coaches, teammates, women, men, arguments, and threats. It was not good enough for Shane. Important things became too blunt in his mouth. Feelings came out sharp-edged, half-translated, stripped of the parts that mattered most. In Russian, Ilya could feel exactly what he meant. In English, everything became mine, stay, don't go, I'm sorry. Useful words, maybe. Not enough words. Not precise enough for someone like Hollander, who flinched at the wrong kind of force and still needed directness like oxygen.

The tutor, Olga, was a woman in her fifties with silver hair, sharp glasses, and absolutely no fear of him.

"You speak understandable English," she told him during their first session. "Not natural English."

Ilya stared at her.

"I speak fine."

"Yes, fine. But you are smarter than that. You shouldn't just want 'fine'."

He narrowed his eyes.

"That is true."

She gave him reading assignments. Articles. essays. Fiction. Dialogue exercises. She told him his phrasing carried unintended aggression. He told her sometimes the aggression was intended. She said that was exactly the problem.

The omega book had been an accident.

Mostly.

He found it in a bookstore after Meredith suggested he read longer nonfiction in English. He had intended to buy something normal, maybe a book about leadership or sports psychology-like the books Hollander read, something boring enough to look respectable on his coffee

table. Instead, he saw the title tucked between relationship psychology and social development.

Understanding Omega Attachment in Modern Society

He stared at it for a long moment before taking it off the shelf.

It felt ridiculous. It also felt useful.

He bought it with three other books to make the purchase look less suspicious, which was stupid because the cashier did not care. Still, when he got home, he placed the omega book face down beneath a grammar workbook like it was contraband.

He started reading after practice.

The first chapters annoyed him. Too much history. Too much legal background. Too many descriptions of social progress written by someone clearly satisfied with progress happening on paper while real life remained much uglier. That and he needed to go back and forth with the translator app on his phone to understand certain words. Ilya skimmed several sections about the evolution of omega rights, workplace protections, suppressant access, and bonding law until he reached a chapter titled **The Contradiction of Omega Independence**.

Then he stopped skimming.

Modern omegas are frequently misunderstood through extremes. Traditional social models frame omegas as dependents requiring alpha protection and household stability, while contemporary political movements often respond by presenting omegas as indistinguishable from betas in social, emotional, and professional needs. Neither model is accurate. Most omegas interviewed for this study described themselves as existing in the tension between independence and instinct. They wanted careers, friendships, private finances, romantic choice, bodily autonomy, and full social respect. At the same time, many admitted privately that emotional security, physical safety, and reliable provision remained deeply soothing when offered by a trusted partner.

Ilya frowned. Read it again. Then continued.

This desire for care should not be confused with weakness. Several high-achieving omegas in this study owned property, managed businesses, served in high-level professional roles, or supported families financially. None described themselves as helpless. Yet many still spoke of an internal battle around care, often with resentment or shame. One omega surgeon masking as a beta throughout her career said, “I can pay my mortgage. I can manage my staff. I can stand in an operating room for sixteen hours and make life-or-death decisions. But there is still a part of me that wants someone to notice when I am tired before I have to ask. I hate that I want it. I dislike how much it calms me when it happens.”

Ilya leaned back slowly in his chair. Interesting.

Hollander hated help. He hated being managed. He hated anything that looked too much like being handled. But he also softened when someone noticed. He melted, then got embarrassed

about it. He let his mother take the lead in business matters. He rolled his eyes when Ilya asked if he ate, but he answered. Sometimes even sent proof. Sometimes even admitted he was tired.

Ilya turned the page.

Omeegas raised in environments of secrecy or high performance often learn to distrust their own needs. In professional sports, politics, law enforcement, and military environments, disclosed omeegas report intense scrutiny, social isolation, and increased risk of alpha interference. Many choose suppressants not only for biological management but for social survival. One omega athlete interviewed stated, "People say the world has changed. Legally, maybe. But tell a locker room of alpha men what you are and suddenly every interaction changes. They stop seeing the player first."

That one made him stop entirely. Because Hollander was not only afraid, he was correct to be afraid.

The league would eat him alive. Not officially at first maybe since Hollander was insanely popular. Officially, there would be statements about inclusion, privacy, equal opportunity. Unofficially, every interaction would be questioned. Every bad game blamed on hormones. Every alpha opponent watched too closely or not closely enough. Media would circle like vultures. Sponsors would either drop him quietly or package him as something softer, prettier, more marketable. The sport would stop seeing Hollander as the dangerous little bastard who could slice through defenses and start seeing omega first.

Ilya hated the thought. Deeply. *Violently*.

He read on.

Alpha behavior varies considerably between individuals. Public narratives often divide alphas into two categories: civilized protectors or dangerous aggressors. In reality, most alphas display moderate instinct expression and maintain stable social bonds without significant possessive escalation, unless their mate is in heat or bred. However, a smaller subset demonstrates heightened attachment intensity, commonly referred to in behavioral studies as imprinting behavior. These alphas may develop obsessive focus on a chosen partner, disproportionate distress at separation, increased territorial responses, heightened protective instincts, and a tendency toward practical or financial overprovisioning. None of these traits are inherently abusive in isolation. Risk increases when possessiveness is paired with poor emotional regulation, entitlement, or disregard for the omega's autonomy.

Ilya went very still. Then read the paragraph again with growing irritation. Obsessive focus. Disproportionate distress at separation. Territorial responses. Practical overprovisioning. He shut the book, hard.

Judgmental. The book was judgmental. Also possibly correct. He reopened it after five minutes.

Omeegas paired with highly possessive alphas reported mixed outcomes. When the alpha demonstrated consistency, patience, emotional regulation, and respect for choice, omeegas

described feeling intensely protected, deeply wanted, and unusually safe. Omega's naturally seek out the mate who would keep them safe-male omega's above all since when they are in heat, pregnant or pre-and post coitus-they are extremely vulnerable. An omega will not allow an alpha to mate with them who will not be able to offer the needed protections. When the same instincts were expressed through coercion, surveillance, punishment, or intimidation, omegas described fear, resentment, and emotional fragmentation. The distinction was not intensity itself, but trust. Without trust, protection becomes control. Without choice, care becomes captivity.

Ilya closed his eyes.

Memories of Boston came back to him in broken pieces.

Hollander flinching, arguing back. Hollander saying, *I didn't do anything wrong*. His face afterward. His own apology. The disgust he had felt once the anger drained out and left him with the truth of what he had done. His explanation that they weren't really a couple.

Without choice, care becomes captivity.

He hated that sentence.

He switched the cover of the book and kept it close to him after that. Not because he was embarrassed. Because he preferred strategy. There was no need for Hollander to know he was being studied if he had the chance to come over again soon. It migrated around the house over the next week, from kitchen counter to nightstand to the passenger seat of his car. He wrote notes in Russian in the margins whenever something felt relevant.

Too general.

Possibly H.

Not H.

Important.

The word important appeared more than he liked.

Especially in the chapter on courtship.

Courtship, in omega social development, is best understood not as a sequence of romantic gestures but as the creation of reliability. While public examples often emphasize flowers, formal dates, gifts, scent exchange, or family negotiation, the omegas interviewed in this study most frequently defined successful courtship through repeated proof. Does the alpha return after conflict? Do they remain emotionally steady when challenged? Can they provide physical protection without creating fear? Do they offer aftercare? Does their presence reduce the omega's need to remain constantly alert?

Ilya underlined the last sentence.

Then stared at it.

Many omegas resist courtship behaviors even while responding positively to them. This resistance is especially common in omegas who have spent years suppressing instinct, hiding secondary sex traits, or establishing professional identities in environments hostile to omega vulnerability. An omega may mock concern while secretly feeling soothed by it. They may reject financial or practical care on principle while unconsciously testing whether the offer remains available. They may argue against guidance while becoming attached to consistency. These contradictions are not manipulation. They are often the result of instinct colliding with learned self-protection. A true mate, a steady alpha will not give up their pursuit when faced with push back.

Ilya sat back. That was Hollander exactly. Annoyingly exactly.

He reached for his phone before he could think better of it.

IGR: Did you eat dinner or are you pretending coffee is soup?

The reply came faster than expected.

S: I'm a grown adult. Of course I ate dinner.

IGR: You are menace.

S: You like it.

IGR: Unfortunately.

S: Wow. Romantic.

IGR: Eat.

S: You eat.

Ilya looked at the empty kitchen counter.

He had not eaten.

S: Did you seriously ask me if I ate while not eating?

IGR: Different.

S: It is literally the same.

IGR: I am bigger. I survive longer.

S: That is the stupidest alpha thing you've ever said.

IGR: Not true. I say many stupid alpha things.

S: At least you're self-aware.

Ilya stared at the phone, smiling despite himself.

Then got up to make dinner. Because apparently being ordered around by Shane Hollander was tolerable.

The more Ilya read, the more his thoughts shifted from abstract care to logistics. Emotional safety was complicated. Physical protection was simpler. Financial security was simplest of all. Money made things easier. Money closed gaps, eliminated stress, bought privacy, created distance from people who asked too many questions. Money was not love, but it could clear space around love so nothing touched it.

The problem was that Shane was not poor.

Not even close.

The first financial summary Ilya received irritated him.

Shane's rookie contract was respectable but not as strong as Ilya's had been. Boston had wanted Ilya badly enough to overpay early, and his incentives had been negotiated by people who understood leverage. From a hockey perspective, Ilya made more. As it should be.

Then came the rest of the report.

Brand partnerships. Commercial campaigns. Licensing. Sportswear. A small but strategic luxury watch deal. Investment properties. Family-managed holding accounts. Carefully structured savings. Conservative growth strategy. No reckless spending.

Ilya frowned harder the longer he read. Yuna Hollander, obviously. She was terrifying. Efficient. Selective. Protective. Better than half the agents Ilya knew. Shane had the weaker rookie contract, but Yuna had made sure his money worked like a machine. Endorsements chosen for longevity instead of flash. Investments that assumed hockey could end at any time. Properties purchased quietly. Enough that Shane was far more secure than most players twice his age.

This should have pleased him. Instead, it irritated him. Because Ilya had ignored brand deals all year because shoots were annoying. He had turned down watch companies, car companies, sports drinks, skincare, training equipment, and one truly ridiculous cologne campaign after reading three words of the pitch and deciding everyone involved deserved prison.

Now that felt irresponsible. Because keeping an eye on Hollander was not cheap. Security was expensive.

Private drivers. Discreet surveillance around high-risk games. Background checks. Travel adjustments. Information. Quiet solutions. The occasional person who needed to be encouraged to leave certain places permanently. All that and he still provided for his family back home too.

Ilya called his manager.

“What happened?” his manager answered immediately.

“I need more endorsements.”

There was a long silence.

“...Are you dying?”

“No.”

“Are you concussed?”

“No.”

“You hate endorsements.”

“I changed mind.”

Another pause.

“You changed your mind.”

“Yes.”

“About money.”

“Yes.”

“Are you in trouble?”

Ilya narrowed his eyes.

“I am hanging up.”

“Oh my god, it is someone.”

“Stop it with questions. Find me endorsements”

“You already make millions.”

“Not enough.”

“For what?”

Ilya considered the question. Answering honestly felt unwise. “Expenses,” he said.

“What expenses?”

“None of your business expenses.”

His manager inhaled sharply.

“Jesus Christ.”

“Long-term deals,” Ilya continued, ignoring him. “Good money. Not stupid products.”

“You think every product is stupid.”

“Find less stupid.”

“You turned down six figures from a luxury watch company because you said time was a prison.”

“It is.”

“You’re impossible.”

“I pay you.”

“That is unfortunately true.”

When he hung up, Ilya opened the omega book again.

Financial provision remains one of the most culturally contested aspects of omega courtship. Many modern omegas reject traditional dependency models and resent assumptions that their secondary sex makes them financially incapable. However, interviews revealed that even financially independent omegas often responded strongly to proof that a partner could provide if necessary. Importantly, the desire was not always for money itself, but for the reassurance money represented: stability, continuity, and the ability to rest without catastrophic loss of control.

Ilya looked back at Hollander’s financial summary.

Then at the highlighted sentence. Stability. Continuity.

He could do that. He could do that very well. The accountant took longer than expected.

Not because the man was loyal. Because he was nervous and professionally cautious, which Ilya found irritating but not unexpected. There were layers between them, as there always were when Ilya wanted something done quietly. He did not call as himself at first. He did not ask directly. Information moved best through pressure and money, and the right people understood how to make cooperation feel like relief instead of risk.

Eventually, the accountant talked.

Carefully. Not giving everything, but just enough.

Hollander was financially responsible to the point of anxiety. He checked accounts obsessively, worried about injury, overplanned for career collapse, hated debt, carried credit card balances occasionally only because travel and property expenses stacked inconveniently before reimbursements cleared, and checked mortgage rates like they were hostile enemies

plotting against him. The investment properties were good decisions, but they weighed on him. He liked having something separate from hockey. He hated owing anyone anything.

Of course he did.

Ilya transferred the first payment that night.

Small enough not to cause immediate notice.

Then another. Bribing the financial advisors was easy enough and he left it to them to come up with an excuse to tell Hollander if he noticed, just until Ilya figured out what exactly he wanted with the omega.

By the third payment, the accountant sent one nervous message through the chain asking whether Mr. Hollander had approved this activity.

Ilya sent back more money.

The protests stopped.

For two weeks.

Then Shane noticed.

S: Weird question.

Ilya stared at the message.

IGR: You ask many weird questions.

S: Did your contract or team pay for things?

IGR: Need more information.

S: My accountant sounds like he's being held hostage.

Ilya blinked. How unprofessional.

S: And one of my cards is paid off, one of the mortgages got a balloon payment.

Long pause.

S: Rozanov.

Ilya looked at the omega book sitting open on the counter.

Care without humiliation.

Hm.

He typed carefully.

IGR: Maybe bank likes you.

S: My bank does not like me that much.

IGR: Maybe accountant good at job.

S: My accountant keeps avoiding my calls.

Ilya closed his eyes briefly.

Very unprofessional.

IGR: You sound upset.

They went back and forth for a few minutes until Hollander had to leave to go to practice. Ilya was proud of himself for deflecting the conversation.

Svetlana found the book three days later.

She arrived unannounced, which was typical, carrying a bag of food and wearing sunglasses despite it being nearly dark outside. She walked into Ilya's kitchen like she owned it, took one look at the counters, and immediately began judging him.

"Please, you are too enthusiastic-please don't rush at me with all the love and kisses." she said sarcastically when Ilya stayed absorbed in the book.

"I did great you."

"Barely."

She opened his refrigerator, sighed dramatically, and began unpacking containers of food she had apparently brought because she did not trust him to keep anything edible in the house. Ilya let her. Svetlana had been in his life too long to argue with over small things. Family without blood. Annoying without being removable.

Then she saw the book.

It sat beside the coffee maker, facedown but not hidden well enough.

Svetlana picked it up. Read the title. Paused. Then looked at him. "Oh no."

Ilya took the book from her hand. "Do not touch my things."

"You're still chasing the omega." Not asked- stated.

He said nothing, which was answer enough.

Svetlana's expression shifted from teasing to something more serious. She leaned back against the counter and crossed her arms, the food forgotten for the moment. "Ilyushka."

“What?”

“You know what.”

He looked away first, irritated by that.

She sighed. “You never wanted this.”

“This?”

“A relationship. A real one. Long term. Permanent.” She watched him carefully. “You barely tolerated anyone past three months.”

“They became annoying.”

“You become annoying first.”

He frowned.

She ignored him.

“I’m serious. You get bored. You disappear. You don’t explain. You don’t care when they cry. You don’t like being needed.”

That was before though. He had only ever known demand from people. No matter how much he gave to his family, they always wanted more. Never sparing a thought of what *he* needed. No matter how hard tried or how much he gave, it wasn’t ever enough.

Before Hollander, need had always felt like a trap. A demand. A slow narrowing of the world. Everyone wanted more than he felt like giving, and eventually their wanting became irritating. He had never understood why anyone voluntarily folded another person into their daily life. Why they adjusted schedules, answered stupid texts, remembered small details, tolerated moods, apologized when they did not feel like apologizing.

Now he knew Hollander’s schedule better than his own. Now he hired a tutor because he wanted to say things correctly- but only to Hollander. Now he read an omega book in secret like some deranged academic stalker. Now he had bribed an accountant because the thought of Hollander worrying over debt made something unpleasant twist inside him.

Svetlana’s voice softened. “If you are not sure, stop.”

His answer was immediate. “No.”

“You can’t do this halfway with an omega like him.”

“I know.”

“Do you?” she asked. “Because omegas aren’t like our little fuck buddies. They spend so much time surviving that when they finally let someone in, it means something. If you push

and push and push just because you want him, and then decide later that you don't actually want the work, you will destroy him."

The words hit him badly. Because Hollander was not fragile. But he was breakable - there was a difference. Ilya had already seen the cracks.

The way he hid. The way he got overwhelmed. The way he carried fear like discipline. The way he could be stubborn and sharp and brilliant on the ice, then go still when something touched the wrong place inside him. The way he had said, I'm scared I'll hurt him, that he'll hurt me, according to what little Ilya had managed to pry from him later through half-jokes and half-confessions.

"I want to be in his life," Ilya said finally. It was not the answer to her question. It was the only true thing he had.

Svetlana went quiet.

He looked down at the book in his hand.

"I want his mornings. Nights. The small things. I want to know when he eats and when he sleeps and when he is angry and why. I want him to call me when something happens. I want..." He stopped, jaw tightening around the words. "I want to be expected."

Svetlana's expression softened in a way he immediately disliked. "Oh," she said quietly.

"What?"

"You're in trouble."

"I am not."

"You are absolutely in trouble."

He turned away.

She let him, which meant she was feeling merciful.

For now.

Svetlana stayed that night. She changed into one of the oversized hoodies she usually borrowed, and declared that it was too late to drive home. They ate in the living room while some terrible reality show played on television. Ilya hated it immediately. Svetlana insisted this meant he had no taste. He told her all the people on the screen should be arrested. She said that was why it was good television. They kept teasing each other and by midnight, the argument had faded into familiar, comfortable silence.

Svetlana stretched out along the couch with a blanket over her legs, and Ilya moved without thinking. He lowered himself beside her and laid his head in her lap the way he had done a hundred times before, years of habit taking over before pride could interfere.

Svetlana snorted. "This omega has made you more cuddly then ever. You should have me bent over the table by now."

"I am tired."

"You only do this when you're in your head too much."

He closed his eyes. "Quiet."

Her fingers moved into his hair anyway, nails scratching lightly against his scalp in the familiar way that had always made his shoulders loosen despite himself. Outside, Boston was cold and dark, snow threatening but not falling yet. The television droned on in the background, voices rising and falling around some manufactured drama neither of them cared about. For a while, neither spoke.

Then Svetlana said, quieter, "You really don't know what you want?"

Ilya kept his eyes closed. That was easier. "I know pieces."

"Tell me."

He exhaled slowly. "I want him close. I want him safe. I want him to answer when I call. I want him to stop being afraid of wanting me. I want to be in his life so much that when something happens, he thinks of me first." His hand curled loosely against the blanket. "But I don't know what to call this."

Svetlana's fingers slowed.

"That sounds like a relationship."

He grimaced. "Terrible word."

She laughed softly. "Because you are twelve."

"I am not."

"You are emotionally twelve sometimes."

He opened one eye. "You are very rude in my house."

"Someone has to be." Silence settled again, softer now.

Then he said, quieter than before, "I do not know if I know how to do this."

That made her hand pause completely.

The admission sat between them, rawer than he wanted. Ilya hated weakness. Hated saying things that gave someone else room to pity him. But Svetlana only resumed touching his hair, gentle now.

"No," she said. "You don't."

He frowned.

“Not helpful.”

“You don’t know how because you never cared enough to learn. That is different from being unable.”

He looked toward the television without seeing it. “I am unwilling to let him go.”

This time, Svetlana did not joke. “I know. You might need to though.”

“I can’t. Not yet.”

“If it meant his safety? His happiness?”

“If I am bad for him you mean?”

“You might be.”

His jaw tightened.

“But,” she continued, “you might also be the only person stubborn enough to stay and make it worth the sacrifice.”

Svetlana looked down at him, expression thoughtful.

“I think if you two can figure out how to get there without destroying each other first, you will want him as a mate.”

He opened his eyes immediately. “No.”

She smiled. “Yes.”

“No. He said he did not want a mate.”

“You already act half-mated.”

“That is ridiculous.”

“You are working on your english.”

“It is useful since I live here.”

“You’re reading omega psychology.”

“Research.”

Svetlana stared at him.

He paused. Then scowled. “Do not make face. I am being practical.”

She laughed so hard his head shifted in her lap.

He scowled harder.

“You’re hopeless,” she said.

“I am not.”

“You are. And he’s going to yell at you so much.”

That, unfortunately, made him smile.

A little.

“He yells cute.”

“God help him.”

Later, after Svetlana fell asleep in his bed, Ilya stood alone in the kitchen with the omega book open again. He was not reading it anymore, not really. The words blurred together, but one passage remained underlined twice.

Courtship becomes meaningful, official, when care is repeated without erasing choice. The possessive alpha must learn that being chosen is more powerful than taking. The independent omega must learn that accepting care is not the same as surrendering selfhood. Between these two lessons, attachment either fractures or becomes a solid bond.

He stared at that for a long time. Then his phone buzzed.

S: Hayden says I’m being weird because I smiled at my phone. I hope you’re happy.

Ilya smiled.

IGR: Very.

S: You’re the worst.

IGR: You like worst.

S: Unfortunately.

IGR: Did you eat dinner?

S: There it is.

IGR: Answer.

S: Yes, Russian grandma. I ate dinner.

IGR: Good boy.

S: Delete that immediately.

IGR: No.

S: I'm blocking you.

IGR: No you are not.

S: Asshole.

He leaned against the counter, warmth spreading through him in a way that still felt unfamiliar. Not lust. Not victory. Something slower. Something domestic, maybe. He disliked that word almost as much as relationship, but there it was. The ease of it. The wanting. The fact that Shane could be hundreds of miles away and still somehow in the room with him.

IGR: Miss you.

He almost deleted it, but didn't.

The reply took almost a minute.

S: You saw me literally yesterday on Facetime.

Then after a minute:

S: I miss you too though.

Ilya stared at the message.

For a long time.

Then he placed the phone down carefully, like sudden movement might disturb something fragile.

Two weeks later, the schedule offered an opportunity.

Montreal would be in New York for a weekend stretch, Admirals on Friday, Islanders on Sunday, with a Saturday night gap. Boston had only one game on Friday and the rest of the weekend free, which meant Ilya had no logical reason to be in New York. This did not matter. He was desperate to see Hollander face to face.

He texted after practice.

IGR: You are in New York Saturday.

S: Ok...Creepy way to start a conversation.

IGR: I come see you.

S: You play in Boston.

IGR: Friday night. Then free.

S: But I am not free.

IGR: I come.

S: No.

Ilya frowned at the phone.

IGR: No?

S: I have plans.

That annoyed him immediately.

IGR: Cancel.

S: Absolutely not.

IGR: What plans.

S: Hayden got a bunch of us tickets to Hadestown.

Ilya stared.

IGR: What is Hadestown?

S: A Broadway show.

IGR: No.

S: What do you mean no?

IGR: Sounds boring.

S: You listen to Russian sad music for fun.

IGR: Is different.

S: It's not different.

IGR: Cancel.

S: I am not canceling plans with my teammates because you decided to appear.

IGR: I did not decide yet.

S: You absolutely decided.

IGR: Maybe.

S: Rozanov.

IGR: Hollander.

S: I'm serious.

IGR: Me too.

S: I said no.

IGR: I heard.

S: Did you understand the no?

IGR: Yes.

S: Great.

IGR: I come anyway.

S: Oh my god.

Ilya booked the flight ten minutes later.

New York was cold, loud, and irritatingly full of people, but the hotel was easy enough to find. His room was even easier to find with the implanted tracker. He had not told Hollander he was coming because he would have continued saying no, and while Ilya was learning many things about choice, he had not yet decided surprises counted as violations. Mostly.

The hallway outside Hollander's room was quiet when he knocked.

For one second, he wondered if Hollander had already left.

Then the door opened.

Shane froze completely.

He wore black jeans and a dark green sweater that made his eyes look even darker than usual, hair slightly messy, mouth parted in shock. For a moment, neither of them spoke.

Then Shane said, very slowly, "What the fuck?"

Ilya smiled.

"Hello."

"You're in Boston."

"No."

"I can see that."

“Good.”

Shane looked down the hallway, then back at him, panic and delight flashing across his face so quickly Ilya nearly missed it. Nearly.

“Oh my god,” Shane muttered. “You actually flew here.”

“Da.”

“I said no.”

“I know.”

“That usually means don’t come.”

“I interpreted as challenge.”

“That was not me daring you.”

Ilya considered that. “Fair.”

Shane blinked, thrown off by the easy admission. Then his mouth twitched like he was fighting a smile and losing. “You’re insane.”

“Maybe.”

“You’re lucky Hayden stepped out.”

“I know.”

Shane stared. “How do you know that?”

Ilya paused.

“Guess.”

“Rozanov.”

“Lucky guess.”

“That is not comforting.”

Still, Shane stepped back and let him in.

Ilya entered the room and immediately hated it. Too small. Two beds. The scent of another alpha intermingled with his omega’s things. Not enough privacy. Hollander shut the door and turned toward him, still looking like he could not decide whether to be angry or happy.

Ilya wanted to touch him. He did not, not immediately. This, apparently, was growth. “You look good,” he said instead.

Shane's face went pink. "You cannot just fly to New York and compliment me like that makes this normal."

"But I did."

"Not the point."

"Hadestown still stupid name."

"You don't even know what it is."

"Man goes to hell?"

Shane blinked.

"...Kind of actually."

"Sounds depressing."

"It's supposed to be good."

"I am better."

Shane laughed then, sudden and unwilling, and Ilya felt something inside him loosen. There. That. That was why he came. Not only to touch him, though he wanted that badly enough that standing still felt like effort. He came for the laugh. For the face Shane made when pretending not to be pleased. For the way his shoulders dropped when he realized Ilya was really there.

Then Shane's expression softened.

"You flew all the way here."

"Yes."

"Just to see me?"

Ilya frowned. "Yes."

Like there was any other possible answer. For a moment, the room went quiet. Then Shane stepped closer and couldn't help himself and closed the distance and kissed him.

Ilya spun Hollander around and pinned him to the wall. The smaller man's back met the cool, unyielding plaster of the wall with a soft thump. Ilya's hands came up to frame Shane's face, calloused thumbs brushing over his freckles, the touch shockingly tender against the implicit force of the pin.

The world narrowed to the small hotel room, to the heat radiating from Ilya's body, to the stormy blue eyes. Shane pulled back for a second to catch his breath. Shane felt the

controlled frustration slip. There was no slow lean, no question. Ilya closed the final inch again and captured Shane's mouth with his own.

It wasn't a kiss. It was a conquest. The initial pressure was fierce, almost bruising, a release of weeks of pent-up tension. Ilya's lips were demanding, moving with a hungry, relentless rhythm that stole the air from Shane's lungs. A soft, startled sound - a muffled mmph escaped Shane, swallowed instantly by Ilya. One of Ilya's hands slid from Shane's face to wrap his hand around Shane's throat, tilting his head to deepen the angle. The other arm braced against the wall, caging Hollander in completely.

The taste of Hollander was overwhelming. Bitter coffee, a hint of spearmint, and something uniquely, essentially Shane, a dark, warm flavor that went straight to Ilya's head. Ilya smiled when he felt Shane's hands rise of their own volition, fists clutching in Ilya's hair, pulling him closer, or maybe he surged forward; the distinction melted away. The kiss deepened, turned wet and searching.

The quiet room was filled with the raw, intimate sounds of it: the slick, hot slide of mouths, the ragged pull of breath through noses, the soft, desperate whimpers Shane couldn't suppress. Ilya answered with a low groan from deep in his chest, a vibration Shane felt against their own. His body pressed Shane harder into the wall, the solid line of him from chest to thigh a brand of heat through their clothes.

Ilya could practically *feel* Hollander's emotions. Even over the scent suppressors, Ilya was drowning in Hollander's scent now, in the scent and the taste and the sheer *rightness* of it all. Their mind fogged, blissfully empty of everything but sensation.

Then, a sound. It was distant, the definitive ka-chunk of a door closing nearby. Maybe from the stairwell. Maybe from another room down the hall. It sliced through the haze like a shard of ice.

A bolt of pure, adrenal fear shot through Hollander's veins, freezing the fire in his blood. He tore his mouth away from Ilya's with a ragged, wet sound.

"Stop!"

The word was a broken whisper, shoved against Ilya's lips. Shane's hands, which had been clinging, now pushed weakly at his chest. The movement was frantic, bird-like.

Ilya stilled, but didn't pull back. His forehead rested against Hollander's, his breath coming in harsh, hot gusts that fanned over their wet, swollen lips. His eyes were heavy-lidded, dark with a hunger that was far from sated. "Hollander," he murmured, voice gravelly and thick.

"Someone," Shane gasped, their own voice trembling. They strained to listen, their body rigid with panic. The silence now felt predatory, listening back. "I heard a door."

The spell shattered. Ilya's eyes cleared, sharpening from lust to alertness. He pulled back, just an inch, his head turning to listen for any continuing sound. His jaw was tight, the muscles

working. The loss of his heat was immediate and profound.

For a long, suspended moment, they stayed there, frozen in the aftermath. Shane's heart hammered against his ribs, a frantic drumbeat of fear and lingering desire. His lips felt bruised, sensitive, throbbing with the ghost of the kiss. Ilya looked back at them, his gaze dropping to his mouth, and Shane saw the conflict warring in him -the urge to reclaim what was interrupted, warring with the cold logic of the risk.

Slowly, with obvious effort, Ilya uncurled his fingers from Shane's hair. His arm lowered from the wall. He took a full step back, putting a foot of devastating distance between them. The space felt like a chasm.

The only sound was their labored breathing, slowly beginning to steady.

Shane slid down the wall an inch, his legs weak. He couldn't meet Ilya's eyes. He stared at the floor.

"You were about to try to make me stay."

Correct.

"I can do both."

"No."

"Hollander."

"Rozanov."

"I flew here."

"Obviously you asshole. You flew here after I told you I had plans."

"You should reward effort."

"I just kissed you."

"Its not enough. I want you."

Shane rolled his eyes, but he was smiling now, and that made it worse. "I'm not canceling plans with my teammates because you decided to ignore me and show up anyway."

"I can get better tickets."

"That is not the point."

"I can buy theater."

"You cannot buy the theater."

"Probably I can."

“Oh my god.”

Ilya moved closer, testing. Slowly enough that Hollander saw it coming. He let him, which felt like permission, so Ilya took another step until he could feel the warmth of him.

“Stay,” Ilya said quietly.

Shane’s expression flickered.

Want. Irritation. Resolve. “No.”

“You want to.”

“Yeah,” Shane admitted, and the honesty hit harder than refusal. “But I’m still going.”

Ilya hated that. He also liked it. That was new. “You are cruel. I need you, Hollander.” Ilya said, pulling Hollander so they’re hips met again.

“You’ll survive.”

“Barely.”

“You’re such an asshole.”

“I have feelings.”

Shane lifted an eyebrow.

“Do you?”

“For you. Bored ones.”

That stopped him. The teasing softened around the edges.

Shane looked at him for a long second before reaching up and fixing the collar of Ilya’s coat, a gesture so small and domestic that Ilya nearly forgot how to breathe.

“I’ll call you after,” Shane said softly.

“Come after.”

“Maybe.”

“Hollander.”

“I’ll call,” Shane repeated, firmer now. “And maybe after, if it’s not too late. But I’m going.”

Ilya stared at him.

Everything in him wanted to push. Complain. Seduce. Convince. He could. He knew that. Hollander wanted him. It was there in his face, in the way he kept glancing at Ilya’s mouth, in

the way his hand lingered on his coat.

But the book had been annoyingly clear: Choice. Care without erasing choice.

He exhaled through his nose.

“Fine.”

Shane smiled.

“Was that painful?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

Ilya grabbed him then, just enough to pull him into one more kiss. Shane made a startled noise but kissed him back immediately, hands briefly fisting in the front of his coat. This one was longer. Hotter. Enough that when Shane pulled away, his mouth looked soft and his eyes had darkened.

“Mean,” Ilya murmured.

“You’ll live.”

“Call me.”

“I said I would.”

“After show.”

“Yes.”

“Not after drinks.”

Shane narrowed his eyes.

“I’m hanging up on you later just for that.”

“You will not.”

“I might.”

“No.”

Ilya kissed him once more, quick and smug, then he watched as Hollander slipped out of his hold. He grabbed his jacket, checked his phone, and walked toward the door.

At the threshold, he looked back.

“Try not to break into anything while I’m gone.”

“No promises.”

“Rozanov.”

“I will try.”

“Good enough.”

Then he left.

Ilya stood in the hotel room alone, listening to the door click shut, irritated, amused, and deeply unwilling to examine the warmth settling inside him.

He had flown to New York.

Shane had said no.

And still kissed him before leaving.

Interesting.

Very interesting.

Maybe, Ilya thought, sitting down on Shane’s bed like he belonged there, this was what being chosen felt like.

Not obedience. Not surrender, something better.

The cold hit Shane immediately the second he stepped outside the hotel.

New York in winter felt different from Montreal. Wetter somehow. The city moved too fast even at night, headlights smearing gold across damp streets while people rushed by wrapped in coats and scarves, shoulders tucked against the wind.

Hayden was already waiting near the curb with two of the defensemen from the team.

“There he is,” Hayden said dramatically the second Shane approached. “Thought you might have been kidnapped.”

Shane nearly tripped.

“Shut up, I’m not late.”

“Right,” Hayden said dryly.

One of the defensemen snorted.

“You’ve been weird lately,” another added. “Way less miserable.”

“I’m not miserable.”

“Your world is hockey,” Hayden said immediately. “I’m surprised you even agreed to come out with us tonight.”

Shane rolled his eyes hard enough to hurt. “Can we just go?”

“Touchy,” Hayden muttered.

Shane ignored him.

Mostly because he could still feel Rozanov’s mouth on his. That was the problem.

No matter how stubborn Shane tried to be, no matter how much he reminded himself that Rozanov was difficult, possessive, occasionally terrifying, and objectively too intense for any reasonable person, his body still hummed faintly from the kiss. From the weight of him. From the ridiculous fact that Rozanov had flown to another city just because Shane said no.

Completely insane behavior. Completely unfair behavior. Also, if Shane was being painfully honest with himself, embarrassingly flattering.

The theater itself was beautiful in that New York way, all velvet and gold trim and soft lights reflecting against polished surfaces. Tourists crowded the lobby taking photos while theater staff moved people efficiently toward seats.

Hayden held up the playbill dramatically.

“Culture,” he announced.

“You cried during *The Lion King*,” Shane reminded him.

“That was emotional!.”

“You cried during *Frozen* too.”

“There were family themes!”

Shane laughed despite himself, settling into his seat while people slowly filtered in around them.

His phone buzzed.

IGR: You survive theater?

Shane immediately smiled before he could stop himself.

S: Barely. Hayden is already embarrassing me.

IGR: Good.

S: You're supposed to defend me.

IGR: No. You could be in bed with me right now.

Shane shook his head.

S: Are you seriously just sitting in my hotel room?

Long pause.

IGR: Maybe.

Shane narrowed his eyes.

S: Rozanov.

IGR: Watching television.

S: What television.

IGR: Bad cooking competition. Shane stared at the screen, then burst out laughing quietly.

Hayden looked over suspiciously. "Oh my god," he said slowly. "It *is* someone."

"No."

"That smile says yes."

Shane shoved the phone in his pocket immediately. "Shut up."

Hayden gasped dramatically.

"Oh my god. You like someone."

"No, I don't."

"You absolutely do."

The lights dimmed before Shane could argue, thankfully. Because he genuinely didn't know what to say to that.

The show started.

And unfortunately for Shane, *Hadestown* was really good.

Painfully good. The music settled somewhere under his skin almost immediately, haunting and beautiful in a way he had not expected. By the middle of the first act, Shane found himself leaning forward despite himself.

Loving someone enough to follow them somewhere dangerous. Loving someone enough to risk losing them. Loving someone and still being terrified they would turn around and disappear.

By intermission Shane felt strangely unsettled.

“You okay?” Hayden asked, eyeing him.

“Fine.”

“That didn’t sound fine.”

Shane exhaled.

“I just...” He rubbed at the back of his neck. “It’s sad.”

Hayden blinked slowly.

“You’re emotional over a play?”

“I’m not emotional.”

“You absolutely are.”

Shane ignored him and checked his phone instead.

Three unread messages.

IGR: Did boring thing start?

IGR: You alive?

Then:

IGR: Miss you.

Shane stared at that last one too long.

God.

He really was in trouble.

S: Intermission.

Reply instantly.

IGR: You survive.

S: It's actually good.

IGR: Impossible.

S: Its an interesting play.

Pause. Then:

S: I miss you too.

The typing bubble appeared immediately.

Stopped.

Appeared again.

IGR: Come to my room after. I got better hotel room for us.

Something warm settled low in Shane's chest. Not pressure. It didn't sound like a demand exactly.

Just wanting. And maybe that was the dangerous part. Because despite how messy and complicated they still were, Shane wanted to go back. Wanted to see him again, wanted another kiss. Wanted-

"You're smiling again," Hayden said flatly.

Shane nearly jumped.

"Oh my god," Hayden whispered like he'd witnessed a crime. "You're down horrendous."

"Shut up."

"You're gone."

"I'm literally sitting here."

"Not mentally."

Shane rolled his eyes and shoved his shoulder. The second half of the show passed slowly.

By the end, Shane sat unusually quiet while applause thundered through the theater. The ending sat heavy in his chest. Thoughts about love tangled up with fear. People hurting each other while trying desperately not to. People wanting too much and not enough at the same time.

The group filtered out into the freezing air afterward, everyone talking over each other about favorite songs and scenes.

Hayden bumped Shane lightly.

“So,” he said casually. “You disappearing tonight?” Shane looked over too quickly.

Hayden immediately pointed. “Oh my god.”

“Shut up.”

“It *is* serious.”

“It’s not-”

“You’re leaving.”

Shane hesitated. Then sighed. “...Maybe.”

Hayden grinned. “Wow.”

“Don’t make it weird.”

“You’re literally made heart eyes at your phone.”

“I did not.”

“You absolutely did.”

Shane ignored him. Mostly because his phone had buzzed again.

IGR: Finished?

S: Yeah.

IGR: Come back.

The simplicity of it made something in Shane soften.

Not *Come now*.

Not *I’m waiting*.

Just: Come back.

And Shane wanted to. Really wanted to.

Not because Ilya had pushed. Not because he felt guilty. Not because he was afraid of upsetting him. Because he missed him already. Which was ridiculous considering they had literally seen each other an hour ago.

S: Leaving now.

The reply came instantly.

IGR: Good.

Then:

IGR: I ordered food.

Shane blinked. S: What kind?

IGR: Food you actually eat.

Shane narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

S: That sounds threatening.

IGR: Protein.

S: Oh my god.

IGR: Small omega needs food.

Shane smiled helplessly.

And for maybe the first time, the decision felt entirely his.

Not surrender. Not giving in. Just... choosing. Which somehow felt scarier than anything else.

“Heading up. Dead on my feet,” Shane muttered to no one in particular, already turning toward the elevators.

A teammate clapped them on the shoulder. “C’mon man, we’re having beers before turning in.”

“Na man, thanks but I’m beat.” Shane lied, pressing the button for the twelfth floor.

The silence of the ascending car was a vacuum. Their reflection in the brass doors looked haunted, eyes too bright, the adrenaline of the game now a toxic, jittery static in their veins. The text burned in their mind.

Room 1217 had read the text. The keycard was under the mat. A silent, illicit permission. Shane swiped it, the green light flashing, and pushed inside.

The room was dark, cool, and smelled of sandalwood and Ilya's usual leather and pine smell and something rich - garlic, rosemary, seared meat. A room service cart sat by the window, silver domes covering plates, a bottle of red wine already breathing beside two glasses. Soft lamp light pooled on the bedside table.

Ilya wasn't there.

Shane stood just inside the door, taking off his shoes, he noticed his duffle bag by the closet door.

From behind the closed bathroom door, a new sound began: the rush of water into a tub. A long, pouring stream. Steam began to curl from the gap at the bottom of the door.

The sound was intimate, obscenely domestic in this clandestine space. It spoke of intention, of time, of a slow unraveling they had both been hurtling toward since the first check into the boards.

The water stopped. Silence, thick and heavy.

The bathroom door opened.

Rozanov stood in the frame, backlit by the soft, steam-hazed light. He was stripped down to a pair of black boxer briefs that clung to the heavy muscle of his thighs and the clear, thick outline of his arousal.

He moved slowly, shrugging off his jacket. He was on high alert when Ilya walked back into the room, shirtless of course. Rozanov pulled out a chair for Shane. He blushed as he walked over and sat down. They lifted the domes. Steak, frites, asparagus. Perfectly cooked. Shane's stomach clenched, but not with hunger. Ilya poured a glass of wine for each of them.

He didn't speak. They ate quickly, not saying much. His eyes, blue and unreadable, tracked from Shane's face to the full glass in their hand, to their still-clothed body. He jerked his head, a single nod toward the bathroom.

"Come on."

His voice was hoarse. Used.

Shane set the glass down. The clink against the table was deafening. They walked past him, into the wall of humid, perfumed air. The bath was deep, overflowing with bubbles. A few candles flickered on the wide ledge.

Shane felt Rozanov behind him, a solid wall of heat. Rozanov's hands came to his hips, then up, under the hem of his shirt. His fingers were hot, slightly rough. He peeled the fabric up and over his head, tossing it aside without a glance. His thumbs hooked into the waistband of his jeans and boxers, pushing them down in one firm, efficient motion. Shane stepped out of the puddle of clothes, naked, shivering despite the heat.

Rozanov's hands returned, sliding possessively over his ribs, his stomach, pulling them back against his bare chest. His mouth found the juncture of Shane's neck and shoulder. He didn't kiss it. He bit lightly, over the bite guard. The feeling was dulled but Shane still felt it- the claiming pressure that made Shane gasp and arch back into him. A low rumble vibrated against their spine.

"In," he ordered, his voice muffled against their skin.

Shane climbed into the scalding water, sinking down until it lapped at his collarbones. The heat was a shock, a seeping relief into aching muscles. A moment later, Rozanov stepped in opposite him, his body a landscape of defined muscle and fading bruises beneath the water. The tub was large, but not large enough. Their legs tangled immediately, his foot sliding between Rozanov's calves.

For long minutes, there was only the quiet slap of water, the crackle of candles. Rozanov watched him, his gaze a physical weight. He reached out, took the bar of soap, and began to lather his hands. The ritual was deliberate, slow.

"Turn around," he said.

Shane obeyed, presenting his back. His soap-slick hands landed on their shoulders, and the breath left Shane's body in a rush. It wasn't a massage. It was a reclamation. His thumbs dug into the knots left by checks and falls, his palms spread the lather in broad, firm strokes down the line of Shane's spine, over the curve of his ass. Rozanov washed him with a thorough intensity that was more devastating than any caress. He washed his arms, his neck, the backs of his thighs. Each pass of his hands stripped away not just the grime of the day, but the last pretense of why they were here.

When he was done, Rozanov pulled Shane back against his chest, his arms locking around his stomach, holding him tight. His chin rested on his wet hair. His erection, thick and insistent, pressed against the small of Shane's back.

"My turn?" Shane whispered, the first words either had spoken in what felt like hours.

Ilya's arms loosened. Shane turned in the confined space, water sloshing over the rim. They took the soap, worked it into a lather, and began on his chest. His hands mapped the hard planes, the puckered scar along his ribs, the tight muscles of his abdomen. Their touch grew less clinical, fingers tracing, exploring. When their hand slid lower, beneath the water, over the hair below his belly button, Ilya seized his wrist.

"Enough," he growled. But he didn't push Shane's hand away. He held it there, pressed against him, letting Shane feel the full, daunting length of him. His eyes were dark, his control a visible, fraying thread. "You are forgetting something tonight."

“I know,” Shane breathed.

A harsh, ragged sound tore from Ilya’s throat. It was triumph and surrender. In one fluid, powerful motion, he stood, water sheeting off his body. He hooked his hands under Shane’s arms and hauled him up, out of the tub, dripping and gasping, onto the bath mat. He shoved the towels off the rack with a sweep of his arm and pushed Shane down onto the plush pile.

He followed them down, a cascade of water and heat. His body covered Shane’s completely, skin to skin, steam rising between them. The air was gone. There was only his weight, his smell, the desperate, searching crush of his mouth.

“You’re sure?” he demanded against their lips, his voice shattered. His hand was between them, guiding himself, the broad, slick head pressing against Shane’s entrance. The sensation was blinding, a promise of ruin.

“Yes,” Shane choked out, spreading their legs wider, arching up. “Rozanov, please.”

He drove into him in one relentless, claiming stroke.

The cry Shane let out was guttural, torn from a place deeper than pain or pleasure. It was a release of every tense moment, every stolen glance. Ilya swallowed the sound with his kiss, his hips beginning a punishing, deep rhythm that shoved Shane up the mat with every thrust. The world dissolved into wet heat and friction, the slap of skin, the ragged symphony of their breathing.

Ilya fucked him with the same focused intensity he played hockey- all power, strategy, and relentless drive. He braced himself on one arm, the other hand fisting in Shane’s hair, angling their face to his, forcing the omega to watch him, to see the naked, hungry possession in his eyes.

“Mine,” he grunted, each word punctuated by a deep, rolling thrust. “You’re *mine* now. Everyone will see it soon.”

Shane could only clutch at his back, nails digging in, legs locked around his hips, meeting every drive with a desperate lift of his own. The pleasure was a coil, winding tighter and tighter, a white-hot wire of need centered where their bodies joined. They were babbling, half-formed words, his name, curses.

Ilya's rhythm began to falter, growing more erratic, deeper, more possessive. A new, swelling pressure began to build at the heart of each thrust, a stretching, profound fullness that made Shane's eyes fly open.

Ilya saw their realization. His face was a mask of agonized ecstasy, sweat and water dripping from his brow. "*Fuck...fuck*, Hollander, I'm-" His voice broke. He was trying to pull back, to retreat, to stop the inevitable biological crest, but his body was betraying him, seeking the deepest possible claim.

The first thick, pulsing release of his orgasm triggered Shane's. They came with a shattered cry, vision whiting out, body clamping down around him in rhythmic, vice-like waves. That seemed to destroy the last of Ilya's control. With a groan that was pure defeat and triumph, he buried himself to the hilt and pushed forward one last, impossible fraction.

The knot.

It swelled, locked, tied them together in a searing, exquisite stretch. Ilya collapsed onto him, his full weight a final anchor, his face buried in the damp mess of Shane's hair. They were fused, pulsing, utterly joined. Every slight, involuntary throb from him sent a corresponding shockwave through Shane's oversensitive nerves.

For long minutes, there was only the sound of their struggling breath and the distant drip of the faucet. The candles guttered. The steam began to clear.

Slowly, Ilya lifted his head. He looked dazed, wrecked, his eyes soft in a way Shane had never seen. He brushed a thumb over Shane's bitten, swollen lips.

“You forgot the condom,” he repeated, his voice wrecked and wondrous. A slow, devastating smile touched his mouth. “Good.”

He lowered his head again, settling in to wait, holding them through the long, binding minutes of their bodies’ unwillingness to part, in the cooling damp of the bathroom floor. The game was over. Something else, vast and uncharted, had just begun.

A slow, deep blush warmed Shane’s cheeks, visible even in the dim light. The intensity of Ilya’s gaze, the possessiveness in his voice, combined with the inescapable, intimate fullness of their joining, made the admission feel more vulnerable than the act itself.

“I’m on... it’s a better birth control,” Shane murmured, the words muffled against Ilya’s damp shoulder. “A stronger pill. So. We didn’t... we wouldn’t need them.”

The confession hung in the steamy air. It wasn’t an excuse. Ilya was disappointed, but it also made him internally smile. This was Hollander making a statement of fact that carried the weight of a thousand unspoken implications: *I thought about this. I planned for this possibility. I made sure nothing would stop this.*

Ilya went very still above him. Then, a shuddering breath racked his frame, and he pressed his forehead to Shane’s, his eyes closed. The knot, still holding them fast, gave a subtle, possessive pulse. “Clever,” he whispered, the word thick with a stunned, reverent heat. “Fucking clever, Hollander.”

They stayed locked together until the insistent swell finally began to soften and subside, a slow, tender unraveling that was its own kind of intimacy. Ilya was careful, so careful, as he finally withdrew, a low, sensitive whimper catching in Hollander’s throat at the loss.

He didn’t go far. Rising on shaky legs, Ilya fetched a clean washcloth, ran it under warm water, and returned to kneel beside Shane on the soaked bath mat. His touch, which had been all demand and possession minutes before, was now infinitely gentle. He cleaned Shane with a focused, tender thoroughness, wiping away the evidence of their joining from trembling thighs and stomach. His eyes were dark, observant, tracing every shiver, every flutter of Hollander’s lashes.

Shane floated in a warm, weightless haze. The sharp edges of the world were blissfully blurred. The fear, the constant alertness, the constant calculation- all of it had been burned away in the crucible of sensation, leaving him soft and pliant and quietly yearning. Shane watched Ilya's face, the fierce concentration in his brow as he tended to him, and a small, trusting sound escaped his lips.

Ilya's gaze snapped to Shane's. He saw it- the unfocused eyes, the profound relaxation, the utter surrender not just of body but of will. Hovering on the blissful edge of subspace. A new, different kind of possessiveness, fiercely protective, settled in Ilya's chest.

"Come here," he said, his voice a low rumble. He tossed the cloth aside, slid his arms under Shane's back and knees, and lifted him as if they weighed nothing. Shane's head lolled against his shoulder, a sigh ghosting over his damp skin.

He carried them into the bedroom, laying Hollander gently in the center of the cool sheets. The moment their back touched the mattress, he turned instinctively, seeking. His arms and legs wound around Ilya as he stretched out beside them, clinging with a sudden, frantic strength. A violent, uncontrollable shiver wracked Shane's entire frame, then another, a cascade of tremors born from crashing adrenaline, emotional overload, and the deep, vulnerable drop after an intense submission.

Ilya reacted on pure instinct. He gathered Shane closer, wrapping him up completely, tucking Shane's head under his chin. One big hand splayed across the shivering plane of Shane's back, holding him firmly, securely. The other came up to cradle the back of his head, fingers threading into the damp black hair.

"Shhh," he murmured into the crown of their head, his voice a vibration against Shane's skin. "I've got you. I'm here. Just breathe. Follow me." He took an exaggerated, deep breath, letting his own chest expand against Shane's, willing them to sync. He began to rub slow, firm circles on his back, a grounding, constant pressure. "That's it. Easy. You're safe. You're with me."

He didn't use many words. He used his body as a shelter, his touch as an anchor. He held Shane through the storm of tremors, his own presence a steady, unmoving rock. Gradually, the frantic shivering subsided into occasional trembles, then into deep, exhausted sighs. The desperate cling of Shane's limbs softened into a heavy, boneless drape.

Ilya felt the exact moment Shane slipped over the edge into sleep. The last vestige of tension melted away, their breathing deepening into a slow, even rhythm against his neck. A profound, quiet smile touched Ilya's lips in the darkness. He'd done that. He'd wound the smaller omega up to the breaking point and then, instinctively, known how to piece him back together into peace.

His gaze drifted down Shane's sleeping form. In the faint light from the bathroom, he saw the small, neutral transparent patches adhered to the delicate skin of his inner thigh and the side of his neck. The disgusting scent suppressors.

Holding Shane securely with one arm, he reached down with the other. With careful, deliberate fingers, he peeled the patch from Shane's thigh, then the one from his neck. He lifted them to his face, the adhesive side faintly gleaming.

He inhaled, deeply.

The clean, chemical smell of the patch gave way, and beneath it, unfiltered and true, was *Shane*. The scent was a complex, beautiful shock-crisp honeysuckle and underneath, a warm, sweet note of vanilla and the barest, tantalizing hint of something earthy and rich. It was the scent of the competitor who challenged him, and the vulnerable person who trusted him enough to fall apart in his arms.

Ilya closed his eyes, committing it to memory. He let the patches fall to the floor, unimportant now. He buried his nose against the warm skin of Shane's neck, breathing him in, surrounding himself in the truth of *them*. With his rival-turned-lover asleep and utterly secure in his embrace, Ilya finally allowed himself to relax, a deep, satisfied contentment settling in his bones as he held onto what, against all odds, was now unquestionably his.

Chapter End Notes

Well. 😊

Ilya read one omega book and immediately decided the solution was apparently financial crimes, emotional support, and stalking with feelings. Progress? Maybe?

Also yes, Hadestown was chosen on purpose. If you know, you know. 🙄

Curious where everyone stands right now:

Are we proud of Ilya for attempting growth or are we proud of Shane starting to stand his ground and going out with his friends even though Ilya came looking all hot and everything?

Or are we side-eyeing him because this man somehow made “flying to another city after being told no” seem romantic?

And most importantly... are we worried about how long these two can stay relatively stable before disaster strikes again?

Next chapter: more time together, more feelings, more problems, and unfortunately for Shane, Rozanov continues to believe boundaries are merely suggestions.

Comments/feed back absolutely make my day 💙

Chapter 14: Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Some of you guys are REALLY not going to like this chapter, but it's in my outline. Trigger is dubious consent for this chapter because Ilya is 2 steps forward, 5 steps back. So is Shane to a certain point, but this wasn't the easiest to write and there's only one or two more crazy over the top moments for Ilya left I think if I follow the outline.

Chapter Notes

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

The first grey light of dawn was just etching the outlines of the windows when Ilya awoke. Shane was a warm, solid weight against his side, one arm flung across Ilya's chest, breathing deep and even. The scent of them mixed together- honeysuckle and leather and pine, filled the space, a balm to the hollow ache that had plagued him the night before when Hollander had fallen asleep. He turned his head, watching the slow rise and fall of Shane's ribs, the peaceful slackness of his face.

A fierce, quiet possessiveness rose in him, swift and undeniable. He wanted to claim this peace, to mark this soft, trusting vulnerability as his own doing.

He moved with the silent, deliberate grace of a hunter. Sliding down the bed, he pushed the sheets aside. The morning air was cool on Shane's bare skin, and he murmured, shifting slightly in his sleep. Ilya bent his head.

The first touch of his mouth was a ghost of pressure, a soft, worshipping kiss against the sensitive skin of Shane's inner thigh. Then another, higher. Shane's breathing hitched, a soft, confused sigh escaping his lips. Ilya didn't rush. He mapped the territory with his lips and tongue, gentle, teasing, until he felt the first stirring of interest against his cheek.

Only then did he take Shane fully into the wet, consuming heat of his mouth.

Shane woke not with a start, but with a slow, deep groan that seemed to be pulled from the roots of his soul. His hips twitched, a helpless little thrust into the sensation. "Roz...?" His voice was thick with sleep and instant, dizzying pleasure.

Ilya hummed in response, the vibration earning him a sharp gasp and a hand that fumbled down to tangle in his hair. Not pushing, not guiding, just holding on. Ilya worked him with a relentless, devoted focus, using his tongue, his throat, until Shane was trembling, his breaths coming in short, punched out whimpers, his heels digging into the mattress. Ilya could taste the precum- clean and sharp, and he drank it down, wanting every part of him.

Just as Shane's thighs began to tense, a broken warning on his lips, Ilya pulled back with a wet, obscene sound.

Shane cried out at the loss, his eyes flying open, dazed and desperate. "Please--"

"I know," Ilya growled, surging up over him. He kissed Shane, deep and filthy, letting him taste himself on Ilya's tongue. He positioned himself with a single, rough adjustment, and then he was pushing back inside, into the warm, clinging heat that was still loose and pliant from the night before.

This was different. Not the frantic claiming of the bath, but something deeper, more rhythmic and intent. He braced his weight on his forearms, caging Shane's head, and set a pace that was less about friction and more about depth, each slow, rolling thrust a deliberate search for the very core of him. He watched every flicker of feeling on Shane's face- the fluttering eyelids, the bitten-red lips parting on silent cries, the sheer, overwhelming *acceptance*.

"Mine," Ilya chanted against his mouth, the word a prayer and a command with every drive of his hips. "You feel that? You're mine, Hollander. Every part. *Mine*."

Shane could only nod, his legs locking around Ilya's back, his body arching to take him deeper, tears of overstimulation and bliss leaking from the corners of his eyes. The climb was slower, more immense, a tidal wave building in the deep. When it broke, it broke them both simultaneously. Shane's orgasm was a silent, seizing thing, his body clamping down in a series of endless, rhythmic pulses that milked Ilya's own release from him- a hot, flooding rush that seemed to have no end.

Ilya collapsed, spent, burying his face in Shane's neck as they both shuddered through the aftershocks. For a moment, there was only the sound of their ragged breathing.

Then, moving with a tenderness that belied the fierce possession of moments before, Ilya slid a hand between their still joined bodies before pulling out. He gathered the warm, slick evidence of his release as it began to seep out, and with a gentle, insistent pressure of his fingers, he pushed it back inside.

Shane jolted, a soft, overwhelmed sound catching in his throat. The intimacy of the act, the profound vulnerability of it, was the final key. Ilya watched as Shane's eyes, which had been hazy with pleasure, went completely soft and unfocused. The tension left his body all at once, leaving him boneless and pliant, floating somewhere far away. Subspace.

Ilya carefully withdrew fully, his heart pounding with a reverence that felt like fear. He shifted down the bed, laying his head gently on the flat plane of Shane's lower belly, his ear pressed to the skin. He closed his eyes.

The words that came were in the rough, guttural Russian of his grandmother, whispered into the warmth of Shane's skin, a secret for the darkness.

"Bozhe, Mama, sokhrani i zashchiti... Day kornyam vzyat'sya zdes', v etoy tishine. Pust' semya naydyot pochvu. Pust' ono uderzhitsya. Ya budu berech'. Ya budu okhranyat'. Pust' on dast mne eto "

God, Mama preserve and protect... Let roots take hold here, in this quiet. Let the seed find soil. Let it hold. I will cherish. I will guard. Make him give me this...

He knew the chances were astronomically low. The birth control Shane had mentioned must have been good. But hope, especially this desperate, secret kind, was a stubborn weed. He prayed to a god he rarely acknowledged for a miracle he had no right to ask for.

A tremor ran through Shane's body, then another - the delicate beginnings of the crash. Ilya's head snapped up. He saw the first tears slip free, the shivers starting in the slender hands.

Instantly, the prayer was forgotten. The alpha was gone; only the caretaker remained. He moved up the bed in one fluid motion, gathering Shane against him, pulling the blankets up around them both. He wrapped himself around the trembling form, skin to skin, a living shield.

"Shhh, moy zaychik, I have you," he murmured, his voice a low, constant rumble in his chest. He rocked them gently, his hands smoothing over Shane's back, his hair. "You are so good. So perfect. You let me have everything. I have you now. You're safe." He kissed the tears from Shane's cheeks, his temple, whispering praise and reassurance until the shivers subsided into exhaustion, and Shane lay heavy and quiet in his arms, utterly spent and trusting.

When the room was fully light, Ilya nudged him gently. "Shower. Then food."

They moved together under the hot spray, a quiet, domestic ritual. Ilya washed Shane's hair, his hands gentle on his scalp, and Shane leaned back against his chest, eyes closed. They traded the soap in silence, cleaning each other with a focus that was its own form of communication. For a few stolen minutes, the world was just steam and touch and shared warmth.

Then, from the bedroom, the first alarm blared, a harsh, electronic, relentless noise. A moment later, Shane's phone joined in.

The spell shattered.

Time, which had been suspended, came rushing back in a cold flood. Ilya reached out and shut off the water. The silence that followed was filled with the impending weight of separation, of public faces, of the world waiting outside the door that demanded they be rivals again.

The silence after the alarms was heavier than any check into the boards. They dressed in a wordless, efficient ballet, pulling on the uniforms of their public lives: jeans, hoodies, baseball caps pulled low. The intimate scent of each other was slowly buried under deodorant and the sterile, blanketing smell of fresh fabric.

Ilya watched Shane zip his duffel, his movements precise, his face carefully neutral. The omega from the bath, from the bed - pliant, trusting, *his*- was receding, replaced by Hollander, the formidable center of his team. It felt like a theft happening in broad daylight.

“Your flight is at noon?” Shane asked, not looking up.

“Da. Yours at one?”

A nod. More silence. The charged air between them crackled with everything unsaid: the whispered prayer, the upcoming three empty months, the terrifying possibility of change.

Ilya watched as Shane pulled out a small toiletry case and followed him back to the bathroom, watching the smaller man take out a few pills and a pair of sealed suppressants. Ilya couldn't stand it. He crossed the room in two strides, cupping Shane's face and forcing his gaze up. The eye contact was a shock, a lightning bolt of pure, unguarded feeling. Shane's carefully constructed mask wavered, his eyes swimming with a vulnerability that made Ilya's chest ache.

Ilya buried his nose right over the scent gland at the base of Shane's neck, inhaling the addicted scent one last time before it was masked and they separated. He took the patch out of Shane's hand and carefully applied it for him. “Two?”

Shane nodded nervously. “Precaution. I put the second one on my back.”

Ilya nodded, remembering from before. I put the second patch on Shane's spine then turned and slapped one of his own from his bag over his own neck.

“You will call,” Ilya stated, his thumb stroking the apple of Shane's cheek. “When you can. I will call you. No games.”

“The time difference. And your family...”

“I do not care. I will find a way.” He leaned in, pressing a hard, possessive kiss to Shane's mouth, not of passion but of branding. A seal. “You are mine. Across an ocean, you are mine. Remember that. No matter what.”

Shane's breath hitched. “Yours,” he whispered back, the word a sacred vow in the morning light.

The rideshare notification chimed on Ilya's phone - a cruel reminder that they were to be separated. Ilya's ride was five minutes away.

They walked to the door, both of their duffels over Ilya's shoulder, the ghosts of their night trailing behind them. Ilya stopped, turning Shane to face him one last time. He didn't kiss him again. Instead, he pulled him into a crushing embrace, his face buried in the scent-suppressed hollow of Shane's neck, inhaling deeply, trying to memorize a scent that was already being chemically muted. Shane clung back just as fiercely, fingers digging into Ilya's back.

“Be safe, zayka.” Ilya murmured, the endearment rough with emotion.

“You too.”

He pulled back, his hands sliding down Shane's arms to his wrists, holding on until the last possible second. Then, with a final, searing look that promised everything and feared everything, he turned and walked down the hall toward the elevator. He didn't look back. He couldn't.

Shane stood frozen at the door, watching the elevator doors swallow him whole. The emptiness that flooded the space was instant and absolute, a physical coldness. He wrapped his arms around himself.

Five minutes later, his own phone buzzed. His car was half hour away. The silence rushed in to fill the space Ilya's presence had occupied. It was a different quiet now- hollow, ringing with absence.

Shane stood there for a long moment, his bag ready by the door. The practical part of his brain, the part that always had a checklist, flickered on. *Check the room. Don't leave anything.*

He moved mechanically. He looked in the bathroom- no toothbrushes, no forgotten razors. Just damp towels and the ghost of steam. He checked the nightstand, the desk. Nothing.

His gaze landed on the bed. The sheets were a tangled monument to the night. His cheeks flushed hot, a wave of embarrassment that was entirely at odds with the acts themselves. He could still feel the press of the linens against his back, his shoulders. With quick, efficient tugs, he stripped it, bundling the evidence into a heap on the floor. *I should leave extra money for housekeeping*, he reminded himself, the thought a pathetic attempt at normalcy.

As he turned, his eyes caught the small, metal trash bin by the desk. It was empty. Clean. A fresh liner gleamed inside. It was that sterile emptiness that finally undid him. The memory slammed into him, vivid and sensory: the heat of the bath, the impossible fullness, his own voice muffled against Ilya's skin. "*I'm on... a better birth control.*" He'd told the truth. Ilya was clean; the league had players tested constantly.

But as he stared at the empty bin where no wrapper lay, the real, shameful truth he hadn't voiced rose up like a flood. He hadn't just *forgotten* a condom. Some deep, hidden part of him had *wanted* its absence. He had wanted, with a craven, desperate hope that terrified him, for there to be a chance. However infinitesimal. A one-in-a-million defiance of medicine and reason.

The fantasy unfolded in his mind, swift and devastating: a positive test. Ilya's stunned, reverent face. A swell under his hand that was part of them both. A family. A name. A tiny, screaming, perfect reason that would fuse them into a single, unbreakable unit- Shane and Ilya- forever. Something bigger than hockey, bigger than rivalry, bigger than their own damaged selves.

He sat down heavily on the bare mattress, the cool plastic cover sticking to his jeans. He let himself fall back, staring at the ceiling. The fantasy was so beautiful it felt like a heart attack. Then, he got control of himself.

Insane. Irresponsible. Reckless. You're an athlete. He's going to Russia. It's a chemical impossibility right now. You're losing your mind. It would be the biggest mistake of your life.

The self-recrimination was a whip. He sat bolt upright, his breath short. This wasn't him. This was the scent in the room, *their* scent, layered and primal beneath everything -messing with his biology, twisting his logic into primitive, yearning knots.

He couldn't stay here. The four walls were saturated with the feeling, pressing in on him. He snatched up his bag, shouldered it, and cast one last, frantic look around the room that had shifted from a secret paradise to a chamber of terrifying revelations.

Then he fled, pulling the door shut behind him on the empty bin and the naked bed, trying to outrun the wild, hopeless want that had taken root in the silence.

Two months later Montreal was out for the rest of the season. Boston had been annoyingly good all year. Consistently good. The kind of team Shane hated playing because they never really seemed rattled no matter what happened. Down two goals? Fine. Overtime? Fine. Back-to-backs? Somehow still fine. They played like a team that expected things to eventually go their way, and worse, more often than not, they were right.

Then captain Elias Mercer got hurt. The replay spread across hockey media within an hour.

Florida game. Third period. Mercer dropping to one knee after blocking a shot near the crease, his jaw visibly tightening before trainers rushed the ice. The veteran defensemen didn't stay down unless something genuinely hurt. Shane knew that immediately. Everybody did.

The MRI results came three days later. Torn labrum, officially season-ending. The hockey world reacted like Boston's playoff chances had died overnight.

Mercer had worn the "C" for five years. Quiet leadership. Defensive backbone. One of those captains players naturally followed without much effort because he never really asked for attention, just consistency. Analysts suddenly flooded sports shows talking about Boston collapsing under playoff pressure without veteran leadership.

Apparently, nobody accounted for the fact that Boston's second biggest problem already lived in the locker room. Shane found out about the captaincy through social media. At first he genuinely thought it was fake. Then came the practice photos. Ilya standing at center ice in dark gear with the captain's "C" stitched against his chest. Expression unimpressed. Like leadership itself had personally inconvenienced him. Shane texted immediately.

S: Captain???

The response took eleven minutes. IGR: Temporary probably.

S: Since when.

IGR: Mercer says I yell at everyone already.

Shane snorted quietly to himself.

S: That is unfortunately true.

IGR: This is insult.

S: No. That means people listen to you.

Long pause.

Then: IGR: Mercer says same thing.

Shane could picture it too clearly: Mercer standing there, calm and practical, tossing responsibility toward the only player everyone would follow without hesitation. Because despite the terrifying personality, despite the intensity, despite the occasional inability to behave like a normal human being, people trusted Ilya when it mattered.

Probably because Ilya expected impossible things from himself before anyone else.

The leaked locker room speech happened before Tampa.

Nobody knew who posted it. Somebody inside the organization probably. Hockey locker rooms leaked eventually, especially during playoffs, but somehow this one exploded online immediately.

Shane watched it alone in his apartment after practice.

The camera quality looked terrible, secretly filmed from somewhere near the back of the room. Players sat half dressed, taping sticks or adjusting gear while nervous energy sat heavy in the air.

Then Ilya stood. Captain's "C" bright against dark gear from the jersey.

Tape wrapped around one hand. Expression sharp. "Alright," he said loudly. "Enough. Shut the fuck up."

The room quieted immediately. No hesitation. No resistance.

"You know what I tired of hearing?" he continued, crossing his arms. "Tampa this. Tampa that. Playoff experience."

An eye roll. "Congratulations." He shrugged. "They old." Laughter cracked through the room.

"No seriously. Half their knees probably sound like microwave popcorn." Even Mercer, sitting nearby in sweats with his shoulder strapped, laughed.

Good. The tension loosened. Then Ilya's expression sharpened again. "But listen." Silence. "I do not care what happened last game." A point toward the floor. "That is over."

"I do not care who scored. Who played like superstar." A pause. "Who played like complete idiot." Laughter again. "You know what matters?"

He pointed toward the tunnel. "Tonight. This building. Our fans. On our ice."

His voice dropped lower. "I do not want Game Seven in Tampa."

Immediate agreement echoed through the room. "Fuck that. I want them miserable on plane home. We send them crying back home to their mommies."

Sticks bang on the floor as the team got amped up. Then quieter.

More serious now. "You know what playoff hockey is?" Silence. "Not talent. Everybody talented."

He hit his chest once. "It this."

Then harder: "Deciding who willing suffer more."

The room went still. "You block shot. You skate when lungs hurt. You finish hit. You help teammate. You play for guy next to you."

Then, a grin. "And if somebody touches one of ours?"

Pause. "Make him regret having hands." The room exploded. Players yelling. Sticks slamming against the floor. Something electric settling over the space.

Boston beat Tampa in six. Then New York. Then Denver. And somehow, throughout all of it, Shane kept watching. Montreal didn't survive the first round.

The loss hurt more than Shane expected. The season had ended too quickly, too quietly, one week buried beneath playoff adrenaline and media obligations and the next sitting through locker cleanout interviews pretending disappointment felt manageable.

People kept saying rookie season like it was supposed to soften the loss.

Like success somehow made failure hurt less.

It didn't.

Still - Boston kept playing.

And somehow, despite himself, Shane found his nights quietly rearranging around game schedules.

Not because of Ilya. Obviously. Just hockey. Mostly.

The Stanley Cup Final was already being called a legendary game. Boston versus Edmonton.

Game Seven. Tied series. Everything on the line. Shane told himself he watched because it mattered. Because hockey mattered. Not because one particular player wore the captain's "C" now.

Definitely not because he was missing Rozanov and with his playing and practice schedule it was hard for them not to have more than a few minutes on the phone each day.

The third period happened.

And apparently Ilya Rozanov decided he needed to be the only player to watch.

First goal. Then another. Then a third with under ten minutes left.

A Hat trick during the final game. The Stanley Cup Final.

Three goals of Boston's four. The arena exploded.

Shane sat strangely still watching it happen. The jealousy hit first - sharp and ugly.

Because god, he wanted that too. Wanted the Cup. Wished it had been him. Wanted the impossible joy splashed across Ilya's face while teammates nearly tackled him into the glass.

Wanted- then the camera cut back to Ilya laughing. Actually laughing. Happy in that open, rare way Shane almost never saw. And suddenly pride settled over him bigger than jealousy.

Because Shane knew how hard he worked. Knew the impossible standards, the pressure.

Knew how badly Rozanov had wanted this. As Captain, Rozanov had gotten the trophy first, hoisting it up over his head while the rest of the team surrounded him. The ear splitting grin on his face still there, he was calling out something about his mother, Shane thought.

Eventually, after the celebration, cameras followed players taking laps around the ice with the Cup.

Confetti stuck damply against jerseys. Fans still screaming loud enough to shake the building. Then came Ilya back on screen for the interviews. He slowed near center ice, one hand resting against silver metal. For a second, he just stood there. Quiet, overwhelmed. Shane stayed still.

Something tightened painfully inside his chest. Because suddenly Shane could picture younger Ilya too clearly. Cold rinks, in Russia. Impossible expectations. Years of pressure, just like himself.

And somehow, despite everything difficult and complicated and overwhelming about him, Shane felt overwhelmingly proud.

Shane went to grab his phone, just in case Rozanov snuck away and was able to call him.

Two weeks later found Shane and Rozanov back in the same city finally for the NHL Awards. Shane felt out of sorts. Next season would be his third in the NHL had this one had rung him out to exhaustion. Which was ridiculous. He had played Olympic games. Sold-out arenas screaming loud enough to shake the ice. He should not have been pacing because he might see Ilya Rozanov in person after two months apart.

And yet. Here they were. Or rather - here Shane was.

Pacing. His mother noticed immediately. "You're nervous," Yuna said from the hotel sofa.

"No."

"You've checked your phone six times."

"I'm waiting for a text."

"Mhm."

Shane narrowed his eyes.

"What."

Yuna smiled.

"It's just unlike you to be nervous," she said quietly, "It's a 30 second blurb with Rozanov and you're nominated for the best awards."

Shane immediately looked away.

His phone buzzed.

IGR: Lobby.

Shane blinked.

Already?

The hotel lobby buzzed with players, media, executives, photographers.

He barely noticed any of it.

Because he saw him immediately. Of course he did. Ilya stood near one of the marble columns, hands in dark tailored slacks, jacket thrown casually over one shoulder.

Black suit.

No tie.

Looking devastatingly handsome. So completely unfair.

He looked older somehow after only a couple months. Sharper, more settled into himself. Then Ilya looked up and froze. Everything else disappeared. Because suddenly- there he was. Real, actually real. After months apart, they were within feet of each other. Not FaceTime, not phone calls.

He slowly made his way closer to Shane, casually while being stopped by others on the way. Shane quickly noticed his parents at the bar talking to some of the Voyageurs coaches.

“Hollander.”

“Hi to you too.”

“Hi.” Then quieter: “You cut hair.”

“It was too long.”

“Grow it back.”

“You don’t get a vote.”

“Yes I do.”

Shane rolled his eyes automatically. God, there it was. Easy. Familiar. Like nothing had changed. Like months apart somehow disappeared immediately.

“You look ridiculous,” Shane muttered.

“Handsome.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

Debatable, and somehow after months apart, it felt like nothing between them was tarnished.

If anything- It felt worse.

The awards ceremony itself turned out to be significantly more overwhelming than Shane expected. He hoped he didn’t embarrass himself reading the thank you speeches his mother had prepared for him. He tried to not stare to obviously at Rozanov when he was on stage with his team or alone while accepting his awards.

Too many cameras. Too many expensive suits. Too many executives pretending they had always believed in every player currently being celebrated. Everywhere Shane looked, somebody wanted something. Photos. Interviews. Handshakes. Soundbites.

And somehow, despite all of it, Shane remained painfully aware of one thing.

Ilya standing close to him during intermissions. Too close. He was thankful for the physical shields of Hayden, JJ, Carter and sometimes Scott because otherwise he feared he would have done something stupid.

Months apart apparently had done absolutely nothing to help with that. If anything, proximity somehow made everything worse. Because FaceTime lied. FaceTime did not properly account for presence. Did not account for how broad Ilya had gotten over the season. How his eyes glowed, not just blue but more teal sometimes in some lights. Did not capture how much sharper his features looked after playoffs, or the way confidence sat differently on him now after captaincy and winning the Stanley Cup. It definitely did not account for the stupid warmth radiating off him every time they stood near each other.

Which unfortunately seemed to be constantly.

Now he was pacing, angry that every time he looked over to Rozanov for the last half hour, he was awfully chatty with a pretty reporter from ESPN- watching as she pressed her chest to his arm, or how she gave him flirty looks.

He looked down at his watch, a new one for the Rolex deal that would start advertising tonight. They would have to be onstage any second now and Rozanov was nowhere to be found.

“Nice watch,” Ilya murmured quietly while stepping next to him.

“We’re about to walk out. What the hell were you doing?” Shane looked away immediately in anger. “Or who were you doing?”

Ilya heard of course. “Noone. Don't worry.”

Shane seethed as he walked behind Rozanov, seeing the alpha having to adjust his suit before they walked out under the spotlights.

Shane rolled his eyes hard enough it almost hurt.

“You fucking asshole.”

“No,” Ilya corrected calmly. “Winner. This whole night has been mostly about me, Hollander.”

That-that earned him an elbow. Unfortunately, it only made Ilya grin.

They walked out to present their segment. Shane felt himself tense but he plastered a smile on his face and walked next to Rozanov to the podium. He read the teleprompter at the right moments but he fully tensed as he felt the alpha pull him a bit closer by the back of his neck and he slowly caressed his way down Shane’s spine and he followed along with the gag of taking selfies.

After the player from Winnipeg finished his speech, the three walked off, the sound of applause hurting Shane’s ears. He made it off the stage, down the three steps, and into the shadowed wings before the composure shattered. His lungs seized. The air turned to syrup.

He shoved past a stagehand with a garbled apology, his dress shoes slipping on the polished concrete as he stumbled down a sterile hallway, bursting through the first unmarked door he found.

A bathroom. Empty, thank god. He braced his hands on the cool porcelain of the sink, head hanging, as his chest locked in a vise. Each gasp was a shallow, ragged thing that brought no oxygen. Black spots danced at the edges of his vision. Idiot. You're in public. Get it together.

The door opened and shut again. A lock engaged with a definitive click.

Shane didn't need to look up. The presence that filled the small room was unmistakable, a pressure change that made the air itself crackle.

"What the fuck was that out there?"

Ilya's voice was a low, dangerous whip. Shane flinched.

"Anyone could have seen you run. You looked terrified." Ilya stepped closer, his reflection appearing in the mirror beside Shane's pale, sweating one. He wasn't smiling now. His expression was cold, furious. "And before that. Sitting between Hayden and Scott Hunter. Surrounding yourself with other alphas. Was that a message, zayka? A little display of independence?"

"What? They're my friends," Shane forced out between clenched teeth, fighting for breath. "My parents' seats were... farther back. It was just easier-"

"It was a choice." Ilya cut him off, stepping into his space. "A deliberate one. Now, kneel."

The command, delivered in that tone, in this confined space, should have been irresistible. A shiver of instinctual response ran through Shane. But he stiffened, his hands curling tight around the sink's edge. "No, go fuck yourself, you asshole."

Ilya's eyes narrowed. He studied Shane's heaving shoulders, the wild, unfocused panic in his eyes in the mirror. The anger in his own face shifted, thawing by a fraction into sharp assessment. He recognized the signs - the hyperventilation, the tremor, the fight against a threat that wasn't wholly physical.

"Breathe," Ilya said, the order softening into something more imperative. "In. Hold it. Now out." He demonstrated a slow, audible breath. "Again. With me."

For a minute, there was only the sound of their synchronized breathing in the tiled room. The crushing pressure in Shane's chest began to ease, just enough for the world to solidify.

"You are a mess," Ilya stated, his voice quieter now, stripped of its razor edge. "You cannot stay like this. Come to my room later. The penthouse. We will have time. My flight is not until morning, but I will not leave you... unsteady."

Shane swallowed, finally lifting his head to meet Ilya's gaze in the glass. "Your English... it's a lot better."

A faint, surprised smirk touched Ilya's mouth. "I practice. I read New Yorker. I do word puzzles."

Despite himself, a weak smile pulled at Shane's lips. "My dad loves The New Yorker."

"Being boring must be genetic," Ilya replied, his tone dry.

Shane's smile grew, just for a second, but his eyes glazed over, going soft and distant, lost in the simple, surreal normality of the conversation. "Wow. Genetic." he repeated softly.

Ilya saw it. The slip toward that vulnerable, faraway place. He couldn't allow it, not here. In one swift motion, he turned Shane from the sink, gripping his jaw firmly, forcing his face up. Shane's eyes darted, struggling to land.

"Look at me."

When Shane didn't immediately obey, Ilya crowded him back, step by step, until Shane's shoulders met the cold tile wall. The physical dominance was absolute, anchoring, pulling him from the fog. "Look. At. Me."

Shane's gaze snapped up and locked onto his. Clear. Present. Challenged.

"Good," Ilya murmured, his thumb stroking once over the hinge of Shane's jaw. "We go back. We spend one more hour at this boring party. I leave first. You follow ten minutes later. Penthouse 2. We will have the night. I will see you settled before I go. Do you understand?"

Shane nodded, a slow, deliberate dip of his chin in Ilya's grasp.

Ilya held the gaze a moment longer, then released him, stepping back. He adjusted his own tuxedo jacket, the picture of composure. He moved to the door, unlocked it, and pulled it open a crack. He paused, looking back over his shoulder, his grey eyes like chips of winter ice.

"One more thing, Hollander," he said, his voice dropping to a conversational tone that carried lethal weight. "If I were you, I would not let any of those alphas touch you again. A hand on the shoulder, an arm around the back... it would be unwise."

Then he was gone, the door sighing shut behind him, leaving Shane alone in the sudden, ringing silence.

The relief that had begun to cool Shane's veins evaporated, boiled away by a fresh, clean surge of fury. The audacity. The sheer, breathtaking arrogance to issue a decree like that, about his friends, his teammates. To forbid him. As if he owned the very air Shane breathed with others.

A hard, defiant smile spread across Shane's face. He straightened his bow tie in the mirror, smoothed his hair. His eyes, now clear and blazing, met his own reflection.

We'll see about that.

The next major award came sooner than expected. The Hart Trophy. Predictably, Ilya won.

The room erupted into applause while cameras immediately cut toward his table. Shane found himself standing automatically before he really thought about it, clapping harder than intended while Ilya moved toward the stage.

The arrogant asshole looked even better under the stage lights. Taller and bigger. Confident in that terrifyingly natural way Shane had quietly realized translated to basically every environment. Hockey. In the media. Apparently award ceremonies too. His speech was great too, the noticeably improved vocabulary was a hit with the crowd, they were obviously charmed and Shane had a hard time suppressing the blush when he felt Rozanov's eyes brush past him.

Still rough around the edges, still occasionally clipped in that distinctly Russian way, but better.

Enough that his acceptance speech actually sounded comfortable. He of course thanked the coaches, team, his mother, and everyone who made him play better.

Something shifted unpleasantly warm in Shane's chest. The Art Ross came later. Less surprising but of course Rozanov would win again. It was inevitable.

Then came Shane's turn. The Conn Smythe trophy went to him. The applause hit louder than expected. Longer too. Enough that Shane actually blinked for a second, because part of him still occasionally felt like he didn't fully belong yet. Then he glanced sideways. Ilya stood first. Immediately. Before anyone else. Expression unreadable except for something quietly proud sitting beneath it. That- that got to him more than expected.

Enough that suddenly standing up felt strangely emotional. The Bill Masterton award came a few minutes after and he was truly shocked. This was a different kind of respect. Recognition for perseverance. Heart. Something deeper than statistics. Shane got the impression that Rozanov was proud of him too. Shane noticed it immediately. The way his expression softened slightly.

The way he looked genuinely pleased in a way that felt startlingly unguarded.

As he was talking to some of his teammates, he put a hand in his pocket and felt a card that definitely was not there before. He turned and found a P2 engraved so Rozanov must have slipped it in his pocket in the bathroom.

With no real reason, that made him angry. He'd thought they had improved on how they communicated for the most part and Shane had thought he made it quite clear that he did not appreciate being told what to do. He turned back and went back to his group, placing himself between JJ and Carter- the two most openly affectionate people he knew.

As expected, he could see Rozanov's look over several times-he gaze noticeably tense. He had no right to, though. Shane noticed that Rozanov always seemed to be surrounded by a group of people all the time. That, and the jerk seemed to be thriving about it. The total opposite of himself.

It was about another 45 minutes before he noticed Rozanov start to say his goodbyes. He excused himself to go to his parents, coming up with an excuse to leave too. He slowly made his way out of the ballroom, saying goodbyes to his friends on the way out briefly.

The door sighed shut behind Shane, sealing him into the penthouse's profound silence. The only light came from the wall of windows, framing the city's glittering grid far below. And there, silhouetted against that vast backdrop, stood Ilya.

He was shirtless, the hard lines of his back and shoulders etched in the ambient glow. A curl of smoke rose from a cigarette between his fingers. In his other hand, a glass of clear liquid caught the distant light. He didn't turn.

Shane hovered just inside the door, the keycard still in his hand. The defiance that had fueled him from before was a distant echo here, drowned out by the quiet power radiating from the man at the window.

Ilya took a final, deep drag, then stubbed the cigarette out in a crystal ashtray. He turned, the movement slow and deliberate. His eyes, dark and unreadable, swept over Shane from head to toe in one assessing glance. He raised his glass and took a large, punishing gulp of the vodka, his throat working as he swallowed. He spread his arms wide, a mockery of a welcoming gesture.

"Well?"

Shane's mouth was dry. He shook his head, not in negation, but as if to clear it.

"Congratulations," he managed, his voice quiet. "On everything."

A faint, humorless smile touched Ilya's lips. "Thank you, Hollander." He set the glass down with a soft click. "Come. I want my prize."

He turned abruptly, his gaze scanning the room. It landed on a heavy, upholstered armchair. He grabbed it, the muscles in his back and arms coiling, and dragged it with ease into the adjacent bedroom. Shane followed, a moth drawn to a controlled, dangerous flame.

Ilya positioned the chair a few feet from the foot of the massive bed, angling it precisely. He sat, the picture of indolent authority, spreading his arms along the rests as if on a throne.

"This hotel is very nice," he remarked, his voice conversational. "Very good vodka. And the rooms are soundproof." His eyes, now glinting with intent, locked onto Shane. "Come on,

Hollander. Strip for me.”

Shane’s breath hitched. “Um... I haven’t... I’ve never-”

“I know, Hollander,” Ilya cut him off, his tone leaving no room for protest. “But I want to watch. Come on. Take your clothes off and get on the bed.”

He sat back, schooling his features into a mask of blank expectation. Inside, a cold fire burned. Hollander had intentionally goaded him today- looking devastating in his tuxedo, shining his attention on other alphas, pretending indifference after months of aching separation. After so long without him, Ilya knew his control was a frayed wire. Tonight, the lesson needed to be absolute.

He watched, unmoving, as Shane began. The shyness was genuine, and somehow that made it more potent. Shane unknotted his bow tie with trembling fingers, folded it neatly. The jacket came next, carefully laid over the back of a sofa. Each button of the dress shirt was a tiny agony of slowness. Ilya took another slow sip of vodka, the alcohol doing nothing to dull the sharp edge of his hunger.

Once down to his boxer briefs, Shane paused, a flush painting his freckled skin. Ilya motioned impatiently toward the bed. “On the bed.”

Shane climbed onto the crisp duvet, sitting stiffly against the headboard, legs crossed primly at the ankles. He looked exposed, young, waiting.

“Touch yourself for me.”

The command, delivered straight into Shane’s eyes, made the blush deepen, cascading down his neck and across his chest. “Come on, Hollander,” Ilya purred, shifting slightly in his chair. “It’s my special night, and this is my prize. Show off for me.”

He knew it was unfair, a psychological gambit of the highest order. To heighten it, he reached up, his fingers finding the edge of the scent patch at his own neck. He peeled it off slowly, letting it fall to the carpet.

The effect was instantaneous. His true scent- leather, pine and cold night air, and a dominant, possessive alpha musk- flooded the room. Across the bed, Shane’s pupils blew wide, his breath catching in a soft, desperate gasp.

“I... can I have a drink?” Shane whispered, his voice strained.

“No,” Ilya refused, his tone flat. “Touch yourself.”

He watched, a connoisseur of torment, as Shane’s hand began to move. He started on his own chest, stroking the skin in a poor imitation of the way Ilya touched him. Fingertips traced over his abs, shy and exploratory. Ilya sipped his vodka, his eyes a pendulum swinging between that trailing hand and Shane’s glazed, overwhelmed eyes.

When Shane’s fingers finally brushed the tented fabric of his briefs, Ilya’s voice cracked through the room. “Take them off. All the way.”

Shane obeyed, hooking his thumbs in the waistband and pushing them down, kicking them off the bed. He was fully naked now, beautifully, vulnerably exposed.

“Fuck,” Ilya mumbled into his glass, the word all awe and ache.

Shane’s hand closed around himself, giving a few tentative strokes. A shiver wracked his frame. After a moment, a broken whimper escaped him. “I need...”

“What?” Ilya asked, feigning indifference.

“You know...”

Ilya shook his head slowly. “Use your words. What do you need?”

The plea was torn from him, raw and honest. “I need you.”

Slowly, deliberately, Ilya drained the last of his vodka. He set the glass on the floor beside the chair. In one smooth, predatory movement, he stood up.

Shane scrambled, moving over on the bed as Ilya approached. As soon as Ilya was within reach, Shane turned, nuzzling his face against the fine wool of Ilya’s dress pants over his crotch, a wordless plea.

Ilya looked down, his expression hardening. “You teased me tonight. You tried to make me jealous.” His hand came down, not to caress, but to grip a handful of Shane’s hair, not quite pulling, just holding. “I will not go easy on you. This is the last chance you have to walk out of this room.”

In answer, Shane’s hips lifted off the bed, and he pressed his chest lower, arching his back, presenting himself in a way that was both submission and provocation. The view was exquisite, maddening.

He felt Shane’s shaking hands reach up, fumbling for the button of his pants. That was all the permission he needed.

In a blur of controlled violence, Ilya’s hands were on him. He manhandled Shane, flipping him, pressing his face down toward the headrest, arranging his body with brutal efficiency. There was no kiss, no gentle preparation. With a growl that was pure unleashed frustration, Ilya freed himself and pushed inside in one deep, claiming thrust.

Shane cried out, the sound swallowed by the duvet.

Ilya set a punishing rhythm immediately, each drive of his hips a punctuation to his anger. He pressed Shane’s upper body down with a heavy hand between his shoulder blades, using his own weight to dominate completely. He shifted an angle, pulled a hip back, manipulated Shane’s pliant body until he found the exact position that made Shane scream, a high, shattered sound. This was not love-making. It was a conquest, a reassertion of boundaries erased by time and distance, a physical answer to every flirtatious smile Shane had given

another alpha that night. The soundproof room absorbed every gasp, every sob, every animal grunt of effort, holding their private war inside its walls.

The only sound in the penthouse was the distant hum of the city and the ragged, slowing pull of their breath.

Shane lay where Ilya had left him, pressed into the bedding, unmoving. The violent, claiming heat that had filled him was receding, leaving a deep, throbbing soreness in its wake. He felt hollowed out, scoured clean by the intensity.

He heard the soft pad of Ilya's bare feet on the carpet, the click of the bathroom light, the run of water. A moment later, the bed dipped, and the warm, damp washcloth touched the small of his back. Ilya's touch was different now- methodical, thorough, devoid of the fury that had driven him minutes before. He cleaned Shane with a silent, clinical focus, wiping away the physical evidence of their encounter. The tenderness of the act was somehow more devastating than the roughness that had preceded it.

Finished, Ilya tossed the cloth toward the bathroom door and lay down beside him, not touching, just sharing the charged silence. The space between their bodies on the large bed felt like a canyon.

Shane swallowed, his throat dry. He slowly turned his body to face Rozanov. He had to say something. The silence was strangling him. "What will you do? In Russia, I mean. For the summer."

Ilya was staring at the ceiling, his profile a sharp line in the dim light. His jaw was still tight. "Training. See family. The usual." The words were short, clipped, leaving no room for follow-up.

The dismissal was a clear wall. Shane knew he should leave. The party was over, whatever this was tonight, it had been. There was nothing more to do here but linger in the awkward, painful aftermath. But his body felt heavy, leaden with a fatigue that went beyond the physical.

Slowly, wincing at the protest in his muscles, Shane pushed himself up. Every movement echoed the recent violence- a twinge in his hip, a deep ache that made sitting up straight a challenge. He didn't look at Ilya as he swung his legs over the side of the bed.

Ilya didn't move. He remained on his back, one arm behind his head, watching Shane from the corner of his eye. He knew he should get up. To see him out, to say a proper goodbye, to offer some crumb of comfort before three months of being apart. But a heavier weight pinned him to the mattress- the cold, certain knowledge of the separation ahead, and the raw, angry wound of the evening that made any gentle farewell feel like a lie. Letting Shane walk out now, like this, was its own kind of punishment for both of them.

Shane found his clothes where he had folded them. Dressing was a slow, painful ritual. Each piece of fabric felt like a shield going back into place. He didn't speak again. There was nothing left to say that wouldn't shatter.

Finally, he stood by the door, keycard in hand. He glanced back once. Ilya hadn't moved. His eyes were closed now, but the tension in his body was a visible line in the semi-darkness.

Shane turned the handle and let himself out. The door clicked shut with a sound of profound finality.

In the silent room, Ilya finally opened his eyes. He listened to the faint echo of footsteps fade down the hall. The emptiness of the penthouse expanded, vast and chilling. He had won the confrontation, asserted his dominance, made his point. As the silence solidified around him, the victory tasted utterly, completely of ash.

He reached for his phone, struggling to find the words to say. "I am sorry. I am going to miss you and I don't know what to do about it."

He waited for five minutes and received no reply.

The last message from Ilya sat unanswered for almost fourteen hours. Which, considering the last two months, was unheard of. Usually, Shane answered immediately or within an hour or two if he was at practice. Never this. Never silence.

But every time his phone buzzed, something unpleasant twisted low in his stomach. Because the truth sat there now, ugly and unavoidable in a way Shane could not outrun. The awards had been good for his career. Seeing him again had been good. Dangerously good.

The whole situation was complicated. The kind of complicated Shane still didn't fully know how to explain even to himself.

The problem was that he had liked parts last night. Enough to make things confusing.

Because beneath frustration and irritation and the lingering discomfort of everything unsaid sat the humiliating truth that some awful part of him had wanted Ilya close badly enough to ignore things he probably shouldn't.

And that terrified him. Too much emotion wrapped around things that were already messy enough.

And Shane kept replaying it anyway. Replaying his own reactions. Questioning himself, questioning Ilya. Questioning what exactly this thing between them had slowly become over the season.

Hard enough that sometime around three in the morning, staring up at the ceiling of his childhood bedroom while sleep refused to come, Shane finally admitted something to himself:

Something had to change.

Because whatever this was between them- it could not keep happening like this. Not if every argument eventually turned into confusion and hurt and impossible feelings Shane still didn't know what to do with. Not if wanting someone this badly made him willing to overlook things he normally never would.

His phone buzzed again.

Another text.

He looked despite himself.

IGR: You awake?

Sent three hours ago.

Before that:

IGR: Going to the airport now.

Then: IGR: You are quiet. Don't do this again. I apologized.

And finally, sometime close to four in the morning:

IGR: Hollander.

No anger. No demands. No orders.

Just his name. Hollander.

Which somehow made everything worse, because Shane knew him now.

Knew enough to hear the things left unsaid.

Concern, frustration. Maybe guilt. Maybe fear.

Because for two months, no matter how busy they got, no matter how bad schedules became, no matter how ridiculous time zones felt-

Shane had always answered. Always. And now suddenly- nothing.

The silence stretched long enough to mean something.

The problem sat there anyway. No matter how much Shane missed him.

No matter how badly seeing him again had hurt in all the worst ways.

No matter how much humiliatingly soft, embarrassing affection had quietly grown roots somewhere inside him.

This could not happen again.

Not like that.

Not with anger tangled into things.

Not with Shane leaving feeling confused and guilty and quietly ashamed of how much he had let slide simply because he missed someone.

Because he did miss him. God. That was the worst part. He already missed him. And maybe that was exactly why distance needed to happen. Because if he still missed Rozanov after the way he treated him last night, what did it say about him? That he would be almost allowing someone to treat him that way.

Morning arrived pale and quiet.

Shane sat curled up in bed long after he should have gotten up, tea growing cold beside him while sunlight slowly stretched across his blankets.

His phone rested heavy in his hands. Three separate drafts sat deleted already. Too emotional, too mean, too soft.

Nothing sounded right. Nothing sounded enough.

Because despite everything-

He didn't want to hurt him.

Didn't want this to become ugly. But maybe they needed space, needed distance.

Needed time to figure out what exactly they were doing to each other before something broke in a way neither of them could fix.

Eventually, after nearly forty minutes of staring at the screen, Shane exhaled slowly and started typing again.

Carefully this time.

Slowly.

Forcing himself not to backspace every other sentence.

Because if he waited any longer-

He knew himself. He would answer the call. He would soften. And nothing would change. The cursor blinked once. Twice.

Then finally:

S: I do not accept your apology. You cannot keep treating me like this, Ilya. I think being apart for the next few months will be a good idea so we can reassess and figure out exactly what we are doing to each other, because I refuse to let something like what happened last night happen again. Have a good summer, Rozanov. I will reach out when I am ready. Until then, do not contact me.

Shane stared at the message for a long time afterward.

Heart pounding harder than made sense.

Because despite anger, despite the frustration. Despite how deeply complicated this had all become- sending it still felt a little like heartbreak.

His thumb hovered. Stopped. Hovered again.

Then finally- he pressed send.

Three dots appeared almost immediately.

And disappeared.

Then appeared again.

Gone.

Appeared.

Gone.

Like Ilya kept typing something and deleting it.

Again.

And again.

And again. The Shane decided to follow through and block him for now. Shane hated how much that hurt.

Eventually, before anything could come through, Shane locked the phone and dropped it onto the blankets beside him.

For the first time in months-

Silence felt terrifying.

And somewhere impossibly far away in Russia-

Ilya Rozanov had no way to reach him.

Chapter End Notes

Well.



I feel like I should maybe hide from all the Ilya defenders for a little while.

Before anyone asks: yes, Shane means it. Yes, blocking him was intentional. And yes... Ilya will be absolutely losing his mind right now.

Summer break has officially begun, so the boys are going no contact for a while which Ilya totally deserves.

As always, I love reading theories, emotional damage reports, and “I need to fight someone” comments. Tell me who you’re mad at this chapter 🙄

Thank you all for reading, commenting, and screaming with me every chapter. Your comments genuinely make writing this so much more fun ❤️

Next chapter will be posted Tuesday if y'all are still with me. We go to Russia, Ilya gets pissed off but we see more of why he is the way he is and Shane tries to find purpose outside of hockey and apart from Ilya.

Chapter 15: Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Well, next chapter as promised. I lost some OG reviewers I think but hopefully they come back for the next chapter.

Thank you a million times for the comments and engagement-love y'all.

Chapter Notes

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

The drive home passed in a blur.

Shane remembered the airport vaguely. Remembered boarding, remembered somebody asking if the seat beside him was taken, remembered nodding without really hearing the question. He remembered forcing himself to smile at fans who recognized him, remembered signing something with fingers that felt disconnected from the rest of his body. A jersey, maybe. A hat. He wasn't sure.

Everything after the awards felt oddly muffled, like he was moving underwater. He answered his mother's questions with practiced ease when she texted to check if he'd landed.

Fine.

Tired.

Going to sleep for a while.

No, nothing's wrong.

The lies came easier than they should have.

By the time he unlocked the door to his apartment, exhaustion sat so deep in his bones that he could sleep for the next few days.

The familiar quiet greeted him immediately.

No teammates. No parents. No media obligations. No Rozanov.

Shane shut the door behind himself and stood there for a second, hand still resting against the lock.

Silence, actual silence. The kind he'd thought he wanted. The kind he had practically demanded. He should have felt relieved. Instead, something restless twisted beneath his ribs.

He dropped his duffel near the kitchen island and mechanically kicked off his shoes. His apartment looked exactly the same as he'd left it. Neat. Organized. Clean in the sterile way hotel rooms never quite managed to be.

Nothing was wrong. Nothing should *feel* wrong.

And yet, the hairs on the back of his neck prickled. Shane frowned. The feeling came slowly, quietly, impossible to explain. Like pressure, like a presence.

Like- he looked over his shoulder. Nothing. Empty apartment. Of course it was empty. The living room sat untouched, soft evening light spilling across the couch. The kitchen remained spotless. No movement. No sounds except the distant bird calls and the wind in the trees.

Still, something felt... off. His jaw tightened. This was stupid. He knew exactly where the feeling came from.

Too much stress. Too little sleep. Months of emotional whiplash and pheromone bullshit and whatever the hell had happened between him and Rozanov.

His body was probably just freaking out. But even knowing that didn't make the feeling disappear.

Didn't stop the strange, irrational sensation that if he turned quickly enough- someone might already be watching him.

His chest tightened.

"No," he muttered quietly to himself.

Get it together. You're fine. You're home.

Still.

His feet carried him down the hallway faster than usual.

Into the bedroom. Locking the door behind himself immediately. Only once the click sounded did some of the tension loosen from his shoulders. Shane stood still in the middle of the room. His own room, his own space.

And frowned harder, because somehow he still didn't feel alone. His eyes moved slowly around the familiar space. Over the furniture, the knick knacks he had placed around the room, the book on the nightstand he had forgotten to take with him last week.

Nothing out of place. Nothing that look like it was tampered with.

And yet the sensation lingered, crawling unpleasantly beneath his skin. Like invisible eyes. Watching, waiting.

His stomach twisted. *It's in your head. You know it's in your head.*

He knew that. God, logically he knew that. But logic had not exactly been winning lately. Especially not after last night.

Not after letting somebody get entirely too deep under his skin.

Not after realizing that in a sick and twisted way, he still would miss him anyway. The ache of that thought settled hard in his chest.

Shane scrubbed both hands down his face. He couldn't stay here. The realization arrived immediately. Absolute. He looked around again. The apartment suddenly felt too familiar.

Too quiet. Too full of memories he hadn't noticed collecting. FaceTimes in bed, late night calls, texts.

The stupid place on the couch where he always sat while talking to him.

The kitchen where Rozanov once made fun of the fact Shane somehow survived almost entirely on protein bars during playoffs.

The bed. God. *The bed.*

The same bed where he'd laid awake too many nights staring at his phone after hanging up, smiling like an idiot. Where he and Rozanov first-

No. *Absolutely not.* He made himself stop that train of thought. He would not back down, he would not become one of those pathetic omega's that his teammates made fun of all the time.

Movement snapped through him. Quick and focused.

Almost frantic.

He grabbed the duffel and yanked it open, dumping the contents on the floor.

Clothes. Whatever. Didn't matter.

He opened drawers without thinking, grabbing random hoodies, sweats, underwear, chargers.

Toothbrush.

Laptop.

Phone charger.

More clothes.

Half of it probably didn't even match.

Didn't matter.

He needed- Distance. Somewhere quiet. Somewhere that didn't feel haunted by his own terrible decisions.

An hour later, he stood in the elevator wearing a baseball cap pulled low and carrying enough stuff to disappear for a few days.

His phone buzzed twice.

Mom.

Then team group chat.

He hesitated.

Then typed quickly.

To his parents:

S: I just left home. Just overwhelmed. Going to decompress for a few days before training starts back up. I'm okay. Just want some quiet. Love you.

To the chat that he had with his friends:

S: Gonna disappear for a few days. Need to decompress after the season. Don't worry if I'm quiet. I'm fine.

He ignored the immediate flood of responses.

JJ: *bro are u ok?*

Hayden: *Need company?*

Scott: *Call if needed.*

Carter: *Please don't become one of those weird forest men*

Despite himself, Shane almost smiled.

Almost.

Then the elevator opened.

An hour later, he checked into a hotel far enough away that nobody would casually stop by.

Nothing fancy. Just anonymous. Neutral, forgettable.

Exactly what he wanted. The room smelled like industrial detergent and stale air conditioning. Perfect.

No memories. No ghosts. No Rozanov.

That last thought hurt worse than expected. Shane ignored it. He locked the door. Latched it too.

Then stood there in the middle of the unfamiliar room.

Still, waiting, listening.

Nothing. No strange pressure. No phantom awareness.

No sensation crawling up his spine.

Just quiet.

For the first time all day he finally felt alone.

The relief hit so hard it almost made him dizzy.

Slowly, he exhaled.

Then headed for the bathroom.

He turned the shower as hot as it would physically go.

Steam filled the room almost immediately.

Shane stepped under the water without waiting for it to cool.

Heat burned against already-sensitive skin.

He welcomed it.

Welcomed something sharp enough to interrupt the noise in his head.

He stood there unmoving for a long time.

Water running over his face.

His shoulders.

His closed eyes.

Trying—

And failing—

To process the last twenty-four hours.

Because every time he replayed it, his thoughts tangled worse.

The awards. Rozanov running his hand down back in front of hundreds of people. The bathroom, the panic attack.

The way Ilya had calmed him down.

The penthouse- he didn't know what to feel honestly. He'd be lying if he said it the whole experience was terrible-whether the omega in him or if it really was *him* that hadn't taken the out that Rozanov had presented before things got-

the way things had still gone. The way part of him had still wanted Rozanov. Wanted the comfort, the closeness. He had wanted to please Rozanov, to make him see his worth as a person and an omega.

Wanted-

His throat tightened. No.

No.

Because wanting somebody didn't suddenly make everything okay. What happened with Rozanov wasn't okay. No matter how much Shane missed him. No matter how badly he still wanted to call him.No matter how much humiliating, stupid affection had rooted itself somewhere deep enough to hurt.

It wasn't healthy. It just wasn't. Shane braced both hands against the tile wall. The water burned hotter.

Good.

Because if he stood still long enough maybe things would make sense. But they didn't.

Because the alpha/omega relationships he'd actually seen, the few healthy ones, were not like this.

Not obsessive. Not possessive to the point of fear. Not constantly pushing boundaries until Shane didn't know what was normal anymore. Not confusing anger with care. Not making him feel simultaneously protected and trapped. Not making him question himself every five minutes.

His parents weren't like this. Scott and Kip, from what he'd heard, weren't like this.

Even some of the older mated players he knew- their relationships had softness.

Hayden and Jackie acted very similar to his parents. Not- whatever the hell this had become.

Because wasn't that the problem?

The terrifying part?

That Shane had started excusing things.

Making exceptions.

Overlooking behavior that would horrify him if it happened to literally anybody else.

Because it was Rozanov. Because he missed him.

Because underneath all the impossible intensity-, there was care too. Real care. Tenderness, protection. Moments that felt devastatingly genuine. And somehow, now it made it all seem worse.

Because if Ilya had just been cruel from the start, if he had just been awful, leaving would have been easy.

Instead he was complicated. When he wasn't in front of the crowds, or playing up a character version of himself, Shane had seen glimpses of him almost broken in ways Shane didn't fully understand. It made him want to take care of the alpha, to offer him tenderness in return.

And Shane, God. Shane still will miss him anyway.

He slid slowly down the shower wall until he sat against cool tile, knees drawn toward his chest.

Steam curled around him. Water beat relentlessly overhead. And somewhere beneath anger, confusion, guilt and hurt- something heartbreakingly soft still whispered the same terrible thing. *I want to call him.*

The water eventually turned lukewarm. Shane didn't notice at first.

He stayed sitting against the tile, forehead resting against damp skin, letting the spray beat endlessly against the back of his neck until the heat stopped burning and settled into something duller. His thoughts had long since looped themselves into exhaustion.

Eventually, practicality won. He pushed himself up slowly, immediately wincing.

His entire body protested.

A deep ache settled inside him, low in his hips and thighs, unpleasantly familiar and embarrassingly tied to memories he was actively trying not to replay. Even standing felt off somehow, his muscles sore in ways that made him flush despite being entirely alone.

"Great," he muttered under his breath.

The mirror had completely fogged over when he finally stepped out.

Steam curled around him in thick waves as he grabbed one of the stiff white hotel towels and wrapped it low around his waist. Water dripped steadily from damp curls, trailing down flushed skin.

His whole body was red.

His shoulders looked sunburned from how hot the water had been, fingertips wrinkled and prune-like from standing under it far too long. Probably not normal. Definitely not healthy. Whatever.

At least his brain had shut up for the duration of the shower. He grabbed another towel, rubbing roughly at his hair as he wandered back into the room.

Then stopped. Completely still. Because the thought arrived so suddenly it almost felt like whiplash.

Before last night, before the awards. Before everything had gone sideways, he had actually been looking forward to talking to Rozanov.

Because somewhere between awkward phone calls and stolen moments over the past two seasons he had started to feel differently. Shane had quietly started planning the conversation.

Not even intentionally. Just... thinking about it. The suppressants, the patch. The very reliable birth control.

The fact that they probably didn't need condoms anymore. A heat of embarrassment crawled up his neck. God.

He had actually been looking forward to telling him. He could still hear stupid locker room conversations from veteran alphas over the years, casually complaining about condoms like it was the worst inconvenience on earth.

Doesn't feel the same. Can't stand them. My wife switched birth control and thank god.

Shane had rolled his eyes every single time. But still- some stupid, embarrassingly domestic part of him had quietly thought Rozanov would probably be happy.

Would probably get that impossible smug look on his face. Would probably say something obnoxiously possessive and infuriating.

Shane had wanted that. Wanted the conversation. Wanted what it implied. Stability, something serious-official.

Something that maybe resembled a future.

His hand stilled against the towel.

Slowly, involuntarily, his eyes drifted downward.

To the flat plane of his stomach.

Lower.

His expression tightened.

There was absolutely no way.

Impossible.

Completely impossible.

It was only once, one night.

He knew that.

Logically, he knew that.

Still- for one humiliating second, the thought surfaced anyway. A tiny impossible maybe. A dangerous little fantasy. And what startled him most, what horrified him, actually, was the brief, sharp flicker of disappointment that followed logic.

Gone almost instantly.

But there.

Real enough to sting.

Shane stared hard at himself.

“You are actually losing your mind,” he muttered.

Because seriously.

A baby?

With Rozanov?

Absolutely not.

That would be catastrophic.

Career-ending levels of catastrophic.

Emotionally catastrophic. Practically catastrophic.

And still-

His chest tightened painfully.

Because some awful, embarrassingly soft part of him could picture it too easily.

Rozanov hovering. Protective to a ridiculous degree. Terrifyingly devoted. Possessive in ways that would probably become completely unbearable. And somehow, underneath all of that, happy.

Really happy.

The image disappeared as quickly as it came. Shane scrubbed a hand hard down his face. “No.”

Firmly this time.

“No.”

He wasn't doing this.

Not today. Not after everything. Not when he'd literally blocked him less than twenty-four hours ago.

He finished drying off quickly, pulling on a loose pair of workout shorts and ignoring how sore the movement made him.

The room still smelled faintly like detergent and hotel air-conditioning.

He dug through his bag until he found his toiletry kit buried beneath tangled chargers and half-folded clothes.

Pain relievers.

Thank god.

He shook two into his palm, swallowed them dry without bothering to grab water, and climbed onto the unfamiliar hotel bed.

The mattress dipped strangely beneath him.

Too soft.

Too cold.

Not home.

Which, right now was probably for the best.

He rolled onto his side and pulled the blanket halfway over himself. His body still ached. His thoughts still felt too loud. But exhaustion finally outweighed everything else.

The confusion. The anger. The missing *him*. The humiliating tenderness that refused to fully go away.

Shane squeezed his eyes shut. Hard. Determined.

He would rest. Sleep.

Ignore the world for a few hours.

Ignore the complicated, impossible mess sitting across the world in Russia.

No thinking. No spiraling. Just quiet.

Just rest.

And eventually despite himself, sleep finally started pulling at him.

The flight to Russia felt endless because every twenty minutes Ilya found himself checking his phone like a man possessed, rereading the same unanswered messages until he could practically recite them from memory. The last group he didn't think they even went through.

The airport lounge buzzed around him in a blur of movement and noise he barely registered. A few teammates still drunk on the high of the Stanley Cup, management talking schedules, media lingering too long hoping for one more quote from the newly crowned captain. Usually he loved being with his team, loved having a camera in front of him. Usually he could compartmentalize, push emotions into some locked corner of himself until hockey obligations were handled. Today, he wanted everyone to leave him the fuck alone.

Because Hollander had gone quiet. Again.

And Shane Hollander had promised not to do that again. Not with him, not anymore.

Even angry, Shane answered. Sometimes coldly. Sometimes stubborn enough to make Ilya want to drag him into the nearest room and argue until they understood each other again. Sometimes passive aggressive in a way that made him roll his eyes so hard it physically hurt. But he answered. Now there was just silence.

Ilya sat heavily in one of the leather airport chairs, broad shoulders tense beneath his jacket as he stared down at the thread on his phone. Three messages sat unanswered. Or maybe unread. Hard to tell. Airport signal flickered between terrible and nonexistent, the little delivery icon refusing to cooperate long enough for him to tell if Shane had actually blocked him or if the airport Wi-Fi was simply complete shit.

IGR: *I am sorry. I know you angry.*

Nothing.

Twenty minutes later:

IGR: *You should not disappear like this.*

Still nothing.

He frowned harder, thumb hovering over the keyboard. Shane had said he would block him. But Shane also said things when emotional. Usually, after enough time passed, there was some annoyed reply hours later, something clipped and irritated but still there. Shane cooled down eventually. They always figured it out eventually. Didn't they?

The uncertainty settled unpleasantly in his chest.

He scrubbed a hand down his jaw before typing again.

IGR: *I am sorry. I was too rough.*

The message sat there. Pending. Maybe delivered, Impossible to tell.

Fuck.

He leaned back harder in the chair, jaw flexing as frustration slowly gave way to something heavier. Because yes, he knew he had crossed a line. He knew that. He had let jealousy and possessiveness get the better of him after months apart, after seeing Shane wrapped up in other alphas' space all night while pretending none of this affected him. Watching Hayden lean too close, Carter drape himself around him, Scott hovering nearby in that irritatingly protective way, all while Shane looked devastating in that suit and acted like months apart had somehow meant nothing.

But Shane had still come to the penthouse.

Had still climbed into his bed.

Had still obeyed him. Needed him. Wanted him.

That mattered too. Didn't it?

"Mr. Rozanov?"

Ilya looked up sharply. One of the attendants stood nearby, professional smile fixed into place. "We're beginning boarding."

He nodded once, distracted already by his phone again. Still nothing.

Fine. One more. Short this time. Simple.

IGR: *Text me when you calm down.*

Still pending.

The walk through boarding blurred together. Security, quiet congratulations, fans somehow sneaking pictures despite private access. He barely listened to any of it. The moment he settled into his seat, his phone was back in his hand.

Nothing.

Still.

He typed again.

Deleted it.

Typed something longer.

Deleted that too.

Finally:

IGR: *I miss you already.*

His thumb hovered for a second.

Too soft, too honest. But Hollander might smile at it.

He sent it anyway.

Pending.

Still fucking pending.

“Sir,” the flight attendant said gently beside him. “We’ll need electronics switched off before takeoff.”

“One minute.”

She smiled patiently, already exhausted by passengers.

“One minute.”

Ilya stared at the thread one last time, frowning hard enough his temples started aching. No Shane. No reply. Something about that unsettled him more than anger would have.

Fine. Shane was upset, understandable.

He could be upset.

Ilya knew he had pushed too hard.

He would give him space for a few days. Let him cool off. Then they would talk properly. Like adults. Shane always got emotional first and rational later. Eventually he would answer.

They always answered each other.

Didn’t they?

The thought sat strangely hollow as he finally switched his phone off and tucked it away while the plane began taxiing.

The next morning, Russia came into view beneath pale clouds and muted gray skies.

Usually, seeing Moscow again settled something inside him. Familiar roads. Familiar language. Familiar cold. Home, in the complicated, bittersweet way it had always been home.

Today, he felt like absolute shit. He had slept maybe two hours. Maybe.

The rest of the flight had been restless shifting and half-finished sleep, repeatedly waking convinced his phone had vibrated only to realize it hadn't. The second inflight Wi-Fi became available, he opened his iPad.

Nothing. No messages. No FaceTime attempts.

No angry texts from Shane.

No annoyed *I said leave me alone*.

Nothing.

He refreshed.

Again.

Still nothing.

Tried sending another message.

Nothing went through.

He even checked email at one point, which felt pathetic enough that he almost closed the app immediately afterward.

Still nothing.

No delivered notification.

No response.

Just blank silence.

Fine.

Okay.

Shane was angry.

Understandable.

Ilya knew he had been too rough. Too possessive. Too angry. He *knew* that.

But also, Shane had not stopped him. Hadn't pushed him away. Hadn't told him no.

Hell, Shane had gone to the penthouse himself. Had sat on the bed looking flushed and shy and needy in a way Ilya still could not stop thinking about.

Shane had wanted him too. *Needed* him too.

So maybe this was just hurt feelings and distance and exhaustion making everything worse than it actually was.

Maybe Shane just needed time.

A few days. A week, maybe. Then they would talk.

Ilya could apologize properly. Explain himself better. Try harder.

Because yes, he had fucked up, but it could not have been unforgivable. Could it?

The uncertainty sat heavier than he wanted to admit.

The plane touched down with a soft jolt.

The second the seatbelt sign switched off, Ilya turned his phone back on.

Waited. Nothing, no delayed notifications.

No flood of missed messages.

No Shane.

His chest tightened. Because suddenly, for the first time in months, he genuinely could not reach him.

The airline quietly escorted him through disembarking while fans crowded barriers anyway, phones already out.

“Rozanov!”

“Captain!”

“Can we get a picture?”

“Congratulations!”

He barely looked up. Didn’t stop. Didn’t smile.

Just kept his head down, shoulders tense, phone already back in his hand as he restarted it once.

Then again. Still nothing. Fine.

He tried calling. Straight to voicemail.

His jaw flexed harder. Again. Voicemail.

No ringing. No FaceTime. No response.

That sharp discomfort in his chest deepened into something uglier.

Because suddenly, the ocean between them felt unbearably large.

Because he could not hear Shane. Could not see him. Could not even tell if he was okay. And he hated that.

By the time baggage claim started moving, unease had settled deep enough that he stopped trying to rationalize it.

Alright.

If Shane wanted space, he could have space. He could have his illusion of space for a few days. Did not mean Ilya had to stop worrying. He pulled out his second phone and made another call.

One Shane did not know about.

The private security detail. There only to watch from a distance. Because Shane was oblivious. Too trusting, too recognizable. Too easy a target.

The line clicked. “Mr. Rozanov.”

“Report.” A brief pause.

“Mr. Hollander checked into a hotel yesterday evening. Alone.”

Ilya straightened immediately. “Hotel?” His voice sharpened instinctively. “Why?”

“Unsure, sir. He left his apartment shortly after arriving home.”

That made something unpleasant twist low in his stomach.

“Anything unusual?”

“No visitors. Ordered food to room. Minimal movement. Appears alone.”

Ilya was already opening the tracker. The tiny interface loaded slowly. Then finally. There: Location.

Heart rate.

Movement.

Minimal activity for hours.

Heart rate lower than usual.

Sleeping.

Relief hit hard enough that he exhaled quietly through his nose.

Okay.

Sleeping.

Safe.

Fine.

He checked again anyway.

No elevated stress.

No strange movement.

Nothing alarming.

And yet the relief only settled halfway.

Because he still could not reach him.

Could not hear his voice.

Could not know if Shane was devastated, spiraling, furious, or simply exhausted.

The silence made him nervous. Deeply nervous.

Because for months now, no matter how busy they got, no matter how impossible schedules became, no matter how stupid the time zones felt, Shane had always answered eventually.

Always.

Now there was nothing.

Ilya stared at the sleeping biometrics far too long while airport staff quietly moved him through baggage claim. Eventually, softly enough that nobody nearby could hear, he muttered to himself in Russian,

“Wake up soon, zayka.”

His thumb hovered over the thread anyway.

One more try.

Just in case.

IGR: *Please talk to me.*

Pending.

Still nothing.

Something about not being able to see or hear him sat wrong inside his chest in a way he could not explain.

Because for the first time in months, Shane felt completely out of reach.

And Ilya Rozanov had never been good at losing access to the things he cared about.

Once outside the airport, Moscow greeted him with cold air and gray skies.

The city always smelled different than North America. Sharper somehow. Exhaust, wet pavement, distant cigarette smoke curling through the chill. Familiar in a way that sat deep in muscle memory.

Usually, coming home settled something inside him.

Today, everything felt heavier.

His duffel sat abandoned beside him in the backseat while the city blurred past the window in muted colors. Stopping at his apartment first would have made sense. Sleep would have made sense. Food. Maybe visiting his grandmother.

Instead, after ten quiet minutes staring blankly at traffic, Ilya leaned forward slightly.

“Na Kutuzovsky Prospekt,” he said quietly. “Kladbishche.”

The driver glanced at him through the mirror once and nodded.

“Da.”

The cemetery. His mother first. Always. Some habits never left.

The florist sat near an intersection he remembered from childhood. Small. Quiet. Mostly older women arranging flowers with careful hands. He stepped out alone, hood pulled up despite being recognizable enough now that somebody still paused halfway down the sidewalk and blinked in recognition.

“Hockey player,” someone whispered quietly.

He ignored it.

Inside, warmth greeted him immediately.

The scent of flowers settled thick in the air.

“Lilii?” the older florist asked gently after a pause.

Lilies.

Always lilies.

His mother had liked them because they looked elegant without trying too hard. Simple. Clean.

“Da.”

White. Of course. The bouquet sat heavy in his hands as he climbed back into the car. The drive grew quieter after that. Moscow slowly thinning. Buildings giving way to quieter roads. Memory settling in around him like fog.

He had been twelve the last time he saw his mother alive. Twelve and angry. Twelve and stupid enough to believe adults stayed forever.

Sometimes he still remembered little things at random. The way she tucked blankets around him when he was sick. The smell of tea. The way she touched his hair absentmindedly while reading.

The softness.

God. He barely remembered softness anymore.

The grounds sat quiet.

Still. Ilya told the driver to wait, then he walked alone.

He knew the path without thinking. Left turn. Up the small hill. Third row. He found her immediately.

The stone looked exactly the same.

Untouched by time in the way graves somehow always were.

He crouched first. Set the lilies carefully at the base.

Ilya sat in front of the headstone for a long time before he spoke. The lilies rested carefully against the base of the stone, white against gray granite, the cold creeping through his jeans where he sat on the hard ground with one knee drawn up toward his chest. Moscow remained quiet around him, muted beneath pale skies, the cemetery still in the way only cemeteries could be, his phone sat face down beside him on the ground, useless and silent, still empty of messages no matter how many times he checked it.

Finally, after several minutes, he scrubbed a tired hand down his face and exhaled slowly.

“Privet, Mama,” he said quietly, his Russian rough around the edges from exhaustion. “I won. Just like I promised”

The words sat strangely between them.

“We got the Stanley Cup. Then I won the Hart Trophy. I was named Captain at the last game.” His mouth twitched faintly, humorless. “Temporary first, but permanent enough now, I think.” He glanced down at the lilies. “You would probably pretend not surprised. You always did that - where impossible things somehow seemed expected.” A pause stretched. “You would yell at me for smoking though.”

The silence afterward felt familiar. Comfortable, even.

Because no matter how old he got, no matter how famous or successful or exhausted, this was still the one place where he let his guard down.

“I met somebody,” he admitted finally, quieter now. “He is very annoying.” The corner of his mouth lifted despite himself. “Stubborn. Does opposite of everything I say just because he know it irritates me. Bad texter too.” His expression tightened immediately after. “Actually, no. Usually he text back. That part is new.”

His eyes drifted toward the gray sky.

“You would like him, I think,” he continued softly. “He is quiet, but not weak. People mistake those things all time. He is stronger than most people I know.” His voice softened without permission. “He cares too much. About everyone. About hockey. About doing the right thing. He forgets to care about himself.”

He swallowed.

“He is beautiful too- so beautiful, but not in a shallow way. Just...” He searched for the word, frustrated by how impossible Shane suddenly felt to explain. “Good,” he settled on quietly. “He is still somehow good after people disappoint him. Still kind. Still soft underneath all that stubbornness.”

His chest tightened unexpectedly.

“He makes me want stupid things,” Ilya admitted after a moment, rubbing the heel of his palm against one tired eye. “Domestic things. Quiet things. I want to call him after games. Hear him complain. Sit in silence while he pretends not to be tired.” A small, humorless laugh escaped him. “I like hearing him laugh. He makes my apartment feel less empty.”

The admission lingered between gravestones. “I think maybe I love him. I am not sure though. What I feel has to be love.”

The words sounded strange spoken aloud. Too vulnerable. Too honest. “He hates me right now.”

That one hurt.

“I fucked up,” he admitted, voice roughening. “I was too rough. Too angry. Too jealous.” His jaw flexed harder. “Watching people touch him all night. Watching him laugh with other alphas after months apart like seeing him again did not completely ruin my fucking head.”

He shook his head once, frustrated with himself. “He looked too...” His mouth tightened. “I do not know. Too close and too far away at same time.”

The cold bit through his clothes. Still, he stayed.

“But he came to me,” he said quieter now, uncertainty slipping in around the edges. “He still came to my room. Wanted me too.” His gaze dropped. “Didn’t he?”

The silence gave no answers.

“That is the problem,” he muttered. “I cannot tell anymore when I make excuses.”

His hand curled tighter over his knee. “I have bad thoughts sometimes, Mama.” The confession came slower. Heavier. “Dark thoughts.”

“Not hurting him. Never.” The idea itself made something ugly twist in his stomach. “But controlling things. Keeping him close. Making sure he cannot leave.”

His throat tightened.

“Sometimes I think about mating him. Really mating him. Permanent.” Shame flickered briefly across his face. “Like maybe if he belonged fully to me, if a bond existed, he would stop running. Stop disappearing. Stop hurting both of us.” A bitter laugh escaped him. “Crazy, right?”

He dragged a hand over his face again.

“And the worst part...” His voice lowered. “Worst part is sometimes instinct tells me if I just pushed harder, if I stopped asking, stopped waiting for him to choose, everything would finally settle.” His jaw tightened immediately after. “But I know what will happen if I do.”

His eyes dropped toward the lilies.

“If I force him...” His throat worked once. “He would not be *him* anymore.”

The words hurt to say.

Because Shane, with his millions of questions, soft and stubborn and frustrating and nervous, mattered.

The eye rolls. The playful arguments. The quiet little moments where he chose him anyway, despite everything.

That mattered.

"If I take his choice away..." Ilya swallowed hard. "Something bright in him would die." His voice dropped lower, quieter. "He would stay, maybe. But it would not be him anymore."

And somehow, that scared him worse than losing him entirely.

Because Shane soft and difficult and complicated was the person he had fallen for.

Not obedient. Not broken. Not afraid.

"I think maybe that is what scares me," he admitted quietly. "That sometimes I sound too much like him." His father remained unnamed between them, especially in this place.

The belief that fear somehow meant loyalty.

The ugly instinct to possess instead of trust.

"I hated him for that," Ilya said softly. "And now sometimes I see pieces of him in me and wonder if maybe I am worse because at least he never thought he was wrong. I know it's wrong but I am tempted anyway."

The exhaustion settled heavier then. Not physical. Something darker. Something that had been growing quietly for months now.

"I'm tired, Mama."

His voice roughened. "I win everything." His mouth twisted faintly. "Everything twelve-year-old me would kill for."

His gaze drifted toward the silent phone beside him.

"And somehow none of it matters because one stupid boy in Canada is not answering me."

A humorless laugh left him. "Pathetic."

But his chest still hurt. Because the silence stretched too long. The ocean between them suddenly felt impossibly large. He leaned forward slightly, brushing a thumb over the edge of the cold stone.

"You would have liked him, I sometimes think you sent him to me." he said quietly after a long moment.

A tiny smile flickered. Then it disappeared.

"I think maybe he's too good for me." The admission sat heavier than expected.

And for the first time in months, Ilya genuinely had no idea how to get him back.

"Please do not let me ruin this," he whispered finally, voice quiet enough that it disappeared into the cold. "I do not think I will survive losing him."

The drive back from the cemetery sat heavy inside him.

Usually, seeing his mother settled something. Not fixed it, exactly. Nothing really fixed anything anymore. But it usually quieted the worst parts of his mind for a little while. Helped him separate the noise. Helped him remember who he was supposed to be underneath hockey and anger and the ugly instincts he spent so much effort trying to keep under control.

Today, even after spending more time than usual at her gravesite, everything felt worse. Because Shane still had not answered.

Every few minutes during the drive, Ilya checked anyway. The tracker loaded slowly each time, taunting him with tiny fragments of reassurance that somehow only made the anxiety sharper. Heart rate steady. Minimal movement. Location unchanged. Still inside the hotel room.

Sleeping.

Or resting.

Still. No signs of distress. No sudden spike in stress markers. Nothing alarming.

And yet something deep in him stayed restless. Shane had blocked him out. This wasn't running away. This was Hollander putting a wall in between them.

Even angry, he usually responded eventually. Maybe short. Maybe cold. Maybe stubborn enough to make Ilya want to shake him and kiss him in equal measure. But he answered.

The silence stretched too long now.

By the time the car pulled up outside his father's estate, gray afternoon had settled fully over Moscow. The house stood exactly the same as it always had, enormous and cold and somehow still trying too hard to impress people who had not mattered in years. Dark stone. Sharp lines. Too much money spent pretending wealth made people happier.

Ilya had always hated it. Even as a child, Especially as a child. It had represented his mother's prison.

He stepped inside without knocking.

Nobody stopped him. Nobody ever did.

The maid he had hired a few months ago to help Polina moved around him quietly, professionally, eyes lowered "Your father is in the study," Polina said quietly while taking his coat.

Of course he was. Where else? The office smelled exactly the same. Old books. Expensive liquor.

Grigory Rozanov sat behind the oversized desk, broad shoulders slightly more stooped than the last time Ilya had seen him. Older somehow. Smaller, though admitting that to himself felt strange. His father had always occupied too much space in memory. Too loud. Too imposing. Too impossible to ignore.

Now there were cracks.

Subtle ones.

But there.

Grigory looked up slowly when he entered.

"There he is," he muttered after a second. "The champion remembers family."

Ilya rolled his eyes automatically and leaned against the doorway. "Privet to you too."

His father gestured lazily toward the liquor cabinet without much enthusiasm. "Drink?"

"No."

"Too good now to share a drink with his father then, huh?"

"It's been a long day and I do not want alcohol tonight."

Grigory frowned faintly at that.

Did I?

The pause lingered strangely before he waved it off.

"You cut your hair."

“I did not.”

“You did.”

Ilya frowned, he hadn't had a haircut since before the olympics due to lack of time and his father had seen them then.

Another pause.

Then: “How is Sergei?”

Ilya blinked once.

Slowly. “Who?”

“Sergei.” His father frowned impatiently now. “From Kazan. Tall kid. Played wing.”

Something uncomfortable settled immediately in Ilya's stomach. “Papa,” he said carefully, “Sergei died.”

Ten years ago from a car accident.

Grigory just stared at him.

Blinked.

Twice.

Then frowned harder.

“No,” he muttered eventually. “No. That was...” His expression shifted strangely, confusion flickering briefly across it. “Another one.”

Silence stretched.

Something about it sat wrong.

Off. Then just as quickly, his father waved it away like the moment had never happened.

“Sit.”

So Ilya sat.

The argument started, predictably, less than ten minutes later.

“You disappear to America,” Grigory muttered while pouring whiskey despite it barely being afternoon. “Forget your family. You forget your duties to your country.”

“I call.”

“Not enough.”

“You don’t answer.”

“You should try harder!”

Ilya laughed once, humorless.

“There it is.”

His father narrowed his eyes. “What?”

“Impossible standards.”

“You sound disrespectful.”

“You sound drunk.”

That earned him a sharp look.

“Still arrogant.”

Normal.

Almost.

Except every few minutes something strange happened. His father repeated himself. Told the same complaint twice.

Mentioned old acquaintances like they were still alive.

Asked once how junior hockey was going before going oddly quiet when Ilya stared at him too long.

He forgot details.

Lost words.

Paused strangely in the middle of sentences.

The discomfort only deepened.

Enough that somewhere beneath irritation, worry quietly started growing teeth.

Then the office door slammed open.

Alexie stumbled inside already looking terrible.

Eyes glassy. Jaw too tight. Too much energy vibrating beneath his skin. Cocaine.

Again. Wonderful.

“Ilya!” his brother grinned too wide. “Big hot shot hockey player.”

The smell hit immediately.

Chemical.

Sharp.

Familiar enough to make Ilya grimace.

“Jesus Christ,” he muttered.

“Oh relax.”

“You look like shit.”

“You shut the fuck up.”

Their father barely looked up. “Brothers,” he muttered vaguely. “Sit.”

Neither listened.

The fight started quickly.

Too quickly.

“You think you better than everybody now?” Alexie snapped suddenly, pacing the office like he physically could not stop moving. “Big fucking hockey star.”

“No,” Ilya replied flatly. “I think you should stop doing cocaine before thirty.”

That escalated things immediately.

Old resentment surfaced fast.

Money.

Favoritism.

Their mother.

Who disappointed who.

Who left.

Who stayed.

Alexie accused him of abandoning the family. Ilya accused Alexie of slowly killing himself with the money he sent. Somewhere in the middle, Grigory tried joining the conversation only to derail halfway through, mentioning people none of them had spoken to in years before getting irritated when nobody followed.

Eventually Alexie shoved him.

Not hard, it didn't even cause him to move.

Still enough.

Ilya shoved back harder.

"You always think you know best," Alexie snapped.

"No," Ilya replied coldly. "I think somebody should care enough tell you truth."

"Fuck you."

"You fucking addict. Can't even use your own money to snort up your nose."

"Fuck. You."

Their father yelled something from behind the desk that made almost no sense.

Something about training camp.

Something about their mother making dinner.

The room went strangely quiet.

Because their mother had been dead for years.

Grigory frowned at both of them like they were children.

"Stop fighting before she gets upset."

The silence afterward sat heavy.

Wrong.

Uncomfortable.

Alexie looked away first.

Ilya's stomach twisted unpleasantly.

Something was wrong. Really wrong. He just didn't know how wrong yet.

Twenty minutes later, he was done.

Completely done.

"Call rehab," he muttered while grabbing his coat.

"Fuck you," Alexie snapped immediately.

"Eventually," Ilya replied flatly, "you kill yourself."

The silence afterward stretched ugly.

Then his attention shifted back toward his father.

Still sitting behind the desk.

Expression oddly distant.

Like he had drifted somewhere halfway through the conversation and forgotten how to come back.

“You visiting next week?” Grigory asked suddenly.

“I just got here.” A pause.

“Oh.” Ilya stood there another second longer than necessary before quietly saying, “Take care of yourself.”

His father only waved him off. By the time he got back into the car, exhaustion sat heavier than before.

Not physical. Something worse. Something deeper.

His family felt like rot lately. Slow. Inevitable.

And somehow he suddenly wanted Shane more than before.

Wanted the sound of his voice. Wanted the quiet steadiness of him. Wanted somebody soft after all this sharpness.

His apartment felt unbearable the second he walked inside. No texts. No missed call- nothing.

Just silence.

He dropped his bag near the couch and immediately pulled up the tracker again.

Still there.

Still inside the hotel. Still minimal movement. Heart rate lower than usual. Sleeping. Still. Relief mixed uncomfortably with unease.

He called security immediately.

“Anything?”

“No movement, sir.”

“No visitors?”

“No.”

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

Ilya paced slowly through the apartment, tension sitting visibly through his shoulders now.

“What about cameras?”

A pause.

“Hotel management is delaying access. Unsure if room itself contains internal surveillance.”

Good.

Probably.

Shane would hate that.

Still. Not knowing felt worse.

“What if something wrong?”

“No indication of distress.”

His eyes drifted toward the door.

He could leave. Book another flight, go back.

See him. Make him understand.

Fight if necessary.

Apologize properly.

Something.

Anything.

The temptation sat dangerously strong for several seconds before reality dragged his attention elsewhere.

The table.

Mail.

An absurd pile of it.

Government invitations.

Federation requests.

Media appearances.

Political dinners he hated but could no longer entirely avoid now that fame had made him useful.

Training obligations.

Endorsements.

Enough responsibility to keep him here whether he wanted it or not.

His jaw tightened hard enough to ache.

Fuck.

He couldn't leave.

Not yet.

Not without consequences.

The helplessness settled ugly in his chest.

He sat heavily on the couch, elbows braced against his knees while his phone stayed clenched tightly in one hand.

One more try.

Again.

Nothing.

IGR: *Please answer.*

Pending.

Still nothing.

The apartment suddenly felt too large.

Too quiet.

And for the first time in a very long time, Ilya Rozanov felt something dangerously close to helplessness.

A month and a half passed faster and slower than Shane expected. The first week after blocking Rozanov hurt more than Shane wanted to admit.

Mostly because he kept accidentally running into him anyway. Not literally- online. In headlines. On sports channels. On magazine covers. On social media.

Apparently winning the Stanley Cup and becoming the youngest championship captain in years had turned Ilya Rozanov into Russia's newest obsession. Articles flooded sports media first, celebrating him as some impossible symbol of discipline and national pride. Then politics quietly started creeping into the coverage in ways that made something uncomfortable settle low in Shane's stomach.

Rozanov: Traditional Strength in Modern Hockey

Russia's Golden Alpha

Captaincy, Masculinity, and National Values

One article in particular sat badly enough that Shane reread it twice.

Something about how Rozanov represented "proper alpha leadership" and "traditional social stability," followed by commentary around omega suppression policies and the growing pressure against omega visibility in professional spaces overseas.

The implication was ugly.

Worse, Rozanov had not publicly corrected any of it.

Hadn't denied anything. Hadn't pushed back. And somehow that bothered Shane more than expected.

Because he *knew* him. Or at least thought he knew him.

Knew the impossible tenderness that existed underneath all the possessive bullshit. Knew the man who carefully washed his hair in showers, who sat awake after panic attacks and counted breaths until Shane could breathe again. Knew the version of him who had rested his head against Shane's stomach whispering in Russian when he thought Shane was asleep.

That man did not fit the headlines.

But then again, the version of Ilya who had scared him that night in the penthouse did.

The contradiction sat unpleasantly in Shane's chest, because somehow he still could not decide which version had been real.

Then came the gossip magazines.

Those somehow made things worse.

Because apparently hockey fame translated into celebrity gossip frighteningly fast. Shane tried not to look, really tried.

But every now and then curiosity won. Or loneliness.

Ilya outside expensive Moscow clubs. Ilya leaving restaurants at two in the morning. Ilya with models, actors, other athletes, men, women.

Always beautiful people. Always too close. Sometimes laughing. Sometimes smoking.

Always looking devastatingly handsome in expensive clothes. Shane hated how much those pictures bothered him. Because logically, he had absolutely no right.

He had ended things.

He had blocked him.

He had explicitly said no contact.

And still, seeing strangers touch him made something unpleasant tighten low in his stomach. Maybe jealousy. The omega in him was humiliated that he hadn't been able to be good enough, to keep an alpha.

Especially because some stupid, irrational part of him had quietly expected Ilya to be miserable. Devastated. Waiting.

Not thriving in Moscow nightlife while Shane quietly spiraled in sweatpants eating cereal for dinner.

Though somehow, in some of the photo angles, Rozanov never actually looked happy. That part bothered Shane too.

Because every now and then, usually in paparazzi shots, Ilya looked exhausted. Sharp around the edges somehow. Like somebody had taken something important from him and he had not quite figured out how to function without it.

Shane actively stopped himself from wondering if that had anything to do with him.

The first few weeks still felt unbearable anyway.

Everything reminded him of Ilya in stupid, inconvenient ways. Russian accents overheard in restaurants. Leather scented anything. Teal eyes in advertisements that looked nothing like his but somehow still made Shane's chest ache.

He actively tried not to think about him.

Really tried.

Deleted the urge to check his phone before it fully formed. Stopped rereading old texts. Stopped opening old screenshots.

Ignored the humiliating instinct to wonder what time it was in Moscow. Or whether Ilya had eaten. Or if he was sleeping enough. Or if he missed him too.

The silence remained.

And Shane missed him against his better judgement. At night mostly.

When the apartment got too quiet.

When he caught himself instinctively reaching for his phone after practice to tell somebody about a stupid drill or frustrating coach moment before remembering there was nobody to call anymore.

Nobody he wanted to call.

That part hurt more than expected.

Eventually, after two weeks of not being able to fully settle his own thoughts, Shane made an appointment with his doctor and made the long drive down to New York.

The small home office looked comforting in the way therapists' offices always seemed to. Warm lighting. Soft furniture. Plants arranged intentionally.

Dr. B came back-still looking just like she did when Shane first met her three years ago. After the routine exam, they sat across from each other. "You mentioned concerns involving a partner?" she asked gently halfway through the appointment.

Shane hesitated.

Because suddenly saying things out loud felt dangerous.

Permanent somehow.

"He..." Shane looked down briefly. "Took advantage."

The wording sat heavier once spoken. Not entirely accurate. Not entirely inaccurate either.

Just complicated.

Dr. B's expression softened immediately.

"Do you feel safe now?"

Shane nodded quickly.

"Yes."

"Are you still in contact?"

“No.”

A pause.

Then carefully:

“Would you like to discuss reporting options?”

Shane frowned immediately. “Reporting?”

Her tone remained calm and careful.

“Based on what you described, particularly around coercion and power dynamics, there may be legal grounds for reporting under omega protection statutes.” She paused slightly. “In this state, omega-targeted abuse protections are broad. If coercion or exploitation was involved, it may qualify as an omega hate crime.”

The suggestion hit Shane like ice water. Police. Reports. An investigation.

Rozanov.

No.

Immediately no.

“No,” he said too quickly.

Dr. B didn’t react. Only nodded.

“Okay.”

Shane frowned harder, staring down at his hands. “I just...”

God. Everything felt complicated.

“I mostly just...” His throat tightened slightly. “Need confirmation.”

“Confirmation?”

“That I’m not pregnant.”

Understanding crossed her face almost instantly.

“We can absolutely help with that.”

The relief afterward felt strangely devastating.

Negative.

Of course negative.

Logically he had known that.

Still, some ugly, embarrassing flicker of disappointment hit before Shane shoved it away immediately.

Absolutely not.

That thought was insane.

Before he left, Dr. B took his hands.

“If you ever need support,” she said quietly, “for anything, I’m here. Even if you just need to talk.”

Shane nodded awkwardly.

“Thanks.”

He never told anyone about the appointment. Not Hayden. Not Scott.

Nobody.

Instead, life slowly shifted anyway.

Mostly because Hayden refused to let him isolate himself.

“You realize you need hobbies besides hockey, right?” Jackie asked one afternoon while everyone sat outside on Hayden’s deck.

“I don’t think he does,” Scott answered immediately.

“I think his hobby is more hockey, reading about hockey, talking about hockey, thinking about hockey...” Kipp added helpfully.

Hayden looked genuinely thoughtful. “No. His hobby is pretending to enjoy life while *secretly* thinking about hockey.”

Shane rolled his eyes hard enough it almost hurt.

“You’re all annoying.”

“We love you too,” Jackie replied sweetly.

The teasing became routine after that.

Because Shane kept saying no.

Dinner? No.

Boat day? No.

Weekend trip? No.

Drinks? Absolutely not.

At some point Hayden stopped even pretending to ask politely.

“You know,” Hayden said one morning while stretching before their run, “you’re kind of living like this monk.”

That conversation stayed with Shane longer than expected.

Especially when Hayden admitted, bluntly, that Shane had built his entire life around hockey.

So reluctantly, awkwardly, Shane started trying things.

And unexpectedly? Architecture stuck. Then real estate. Then cabin plans. Then construction.

And somehow, without fully realizing it, Shane slowly started becoming a person outside hockey.

He found himself spending hours looking at blueprints, floor plans, cedar finishes, oversized windows, heating systems, layouts. What had started as casual curiosity quietly turned into obsession.

His cabin near his parents’ property broke ground halfway through the summer.

And embarrassingly?

He loved it.

Loved seeing progress.

Loved talking to contractors.

Loved imagining the finished space.

Jackie nearly cried the first time Shane enthusiastically explained different wood finishes for twenty straight minutes.

“Oh my god,” she whispered dramatically to Hayden. “He has a personality.”

“Holy shit,” Hayden muttered. “He’s evolving.”

“Fuck off,” Shane said, though he was smiling.

And somehow, without fully realizing it, friendships settled deeper too.

Scott and Kipp became easy.

Comfortable.

Safe.

Hayden and Jackie somehow worse in the best way, constantly dragging him places until social settings slowly stopped feeling so exhausting.

He got better at conversations.

Less awkward.

Still quiet.

Still observant.

But less painfully uncomfortable.

Life slowly shifted.

Healing in strange, quiet ways.

Even if some nights still hurt.

Even if every now and then, standing inside the unfinished shell of the cabin while sunlight spilled through oversized future windows, Shane still found himself wondering stupid things.

Like whether Rozanov would have liked it.

Whether he would have stood there pretending the kitchen layout was somehow his business.

Whether he would have looked annoyingly at home there. Shane shut those thoughts down quickly. Usually. Mostly.

Ilya was not doing well.

At first, he told himself it was temporary. Shane was angry, understandably angry, and needed space. Time. Distance.

Eventually, he would calm down. Eventually, he would answer. Eventually, they would talk like they always did, because despite everything, despite the fight and the ugly things said and the silence afterward, Hollander had still cared about him. Hadn't he? Hollander had come to him that night. Had climbed willingly into his bed after months apart, had let himself soften again in that way he only ever did with Ilya. People did not just stop wanting somebody overnight. So fine, space. Time. He could do time.

Except somewhere around week three, the silence stopped feeling temporary.

By week five, it started feeling unbearable.

Because the problem was not just that Shane refused to answer him. The problem was that Ilya could not *see* him. Could not hear his voice. Could not tell if he was okay or angry or hurting or spiraling or sleeping enough. The security detail stayed in place, quieter now, subtle enough that nobody would notice, but their updates somehow only made things worse.

Small, useless fragments of a life Ilya no longer had access to.

Left apartment at 10:17 AM. Coffee with Hayden.

Dinner with Scott and Kipp. Returned home 9:42 PM.

Construction site visit.

Stayed with usual group for three hours.

Every report somehow felt like a knife slid carefully between his ribs because Hollander was still living. Existing. Smiling, apparently. Building routines and friendships and habits that no longer included him.

The hotel surveillance had gone nowhere. Legal issues. Security refusing access despite increasingly unreasonable offers of money. No internal cameras. No confirmation on whether the room itself even had surveillance.

Nothing except the tracker and occasional glimpses on the street. Tiny moments caught by cameras or distant observation that only made the obsession worse. A baseball cap pulled low while Hollander laughed at something Hayden said. Hollander standing outside a restaurant with Scott and Kipp looking relaxed in a way Ilya had not seen in months. Jackie linking her arm through Hollander's while crossing the street, all of them looking comfortable together, safe together.

Safe.

Because irrationally, selfishly, some ugly thing inside Ilya had expected Hollander to be hurting too from this separation.

Not forever. Just enough. Enough to miss him. Enough to hesitate.

Enough to maybe stare at his phone late at night and wonder if blocking him had been a mistake.

Instead, Hollander looked...better.

That part slowly started hollowing something violent and terrified inside Ilya's chest.

Because the photos told a story he hated. Shane looked healthier somehow. Less tense. Softer around the edges. Like the constant nervousness had eased from his shoulders. Like he had

started settling into himself in a way that had nothing to do with Ilya anymore. Worse, every report made it obvious Shane was changing. Socializing more. Going out. Staying places longer. Spending weekends helping build some stupid cabin near his parents' house. Making friends in ways he had never bothered to before.

And suddenly, every ugly thought got louder.

What if Hayden replaced him?

What if Scott replaced him?

What if Shane realized he liked his life better this way? Quieter. Safer. Without some obsessive Russian alpha constantly pushing too hard and wanting too much. It was irrational. Both Pike and Hunter had bonded mates.

The thought sat poisonous.

Because for the first time in a very long time, Ilya genuinely had no control over something important.

And he hated it.

The tracker probably became unhealthy somewhere around week four.

He knew that, logically.

Still, he checked it constantly anyway. First thing in the morning. Last thing at night. Every hour in between. Sometimes every twenty minutes if anxiety got bad enough. He memorized patterns without meaning to. Shane woke up around six-thirty most mornings now. Gym after breakfast. Certain restaurants repeated. More time spent with people. More weekends out. Less time alone. The realization that Shane had slowly stopped isolating himself felt unfair somehow. Like Shane was healing while Ilya sat frozen in place.

Russia only made things worse.

His father deteriorated quietly, subtly enough that it almost seemed cruel. Forgotten names. Forgotten conversations. Mentioning people dead for years like they had spoken yesterday. Asking about hockey games from decades ago. One awful night during dinner, Grigory asked when his wife would be home, voice absent and distracted, like he had genuinely forgotten she'd been buried for seven years. Nobody said anything for several seconds. Alexie looked away. Ilya left halfway through dinner because suddenly sitting there felt impossible.

Then his brother got worse too. The cocaine stopped being casual. Stopped being manageable.

Their fights became routine. Loud arguments in hallways. Shouting matches in front of staff. One particularly bad night ended with Alexie shoving him first and Ilya hitting back hard enough to split skin across his knuckles. Security intervened. Media quietly buried it before morning.

Private disagreement.

Stress-related misunderstanding.

Excuses.

Always excuses.

Meanwhile, Ilya unraveled quietly in ways nobody fully acknowledged.

Training turned violent. He pushed harder. Hit harder. Slept less. Smoked more. Picked fights easier. Teammates stopped joking with him the same way because the mood around him shifted, colder somehow. Meaner. One rookie clipped him accidentally during drills and Ilya nearly put him through the boards hard enough that coaches physically stepped in before things escalated.

“Jesus Christ,” someone muttered afterward.

“Calm the fuck down.”

He couldn’t.

Because nothing felt right anymore.

Winning felt empty.

Captaincy felt pointless.

The trophies sat displayed beautifully in his apartment and somehow only pissed him off every time he looked at it. Because none of it mattered if Hollander was gone. None of it mattered if all the things he had spent years chasing somehow still left him sitting alone in an apartment checking a tracker like a fucking lunatic because he could not stand not knowing where one person was.

The picture broke him.

One stupid picture.

Shane standing in front of a half-built cabin, hair messy from wind, oversized hoodie hanging off his shoulders while sunlight caught across soft skin. Smiling at somebody off-camera like he had forgotten how to be lonely. Like he had forgotten how much this was supposed to hurt.

Something cracked quietly inside Ilya’s chest.

Because suddenly he could see it too clearly.

The future.

Shane moving on.

Shane forgetting him.

Somebody else eventually stepping into all the spaces Ilya had carved out for himself. Somebody safer. Softer. Healthier. Some normal alpha who knew how to love Shane without frightening him. Somebody who got Shane's laugh after bad practice. Somebody who stood in that stupid cabin kitchen making coffee. Somebody who got Shane sleepy and soft and warm in bed.

The thought made him physically nauseous.

He booked the flight that night.

Enough.

Enough space.

Enough pretending distance was helping.

Enough acting like this was temporary when every day apart only made things worse.

He met with his father's doctors the next morning, he was exhausted, running mostly on nicotine and caffeine, signing paperwork with a detached efficiency that unsettled even him. Specialists. Nurses. Bills. Twenty-four-hour supervision if necessary. Whatever was needed.

"I want every invoice paid immediately," he said flatly. "I do not care what cost."

Alexie fought him afterward, of course. Called him controlling. Possessive. Arrogant. Accused him of trying to buy control over everybody.

Normally, maybe, Ilya would have fought harder.

This time, he barely listened.

Because all he could think about was time.

Seventeen hours.

Less now.

Sixteen and some change.

That was how long until he saw Shane again.

The thought settled feverish and sharp inside his chest.

By the time the car pulled toward the airport, Moscow blurred gray outside the windows while Ilya sat rigid in the backseat staring down at his phone. Still blocked. Still nothing. Still silence. His thumb hovered uselessly over their message thread anyway, half-written apologies typed and deleted over and over because suddenly he had no idea what to say anymore.

I miss you felt pathetic.

I'm sorry somehow felt too small.

Please forgive me sat dangerously vulnerable.

No.

He would fix this in person.

He had to.

He would apologize properly. Be softer. Try harder. Whatever Shane needed, whatever it took, he would do it.

The car turned toward departures.

Less than sixteen hours now.

And somewhere in Canada, Shane Hollander had absolutely no idea that by tomorrow morning, Ilya Rozanov would be standing in front of him.

This time, Ilya was not sure he could survive being sent away again.

Chapter End Notes

Well... 😬

Ilya is maybe, potentially, definitely not doing great.

Curious where everyone stands right now because I feel like opinions are going to be divided after this chapter. Are you rooting for them to reconnect, or do you think Shane actually needs more distance? And how badly do we think this reunion is about to go?

I read every comment and theory- thank you all so much! 💙

Chapter 16: Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Instead of being an adult, I'm posting this early from work because I finished the chapter during my break lol.

But I'm being offered a first born-so thank you Laziall1999

This is the first time I deviate from my outline a bit but it was a fun chapter to write. Thank you thank you thank you for the love and discussions on the ch 16-love to see the opinions and love to see where y'all think I'm taking this...some very good guesses.

Chapter Notes

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

The two months had been a form of exile, carved not by distance but by silence. The blocked calls, the vanished digital footprint- it was a void Ilya had never known, more agonizing than any physical wound. The last time Shane disappeared, it was probably due to just sort of rebellion from the little omega. This time Ilya knew what Shane was really like. How they could make each laugh, how they could tease and push each other. How devastatingly precious Hollander truly was.

The guilt, a cold, leaden companion, had festered. The memory of that night in the penthouse, which had felt like rightful possession in the moment, now played in his mind on a loop, each frame revealing a new shade of his own brutality. *Rape*; had it been really been that? The word, once unthinkable, now echoed in the hollow of his conscience. He had been as rough as he had been with other partners in jest and it had been a rare treat, but this had felt different. He had taken what wasn't freely given in that moment, cloaked in anger and a twisted sense of lesson-teaching. Time had not softened the truth; it had sharpened it.

Enough. The need for forgiveness became a physical thirst. He knew where Shane would be- a secluded rental house in Vancouver, a place for quiet training and, Ilya suspected, for licking wounds far from familiar eyes.

He arrived under the cover of a coastal mist, the lock on the back door yielding to his practiced, quiet force. The house was still, smelling of clean linen, lemon cleaner, and, underneath it all, the faint, heartbreakingly distant trace of honeysuckle and vanilla, chemically muted.

He found him in the bedroom. Shane was asleep, one arm curled under his cheek, his face softened in a way Ilya hadn't seen since before the awards night. The sight punched the air from Ilya's lungs. For hours, he simply stood, then sat in a chair in the corner, a specter in the dark. He watched the slow rise and fall of Shane's chest. Finally, compelled, he moved to the bedside. He knelt, his breath stilling. With a reverence that felt like penance, he brushed the very tips of his fingers over the scatter of freckles on Shane's cheekbone, a map of constellations he'd once thought he owned.

His gaze drifted to the small, transparent patch on Shane's neck. The sight of it, as always, sparked a frown of displeasure- a barrier to the truth of him. But he left it. He had forfeited the right to remove it.

Gently, he tugged the duvet down to Shane's waist. Shane wore only a pair of soft sleep shorts. Ilya's eyes traced the lines of his torso, the defined muscles of a professional athlete at rest. And there, a shot of pure, irrational disappointment lanced through him- the flat, taut plane of Shane's abdomen. He hadn't realized, until this moment, how deeply that secret, whispered prayer had taken root in his subconscious. The fantasy of a tangible, living claim had become intertwined with his need for absolution. The reality was a quiet rebuke.

He returned to the chair, steepling his fingers before his face, a patient gargoyle in the pre-dawn grey. He would wait. He would explain. He would beg if he had to.

The first pale light of sunrise was bleeding into the room when Shane began to stir. A soft sigh, a shift of limbs. Ilya remained perfectly still, watching. Shane's eyes fluttered open, blinking at the ceiling, swimming with the last remnants of sleep. He started to sit up, pushing back the covers.

Ilya moved.

He didn't speak. He simply unfolded himself from the chair, a large, sudden shape materializing from the shadows.

Shane's reaction was instantaneous and visceral. A raw, animal sound of terror ripped from his throat. He didn't scream words; he screamed pure panic. His hand flew to the nightstand,

grabbing the first thing it found- a heavy glass of water. He hurled it. Ilya didn't flinch as it shattered against his shoulder, cold water soaking his shirt.

"Get out!" The words were a ragged shriek now. A book followed, then a lamp, which Ilya deflected with a raised forearm, sending it crashing to the floor in a shower of ceramic and dead light.

Ilya kept advancing, his expression grim, determined. "Hollander! Stop. Listen-"

"GET OUT!" Shane scrambled back across the bed, but there was nowhere to go. As Ilya reached the bedside, Shane launched himself not away, but at him. This wasn't flight; it was fight.

A fist connected with Ilya's jaw, a sharp, surprising crack of pain. A knee drove toward his groin, which he twisted to take on his thigh. Shane was a whirlwind of fear-fueled violence, every movement taught by years on the icefast, efficient, desperate. He punched, kicked, clawed.

Ilya let the first few blows land. He took the pain, each impact a stone on the scale of his atonement. The metallic taste of blood filled his mouth from a split lip. But when Shane's nails raked toward his eyes, he caught the wrist. When a heel aimed for his knee, he trapped the leg.

"Stop," he growled, his voice low, trying to envelop, to contain rather than strike back. He wrapped his arms around Shane's torso, pinning his arms to his sides, trying to quell the frantic thrashing.

Shane didn't stop. He couldn't. Trapped in the cage of Ilya's arms, he writhed, he bucked, he threw his head back in an attempt to break Ilya's nose. Sobs now tore through the punches, a horrible symphony of rage and terror. "Let me GO! Don't touch me! You don't get to touch me!"

He was strong, fueled by adrenaline and trauma, and for a moment, he almost broke free. Ilya had to use real strength then, hauling him back, wrestling him down onto the edge of the

ruined bed, using his greater weight and size to finally immobilize him, though Shane's body still vibrated with the effort to fight, every muscle coiled and trembling under Ilya's restraining grip.

They were locked there, chests heaving, the room a wreckage around them. Ilya's face was bleeding, his shirt torn. Beneath him, Shane stared up, wild-eyed, tears of fury and fear cutting tracks through his freckles, his breath coming in shattered, silent hitches where the screams had been. The scent of his panic, sharp and acrid beneath the suppressor, filled the space between them. The quiet was worse than the chaos. It was the silence of a chasm, freshly torn open, and Ilya stood on the wrong side of it, his hope for forgiveness already lying shattered among the broken glass on the floor.

The silence that followed was deafening, thicker than the mist outside the window. It was broken only by the ragged, hitched gasps Shane couldn't control, each one a tremor that ran through his entire pinned body. Ilya could feel the frantic hammer of Shane's heart against his own chest, a wild bird trapped against ribs.

Ilya held him, but it wasn't the embrace he'd imagined during his long, guilty vigil. This was a containment of pure panic. He could see the whites all around Shane's irises, the sheer animal terror that had eclipsed any recognition, any remnant of the challenging, stubborn man he knew. The scent of it- sharp, sour, and utterly devoid of the warm vanilla-honeysuckle-clawed at Ilya's senses, a punishment more severe than any punch.

"Shane," Ilya said, his voice low and gravelly, trying to pour every ounce of desperate sincerity into the name. "Zayka. I am not here to hurt you. I swear it."

A violent shudder was the only reply. Shane's eyes darted around the room, looking for an escape that didn't exist, anywhere but at Ilya's face.

"I came... I need you to understand. What I did..." Ilya's words, rehearsed a thousand times on the flight over, felt clumsy and grotesque in the face of this tangible fear. "It was wrong. It was a breach of trust. I see that now. I have...I have thought of nothing else."

He loosened his grip, just a fraction, an offering of space. The moment the pressure eased, Shane twisted like an eel, his elbow jamming back into Ilya's sternum. It wasn't a trained

move; it was pure, frantic instinct. The air left Ilya's lungs with a pained grunt, and his hold broke.

Shane scrambled off the bed, stumbling over the wreckage of the lamp, putting the ruined mattress between them. He stood, chest heaving, arms wrapped around himself. He wasn't crying now. He was shaking, his gaze fixed on Ilya with a focused, crystalline hatred that was somehow worse than the blind panic.

"Get out," Shane said, the words flat, final, and colder than the Pacific water outside. "You don't get to explain. You don't get to say my name. You don't get to be sorry here. Get out, or I will call the fucking police. Get out now."

Ilya slowly rose from the bed, holding his hands up, palms open. The taste of blood was still in his mouth. He saw himself reflected in Shane's eyes: not a lover, not a rival, but a monster who broke locks and watched people sleep. His grand plan- the explanation, the begging, the hope for a crack of forgiveness- lay in ashes around him. His very presence was the injury.

"I will go," Ilya said, the words ash in his mouth. He took a step back toward the bedroom door, then another, his eyes never leaving Shane's rigid form. "I am... I am going."

He backed into the hallway, through the living room, to the shattered back door he'd forced. The morning light was stronger now, illuminating the damage he'd caused. He paused on the threshold, looking back into the shadowed interior of the house that smelled of lemon cleaner and fear.

Shane hadn't moved. He stood silhouetted in the bedroom doorway, a statue of defiance and trauma.

There was nothing more to say that wouldn't be another violation. Ilya turned and walked out into the damp Vancouver morning, the chill seeping through his torn, water-stained shirt. The door hung open behind him, a broken mouth. He had flown across the world to bridge a chasm, and all he had done was widen it with his own two hands, leaving only silence and the echo of shattered glass in his wake.

The moment the broken back door swung shut, cutting off the sight of Ilya's retreating back, the strength bled from Shane's legs. He didn't so much sit as collapse, his back sliding down the wall until he hit the floor of the hallway, knees drawn to his chest. A great, silent shudder wracked him, and then the tears came- not the furious tears from the fight, but a deep, silent river of despair that felt like it was tearing something loose inside his ribcage.

He pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes, but it was useless. The images flashed: Ilya's bleeding lip, the darkening spot on his shoulder from the thrown glass, the raw, desperate guilt in his eyes that had looked so much like love it made Shane's stomach twist. A part of him, a stupid, traitorous part that still lived in the memory of bathwater and whispered Russian, screamed to run after him. To call him back. To use the first aid kit under the sink and clean the cut, to press a cold cloth to the bruise he'd put on that jaw, to ask if his ribs were okay from the elbow strike.

He choked on a sob, disgusted with himself. *No. No, you don't get to do that. He hurt you. He just broke into your house. He watched you sleep.*

The two truths warred, a sickening civil war in his soul. The monster and the man were the same person, and his body didn't know how to reconcile it. His knuckles were throbbing, scraped from connecting with Ilya's face. He stared at them. He'd hurt him. The thought brought no satisfaction, only a heavier wave of nauseating confusion.

He couldn't fall apart. Not now. The practical part of his brain, the survivor, began to pipe up through the static of panic. *Hayden. Jackie. The baby. They're coming in a few hours. I have to be ok for them.*

The reality was an ice bath. He couldn't let them see this. He couldn't let them see the broken door, the shattered lamp, the water stain on the carpet, the wild terror in his eyes. They'd ask questions. They'd want to help. They'd call the police. The thought of explaining, of saying the words, of making it all real in a police report or in the pitying eyes of his friends... it was unbearable.

With a physical effort that made his muscles scream, he pushed himself up. He went to the sink first, splashing icy water on his face, scrubbing at the tear tracks. His reflection was ghastly- pale, freckles standing out in stark relief, eyes red-rimmed and hollow. He looked like a victim. He couldn't be a victim. He was Shane Hollander, one of the best fucking hockey players in the world. He had a life, a career, friends coming over.

He moved on autopilot, the training of a lifetime taking over. Crisis management. Clean the mess.

He found the broom and dustpan. The glass from the water tumbler was easy. The ceramic from the lamp was more difficult, tiny shards glittering in the carpet pile. He picked through it on his hands and knees, his mind a blessed blank. He sopped up the water with towels. He righted the nightstand, re-stacked the books. The room began to look orderly again, though it felt like a stage set, a lie built over a fault line.

Neither the front or back doors were surprisingly broken. He didn't know how Rozanov had gotten in, but he flipped the deadbolt on and he'd think of something else later.

As he worked, one thought circled, cold and sharp: *How did he find me?*

This house wasn't on any team listing. He'd paid in cash through a friend of a friend. Only a handful of people knew the address. Had Ilya had him followed? Had he hacked something? The violation of it was profound, a different layer of sickness beneath the physical fear. His safe place was breached. His privacy was an illusion. That question, the *how*, was a ticking bomb he'd have to defuse later. For now, it just sat in his gut, a cold stone of dread.

Finally, the house was quiet and orderly. The only evidence was the chair against the door and the faint, lingering scent of Ilya's leather-and-night air scent, which Shane attacked with a can of citrus-scented air freshener, spraying until his lungs burned.

He stood in the center of the living room, breathing hard. He looked normal. The house looked normal. He willed his hands to stop trembling.

When the doorbell rang, it was a normal, cheerful sound. Shane took a final, deep breath, forced his mouth into the shape of a smile, and went to greet his friends, to coo over their baby, to pretend with every fiber of his being that his world hadn't just been shattered and hastily glued back together, with the man who broke it still out there, knowing exactly where he lived.

He forced air into his lungs, past the tightness. Normal. *You are normal. You got this.*

He opened the door. The bright, coastal sunlight framed Hayden and Jackie on the step, a picture of casual contentment. Hayden held a carrier seat with a tiny, sleeping bundle. Jackie had a diaper bag and a warm, easy smile that faltered for a microsecond when she saw him.

“Hey, you!” Hayden said, his voice a little too loud, a little too cheerful for the quiet street. “Ready for some uncle duties?” He reached over the door and gave Shane a quick brotherly one armed hug.

“Hey,” Shane said, and was relieved when his voice didn’t crack. He stepped back, gesturing them in. “Always. Come in.”

As they shuffled past, Shane’s senses, frayed and hyper-alert, scanned them. Did they smell the citrus air freshener, so aggressively floral? Could they see the faint, damp patch on the carpet if the light hit it just right?

“Place looks great,” Jackie said, her eyes doing a gentle sweep. She was always perceptive. “Quiet out here. Perfect for your pre-season reset.”

“Yeah,” Shane agreed, shoving his hands into the pockets of his sweatpants to hide the scraped, trembling knuckles. “That was the idea.”

They settled in the living room. Hayden expertly unclipped the baby- Emma- from his carrier, cradling the drowsy infant against his chest. The sight was a physical ache in Shane, so pure and so far removed from the violence of the morning it felt like watching a scene from another planet.

“So,” Hayden said, lowering himself onto the sofa with the care of someone holding nitroglycerin. “How’s the solo training going? You beating the crap out of the imaginary competition?”

Shane's laugh was a short, brittle sound. "Something like that." He could still feel the impact of his fist against Ilya's jaw, the sickening give of flesh and bone. He flexed his hand under the fabric of his pocket.

Jackie was watching him, her head tilted. "You okay, Shane? You seem a little... jumpy."

Jumpy. The word was so inadequate it was almost funny. "Just tired," he said, the lie smooth from practice. "Time change still messing with me a bit. And you know, the quiet. I just needed some time to think."

Hayden nodded, buying it. "Tell me about it. First week home, I kept waking up at 4 a.m. ready for a pre-game meal." He looked down at the baby, his expression softening into a wonder that was still new. "This girl's schedule is its own kind of chaos, though."

They talked. They talked about the baby's sleep (nonexistent), about mutual friends, about the league gossip. Shane contributed where he could, nodding, smiling when it seemed required. He held Emma when Jackie offered, the warm, solid weight of the sleeping infant a shocking comfort. He smelled of powder and milk and utter innocence. Shane traced a tiny, perfect ear with a finger that had, hours ago, been curled into a fist.

But his mind was a split screen. On one side: Jackie's story about her mother visiting. On the other: the sound of shattering glass. Hayden's joke about their goalie's new haircut. The image of Ilya's blood, dark against his pale lip. The warm weight of Emma in his arms. The cold, assessing look in Ilya's eyes as he watched him sleep.

He was a ghost at his own gathering, smiling at the right moments, making the right noises, all while screaming silently inside the shell of himself.

"You sure you're okay?" Jackie asked again, later, as she was packing the diaper bag. Her voice was lower, meant only for him. "You seem... far away."

He met her gaze, willing his own to be clear. “I’m good, really. Just... offseason brain. You know how it is. Decompressing.”

She searched his face for a beat longer, then squeezed his arm. “Okay. But call if you need anything. Anything at all.”

The promise, so full of genuine care, was a knife twist. He couldn’t call. He could never tell them. This secret, this shame and fear, was a wall between him and the people who loved him.

He saw them out, the cheerful farewells echoing in the now-empty house. He closed the front door- the locked front door- and leaned his forehead against the cool wood.

The performance was over. The silence rushed back in, but it was different now. It wasn’t just empty. The only thing standing between him and the knowledge that Ilya had been here. That he knew. That he could come back.

The tidy living room, the clean carpet, the smiling face he’d presented to his friends- it all felt like a diorama, a fragile scene constructed over a gaping hole. He was alone again, but he wasn’t. The ghost of the morning haunted every corner. The question pulsed in the quiet, a second heartbeat: *How did he find me?*

And the more terrifying, unanswerable question that followed: **What does he want now?**

Shane slid down the wall once more, his back to the chair-blocked door, and wrapped his arms around his knees. He didn’t cry this time. He just sat in the manufactured citrus scent and the deepening afternoon shadows, waiting for a threat he could no longer see, but whose presence had seeped into the very foundations of his safe house.

His hands only shook a little as he pulled his phone from his pocket. He didn’t go to his contacts. He went to his notes, finding the number for the project manager overseeing the construction of his new house- the one he’d been carefully planning for years, a forever home meant for a life he’d once vaguely imagined. Its most important feature had just been radically re-prioritized.

The call connected. “Michael? It’s Shane Hollander.”

“Mr. Hollander! Hey, we got your notes on the kitchen finishes. The quartz you picked is actually back-ordered by about six- ”

“I don’t care about the quartz,” Shane interrupted, his voice firmer than he felt. He walked to the front window, peering through the blinds at the empty, sun-drenched street. Nothing moved. “I’m calling about the timeline. I need it finished. Yesterday.”

There was a pause on the other end. “Well, we’re already on a pretty aggressive schedule for the custom work. The security system integration alone- ”

“Hire more crew. A larger crew. Work double shifts. Whatever it takes.” Shane’s mind raced over the blueprints. “Prioritize the master suite enclosure and the security system. I want the exterior cameras, motion sensors, and the reinforced door on the master wing operational before anything else. Cost is not an issue.”

Another, longer pause. Michael was a good architect, used to the whims of wealthy clients, but this was a sudden, sharp pivot. “Shane, is everything okay? This sounds... urgent.”

Oh, nothing much. Someone broke in. Someone who knows me. Someone I can’t stop. Shane thought to himself “I just need it done, Michael. My pre-season window is shorter than I thought. I want to be in by fall. Make it happen. Please.”

The ‘please’ was the only crack in the veneer. Michael heard it. “Alright. I’ll re-sequence the trades and get more bodies on site Monday. I’ll email you a revised, accelerated schedule by end of day.”

“Thank you.” Shane hung up before his voice could betray anything else. He stared at the phone. One concrete action. A fortress, ordered. It felt pathetic and necessary all at once.

Next, he scrolled to a different contact. This performance required a different tone. He took another steadying breath, forcing his shoulders down from around his ears.

His mother picked up on the second ring. “Shane! Sweetheart, I was just thinking about you. How’s the rain out there?”

Her voice, warm and familiar, was an anchor and an agony. He could tell her. The words bubbled up, acidic, in his throat. He swallowed them. “It’s misty. Not too bad. How are you and Dad?”

They talked of mundane things: his father’s garden, a cousin’s graduation. Shane leaned against the kitchen counter, he made the right sounds, the light laughs.

“So,” his mother said, shifting gears into what he called her ‘team manager’ voice. “I was looking at the preseason schedule they sent. You start camp in what, seven days? And you’ve got that charity golf thing before that. Have you booked your flight east?”

“Not yet,” Shane said, his eyes tracking a flaw in the ceiling texture. A crack. He hadn’t noticed it before. Was it new? “I’ll do it this week. The training facility here is good. I’m just... getting my head right, you know? Quiet time.”

“Of course, honey. You work so hard. Just don’t get too quiet on us.” She meant it as a joke. It landed like a diagnosis.

They talked dates, logistics. He promised to send his travel plans. The entire conversation was a masterpiece of normalcy, a broadcast from a version of himself that felt like a recording. All the while, a part of his brain screamed in a soundproof room.

“Okay, I’ll let you go, Mom. Love you.”

“Love you too, sweetie. Call anytime.”

He ended the call and let the phone clatter onto the counter. The silence in the house was now a living thing. It pulsed with the memory of violence, with the phantom scent of leather and cedar.

He had taken two steps: one toward a fortified future, one toward maintaining the illusion of a peaceful present. Neither solved the immediate problem standing in his kitchen, the terrifying knowledge that the man who broke into this home, his hunger for forgiveness curdled into something darker, and he knew exactly where Shane was.

The rental car smelled of damp wool and the coppery tang of his own blood. Ilya sat behind the wheel, the engine off, staring at the mist-shrouded house growing smaller in the rearview mirror. The adrenaline that had propelled him across an ocean and through a locked door was gone, leaving a hollow, aching fatigue. And a strange, perverse thrum of pride.

He prodded his split lip with his tongue, wincing at the fresh sting. The knuckle-mark on his jaw was a hot, promising throb. He'd have a spectacular bruise.

Good. The thought was immediate, unbidden. A dark bloom of satisfaction in the wreckage of his failure.

Shane had fought. Not just the frantic, slapping panic of a cornered animal, but with real, trained violence. Those weren't the wild swings of someone who'd never thrown a punch. The hook to his jaw had been compact, brutal, the weight of Shane's body behind it. The knee had been aimed with vicious, knowing precision. He'd used his leverage, his speed, every ounce of his athlete's strength.

Ilya had known, abstractly, that Shane didn't fight on the ice. It was one of the things that set him apart in their league of enforcers and agitators- a cool, almost disdainful refusal to drop the gloves, as if the mere scrum was beneath his strategic mind. Ilya had assumed it was a lack, a softness.

He was wrong. The omega hadn't lacked the skill; he'd been choosing not to use it. He'd been saving it. For this.

A grim, bloody smile touched Ilya's mouth. *His* omega could throw a punch. Could fight like a demon when truly threatened. The knowledge was a hot, possessive thrill. He had seen a part of Shane no one else on earth had ever witnessed- not his coaches, not his teammates, not the fans who thought they knew the unflappable defenseman. That raw, survival-level fury belonged to Ilya alone. He had provoked it. He owned it.

The pride curdled as quickly as it had risen, poisoned by the memory of what followed.

The fight had been one thing. It was the collapse after that was seared into him. The way Shane had slid down the wall, the soundless, body-wracking sobs that had stolen the air from the room. Ilya had seen him take brutal hits on the ice, get stitched up, and return with ice in his veins. He had never seen him break like that. Shatter.

The scent in the room hadn't been anger or challenge. It had been pure, undiluted terror, sharp as ammonia beneath the chemical suppressor. It was the scent of a creature that believed it was going to die.

And Ilya had put it there.

The satisfaction iced over. He looked down at his own hands, resting on his knees. They were the hands that had pinned those trembling wrists, that had gripped and restrained and manhandled. They were the hands that had, months ago, touched those same freckles with a reverence he hadn't known he possessed.

He had come for forgiveness.

He started the car, the engine's growl too loud in the quiet street. As he pulled away, the phantom scent of something heavy and almost tar-like seemed to cling to his clothes. The pride was gone, fully extinguished. In its place was a colder, heavier understanding.

He had wanted to see the fighter in Shane. And he had. But in drawing that fighter out, he had finally, irrevocably, become the monster Shane needed to fight against. The locked door was no longer just wood and metal. It was a boundary drawn in blood and fear, and he was permanently on the wrong side of it. The knowledge sat in his gut, heavier than any trophy, and far more hollow.

The hotel was a mid-tier chain, chosen for its anonymity and its proximity- close enough to feel the magnetic pull of Shane's distress, far enough to be a ghost. Ilya bypassed the lobby, took the stairs, and let himself into a generic suite that smelled of lemon cleaner and stale air.

Silence.

It was worse than the aftermath of the fight. This was the silence of consequence. He set the room key down with a soft click that echoed in the empty space.

His face throbbed. He touched his split lip, the coppery taste of blood still on his tongue. The sting was a welcome focal point. In the bathroom's harsh fluorescent light, he examined the damage. The bruise on his jaw was already blooming, a dark testament to Shane's surprising, potent strength. A grim, proud smile tugged at the wound. His omega could hit. He'd always known there was steel beneath the quiet focus, but to feel it, to have it aimed at him... it was perversely exhilarating. It made the wanting worse.

His phone buzzed. He pulled it from his pocket. His father's name glared from the screen, a demand from another life. The Initiative. The ambassador role. The proper Russian alpha with a compliant omega on his arm. The future they'd laid out for him over expensive vodka felt like a sick joke now.

He rejected the call. Then, with a cold, final tap, he blocked the number. Let the old man rage. Ilya would fund his care from an ocean away- the best doctors, the most comfortable silence money could buy. That debt was paid. His only debt now was to the man twenty minutes away, who saw him as a monster.

He found the minibar. The vodka was cheap, but it was cold. He poured it over ice, the clink loud in the quiet, and took the glass to the window. The city lights blurred in the rain-streaked

glass, a smeared painting of a life he wasn't part of.

The first swallow was fire over the cut, a clean, clarifying pain. He closed his eyes.

Calm. He needed Shane calm. Rational. Able to listen to him. But how do you calm a creature you've just cornered and attacked? You don't approach again. You change its entire environment.

The realization uncoiled in his mind, not as a flash of insight, but as a cold, settling certainty. Forgiveness was a naive fantasy. Trust was ashes. Apologies were words, and words had failed him spectacularly.

What remained was possession. Not the frantic, physical claiming of before, but a deeper, more absolute form. He didn't just want Shane in his bed. He wanted to be the axis on which Shane's world turned. The unseen hand that guided his fate. The source of his safety and his peace. He wanted to be so essential, so inextricably woven into the fabric of Shane's existence, that the idea of a life without him would become unthinkable.

It was wrong. He knew it was wrong with a clarity that was almost peaceful. It was a violation on a scale that made what he had been doing seem like petty misdemeanors. It was monstrous.

He didn't care.

The refusal was absolute, a stone wall in his soul. Let it be monstrous. Let it be wrong. He had tasted what it was to have Shane- his spirit, his body, his trust- and the emptiness without him was a void that promised madness. He would not live in that void. And he would not share. The sight of Shane sitting between Hayden and Scott Hunter, the easy camaraderie, the touches... it flashed behind his eyes, a fresh spike of fury. No. That ended now.

He took another long drink, the plan crystallizing with each burning sip.

He would need information. Everything. The new house Shane was building- its location, its blueprints, its security schematics. He would know its weaknesses before the foundation was finished. He would know Shane's daily routines, his friends' habits, his fears, his small comforts. He would become a scholar of Shane Hollander.

And then, he would become his guardian.

A problem with the construction crew? A reliable new foreman would appear, recommended by a mysterious benefactor. A suspicious fan lurking near his training rink? Security would be subtly, permanently increased. A bureaucratic hurdle with a permit? It would vanish. He would smooth every path, eliminate every annoyance, shield him from every conceivable threat. He would weave a net of security so seamless, so comfortable, that Shane would sink into it without ever noticing its strings.

He would make himself the answer to every unspoken need, the solution to every problem Shane didn't even know he had. He would be the reason Shane's life ran smoothly, the invisible source of his peace. Dependence would be his foundation. Gratitude would be the lock.

And when the time was right, when Shane was settled, secure, and quietly wondering who his unseen protector could be... Ilya would step from the shadows. Not as a supplicant begging for forgiveness. Not as a threat breaking down doors. But as the architect of his peace. The only one who could possibly understand and provide for him so completely.

It was a long game. A patient game. It required a level of control and foresight he'd never needed on the ice. It meant disappearing, becoming a ghost, a whisper, a feeling of safety.

He drained the glass, the ice cubes clicking against his teeth. The hollow fatigue was gone, burned away by the vodka and the new, chilling purpose. The pain in his lip was a familiar companion now, a reminder of the cost of brute force.

Brute force had failed. So he would use strategy. He would use patience. He would use the vast, invisible machinery of the world itself.

He set the empty glass down. The reflection in the dark window was no longer a man haunted by failure. It was a man with a plan. His eyes were clear, hard, resolved.

He would not let Shane go. He would make Shane's world so perfectly, irrevocably his, that leaving would never again be a thought that crossed his mind.

Every creak in the wood sounded deliberate. Every shifting shadow caught in the corner of his eye felt watchful.

Shane checked the locks.

Again.

Then the windows.

His phone buzzed hard against the kitchen counter, nearly making him jump out of his skin.

He grabbed it too fast.

Scott Hunter

Shane blinked.

"Hey man," he answered.

"Hey kid," Scott said.

Something in Shane loosened despite himself.

"How's it going? You two get settled ok?"

"Yes, we're alright. But, important business." Scott paused dramatically. "Kip's first art show is this weekend in Brooklyn."

Shane frowned. "Art show?"

In the background, he could hear Kip groan.

"Don't say it like that," Kip said, voice suddenly louder through the speaker. "It sounds embarrassing when you say it like that."

Scott ignored him. "We're forcing you to come."

“I have training.”

“It’s the weekend.”

“I have a flight Sunday night.”

“You’ll make your flight,” Scott said immediately. “I literally already looked. We’ll get you back to Canada on time.”

“And,” Kip added reluctantly, “I guess it would be nice if you came.”

The silence stretched. Shane looked around the rental.

The too-clean floor where glass had shattered. The bedroom doorway.

Suddenly, the thought of staying here another night made something cold slide down his spine.

He didn’t want to sleep here.

Didn’t want to wonder if every sound was a footstep. Didn’t want to wake up and check shadows. “Okay,” Shane said suddenly.

Scott paused.

“...Wait, seriously?”

“Yeah.” Shane was already moving toward the bedroom. “I’ll come.”

“Holy shit,” Scott laughed. “Who are you and what did you do with Shane?”

“Shut up.”

Kip sounded pleased in the background.

“I’ll text you details.”

“Cool.”

The call ended.

Shane stood in the middle of the bedroom for exactly three seconds before grabbing his duffel bag.

Fast.

He packed fast. Clothes, toiletries, chargers. Everything.

The sooner he got out of this cabin, the better.

He told himself it was for fun. For Kip.

For normalcy.

But deep down, beneath the excuses, sat a quieter truth he refused to examine too closely:

He didn't want to be alone here anymore.

The gallery was louder than Shane had expected.

Not loud in the way that he was used to at games and such, but a softer, denser kind of noise. The murmur of expensive conversations layered over quiet jazz, glasses clinking, shoes tapping against polished concrete floors. Warm lighting reflected off white walls and oversized abstract pieces, everything curated into something that felt impossibly adult and intimidating.

Shane had almost backed out twice before even coming inside.

Scott hadn't let him.

"Relax, kiddo. Kip said to make sure you were ok," Scott had said bluntly outside the entrance, straightening Shane's jacket without permission. "Which means I'm not leaving you alone."

"I'm not weird."

"You look like you're about to bolt."

"I'm fine."

Scott had given him a long look. "Sure you are."

And then, without making a thing of it, he'd stayed close.

Not suffocating, just... nearby.

Close enough that Shane could glance across the room and find him talking to someone, drink in hand, always keeping one eye casually in Shane's direction like it wasn't obvious.

It should've annoyed him. Instead, Shane found himself strangely grateful.

The crowd pressed too close sometimes. Too many strangers. Too many people brushing shoulders, laughing too loud, standing behind him unexpectedly.

Every unexpected movement made his nerves jump.

The last twenty-four hours had scraped him raw.

Still, he tried. For Kip. The walls were lined with his work, and honestly, Shane was kind of blown away.

Some of it was abstract, layered textures and dark colors that somehow still managed to feel emotional. Others were startlingly realistic portraits, all sharp shadows and soft expressions,

the kind of pieces that made people stop walking.

“You actually did all this?” Shane asked earlier, genuinely stunned.

Kip, already halfway through pretending not to care, shrugged awkwardly.

“Yeah.”

“This is insane.”

“It’s not- ”

“No, seriously,” Shane interrupted. “Like... *good* good.”

Kip had looked weirdly embarrassed after that.

Now, hours later, Shane stood near one of the larger pieces with a small paper paddle in hand, staring at the bid number he’d scribbled down.

Three pieces. One was a dark ocean landscape that reminded him strangely of Vancouver. Another was a black-and-white city piece Scott claimed looked depressing as hell.

The last was smaller.

A quiet painting of winter trees beneath soft gold light.

Something about it had made his chest ache.

“You realize you’re becoming an art guy now,” Scott said, appearing at his elbow with another drink.

“I’m supporting a friend.”

“You bought half the wall.”

“I did not.”

Scott snorted.

“You absolutely did.”

Shane rolled his eyes, but his attention drifted toward the crowd again.

Too many people.

Too warm.

Too many voices overlapping.

His chest tightened.

Someone laughed too sharply nearby and Shane startled before he could stop himself.

Scott noticed immediately.

His expression shifted.

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” Shane said too quickly.

Scott didn’t look convinced.

“You sure?”

“Just need air.”

The answer came automatically.

Scott hesitated.

“You want me to- ”

“No.” Shane forced a small smile. “I’m good. Stay with Kip.”

A pause.

Then Scott nodded slowly.

“Text me if you disappear.”

“I’m 20 years old. I’m not a child.”

“You’re emotionally fifteen.”

“Fuck off.”

That at least earned the laugh Scott had clearly been aiming for.

Shane slipped through the crowd toward the balcony doors before anyone else could stop him.

The cold night air hit him immediately.

Quiet.

God.

He exhaled hard, stepping into the shadows near the far side of the balcony, pressing lightly against the wall.

The city stretched below in glittering lights.

His pulse still felt too fast.

Too much noise.

Too many people behind him.

Too many places someone could appear unexpectedly.

He closed his eyes.

Just for a second.

Breathe in.

Out.

In.

Out.

“So,” a soft voice said a few feet away, calm enough not to make him jump, “you don’t like crowds either, Shane Hollander?”

His eyes snapped open.

A woman sat near the balcony railing, one leg crossed over the other, a champagne glass balanced loosely in her hand.

Dark coat.

Soft makeup.

A face he recognized instantly.

Shane blinked.

Then blinked again.

“Oh my god,” he said before he could stop himself.

She laughed quietly.

“Well, that’s usually either a good reaction or a really bad one.”

“You’re- ”

“Hopefully not about to be accused of stalking,” she said dryly.

“Rose Landry,” Shane finished, slightly horrified at himself.

Her smile widened.

“Guilty.”

Jesus.

He knew exactly who she was.

Thrillers mostly. Fun damsel in distress movies he’d see a million times on airplanes and hotel rooms at two in the morning because sleep never came easily during road trips.

She tilted her head slightly.

“You okay?” she asked after a moment. “You look like the crowd in there tried to kill you.”

Something about her tone made him laugh unexpectedly.

Small, but real.

“Feels a little like that,” he admitted.

“Ah,” she said knowingly. “You’re hiding.”

He hesitated.

“...Maybe.”

“That’s okay,” she said simply. “I hide too.”

She gestured vaguely toward the doors.

“Too many people pretending to be interesting.”

That made him laugh again.

And somehow, without meaning to, he found himself staying.

At first, it was awkward. Small comments.

Jokes. She asked how he knew Kip. He asked how *she* knew Kip.

Apparently, an indie film she’d done years ago had used one of Kip’s early pieces, and they’d stayed friendly.

“You bought anything?” she asked eventually.

“Three pieces.”

Her eyebrows lifted.

“Damn. Rich hockey player behavior.”

“Supporting local artists,” Shane said defensively.

She smiled.

“Very noble of you.”

Hours slipped strangely after that.

Easy. Unexpectedly easy.

They talked about movies. About terrible hotel coffee. About travel. About weird fan encounters. Rose admitted she sometimes wore hats and sunglasses specifically to grocery shop unnoticed.

Shane told her about getting recognized at gas stations in the middle of nowhere by aggressively enthusiastic Canadian dads.

At some point, Scott appeared briefly through the doors, clearly looking for him.

His eyes narrowed instantly at the sight.

Shane gave him a look.

Don't.

Scott mouthed: Are you ok?

Shane shooed him off.

Rose laughed so hard she nearly spilled her drink.

“Protective friend?”

“Yea, kind of.”

“Mhm.”

Scott lingered suspiciously for another thirty seconds before disappearing again.

And for the first time in what felt like forever, Shane realized something strange.

He hadn't checked over his shoulder once in almost an hour.

Hadn't thought about the cabin.

Or the broken lock.

Or the smell of citrus covering fear.

For one night, standing beneath soft balcony lights with an actress whose films he'd watched alone too many times to admit out loud, Shane felt something dangerously unfamiliar.

Safe.

Chapter End Notes

Well... 😊

I feel like I need to sit in a corner after writing this chapter.

A lot happened here, and I know emotions are probably VERY mixed right now. Shane finally stopped running and fought back, Ilya got a reality check (sort of...), and somehow we also ended up at an art gallery with a certain actress 🙄

I'm genuinely curious where everyone's head is at after this one:

Were you surprised Shane fought back the way he did?

Do you think Ilya actually understands the damage he caused, is causing and will cause?

Thoughts on Rose?? Unexpected friendship? Potential chaos? 🙄

And most importantly... if you were Shane right now, would you ever trust Ilya again?

As always, comments make my entire day and I LOVE reading your theories (even when they stress me out 😂). Chapter 17 is already in progress and things are definitely shifting.

Thank you all for reading ❤️

Chapter 17: Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

A lighter chapter before we get into something not so nice as a fair warning. Personally, I love Rose so hope y'all like her too.

Next chapter will be up tomorrow night. Maybe earlier.

Chapter Notes

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

The morning after Kip's art show, Shane woke up with his phone still in his hand and the strange, unfamiliar sensation of having slept well.

Not well, exactly. Not peacefully all the way through. His body still felt heavy in that bruised, hollow way it had for days, like his muscles had been scraped from the inside and then packed back into the wrong places. But there was no violent lurch awake this time. No hand flying toward an empty nightstand. No phantom shape unfolding from the corner of the room before his eyes were even open. For one suspended second, lying on Scott and Kip's guest bed beneath soft blankets that smelled faintly like detergent and someone else's home, Shane simply blinked at the pale morning light leaking through the blinds and realized he had made it through the night without checking the lock once.

The realization should have been comforting. Instead, it made his throat tighten. Because he knew exactly why.

He had not slept because he was 'healed' or because the fear had finally loosened its teeth from the back of his neck. He had slept because Scott had been down the hall. Because Kip had been moving around the apartment late into the night, still too wired from the gallery to settle, his voice drifting through the walls in excited bursts as Scott listened and laughed and told him for the fourth time that yes, most of the paintings selling actually did count as a successful show. Shane had slept because he wasn't alone in a quiet rental house with too many shadows and a man somewhere in the world who knew how to get through locked doors without making a sound.

His phone screen had gone dark. When he pressed the side button, nothing happened for a second, and a cold needle of panic slid under his ribs before the screen finally lit up.

No new messages.

Not from Rose.

Not from anyone else.

He told himself that was fine. It was normal. It was morning. She had probably gone home and gone to bed like a normal person after spending half the night hiding on a balcony with him. He had sent the message from Scott's phone anyway, not his own, so maybe she had answered Scott and Scott hadn't checked yet. Or maybe she thought he was weird. Maybe sending screenshots of nonfiction books at one in the morning after knowing someone for five hours was, objectively, insane.

Shane stared at the ceiling.

"Fuck," he muttered.

The bedroom door cracked open without warning, and Shane nearly launched himself through the mattress.

Scott stood there in sweatpants, hair a mess, mug in hand, eyebrows raised.

"Jesus," Scott said. "Relax. I knocked."

"No, you didn't."

"I thought about knocking."

"That's not the same thing."

Scott's gaze sharpened for half a second, too quick for most people to catch. Shane caught it anyway. The little assessment. The way Scott's eyes moved over him, taking in the phone clutched too tightly in his hand, the stiff line of his shoulders, the breath he had not fully managed to get back under control.

Then Scott ruined it by smirking.

"You sleep with your phone now?"

Shane threw a pillow at him.

Scott dodged badly, mostly because he had a mug in one hand and refused to sacrifice the coffee. The pillow clipped his shoulder and slid uselessly to the floor.

"Stop opening doors like a serial killer."

"Stop sleeping like a convalescent Victorian child."

Shane sat up slowly, rubbing both hands over his face. His head felt thick. Not hungover, because he hadn't actually drunk much the night before, but wrung out and overused. Like his brain had been running through crisis drills all night even while his body slept.

Scott leaned one shoulder against the doorframe.

"You okay?"

There it was again.

The question everyone kept asking in slightly different voices.

Jackie, soft with worry. His mother, warm and unsuspecting. Scott dry but too careful underneath.

Shane looked down at his phone.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m fine.”

Scott did not move.

Shane sighed. “I slept, okay? That’s something.”

That, at least, seemed to ease whatever Scott had been bracing for. His expression softened just a little.

“Good,” he said. Then, because apparently sincerity could only exist in his body for five seconds at a time, he added, “So you and Rose Landry talked for a good while.”

Shane groaned and fell back against the pillow.

“Yes, she was nice.”

“Oh my god,” Scott said immediately, delighted. “You like her.”

“I like people who don’t annoy me before nine in the morning.”

“That rules me out.”

“Exactly.”

Scott grinned into his coffee.

From somewhere in the apartment, Kip called, “Is he awake?”

“No,” Shane called back. Scott looked at him. “I’m asleep.”

Kip appeared behind Scott a moment later, hair still damp from a shower, dressed casually in jeans and a sweater. He was holding his own coffee mug with both hands and looked softer than he had the night before, the glow of the show still clinging to him, but quieter now. Almost shy in the aftermath of being celebrated.

“Morning,” Kip said.

“Morning.” Shane pushed himself upright again. “Still famous?”

Kip rolled his eyes, but the smile gave him away.

Scott bumped his shoulder against Kip’s. “Very famous. Insufferable already.”

“I sold paintings, I didn’t win an Oscar.”

“You sold most of them.”

Kip looked down into his mug, pleased despite himself.

Shane felt something warm flicker in his chest at the sight. It was easier to focus on that than on anything else. Easier to be happy for Kip. Easier to sit in this sunlit room with someone else’s coffee smell drifting through the apartment and pretend the world had not split open under him two days ago.

“It was a beautiful exhibit.” Shane said after a moment. “I meant what I said. You should be very proud, I loved we brought.

Kip’s face changed. Not dramatically, but enough. The guarded edges softened, his mouth pressing into a line like he was trying not to let the compliment land too hard.

“Thanks,” he said, quieter.

“I want that one shipped to my parents’ house, if that’s okay.”

Scott blinked. “You bought one for your parents?”

“My mom likes trees.”

Scott stared at him for a beat, then put a hand over his chest.

“Your mother is terrifying. I met her once last year. She’s intense.”

“Don’t make it weird.”

“I should be getting ready to leave..”

“Your flight isn’t for another few hours.”

“I have a few errands and then I can sit at the airport.”

Kip laughed softly. “Honestly, that sounds like something he would do.”

It did. And, as soon as the words settled, Shane realized he actually wanted to.

Not because he liked airports. He didn’t. Airports were terrible, all noise and lines and stale coffee and people who had apparently never learned how to walk in straight lines. But airports were public. Crowded in a way that felt annoying rather than threatening. Full of cameras, security, movement. No quiet bedrooms. No chairs in dark corners. No private silence where someone could wait for him to wake up.

Scott must have seen the decision forming.

“You really are going to the airport early.”

Shane shrugged, reaching for his duffel bag on the floor.

“Might buy a new phone.”

Scott’s amusement dimmed. “Because yours was acting weird?”

“It deleted her number.”

“Rose’s?”

“Yeah.”

“And the message.”

Scott’s eyes narrowed.

Shane kept his own face carefully casual as he stood and started stuffing clothes into his bag with more force than necessary. “Probably a glitch.”

“Phones don’t usually just delete one number.”

“Mine does, apparently.”

“Shane.”

He hated the way Scott said his name sometimes. Not teasing. Not kiddo. Just Shane, like he was gently but firmly putting a hand against a door before Shane could close it all the way.

He zipped the bag.

“I’m getting a new one.”

Scott watched him for a long moment, then nodded once.

“Okay.”

No more questions.

That was what almost cracked him.

Not the pushing. Not the concern. The fact that Scott, loudmouth, irritating, boundary-stomping Scott, looked at him and chose not to push because something in Shane must have looked fragile enough to make him stop.

Shane swallowed hard and swung the duffel strap over his shoulder.

“I’ll text you when I land.”

“With the new phone.”

“With the new phone.”

“And you’ll give me the number.”

“Yes, Dad.”

Scott’s mouth twitched, but his eyes stayed serious.

“Good.”

Kip walked him to the door with Scott, still looking pleased and tired and a little overwhelmed. Before Shane could step out, Kip surprised him by reaching forward and giving him a quick hug. It was awkward because Kip was awkward sometimes and Shane was worse, but it was real.

“Thanks for coming,” Kip said against his shoulder. “I know crowds aren’t really your thing.”

Shane froze for half a second, then forced himself to hug back.

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “It was good. I’m glad I came.”

He meant it. That surprised him too.

Scott hugged him next, less awkwardly and more aggressively, thumping him once between the shoulder blades.

“Don’t be a stranger,” Scott said. “And text the girl.”

“She’s not the girl.”

“Sure.”

“She’s my friend.”

“You met her yesterday.”

“And somehow she’s still less annoying than you.”

Scott grinned. “Low bar.”

Shane left before the warmth in his chest could become something harder to swallow.

The ride to the airport was grey and wet, the city sliding past the cab windows in streaks of glass and concrete. Shane kept his hood up and his cap low when he stepped out at departures, moving through the automatic doors with his duffel held close and his phone gripped in one hand. The old phone. The compromised phone, though he refused to call it that, even in his own head. Compromised sounded paranoid, compromised sounded like he was the kind of person who believed in ghosts in mirrors and footsteps that weren’t there.

But the number had vanished. The message had vanished.

And Ilya had found a house he should not have known existed.

So Shane went straight to the electronics kiosk before checking in, bought the newest phone they had without looking too closely at the price, and paid extra to have them transfer only the basics. Photos, some contacts, nothing else. No weird apps. No old permissions. No saved passwords. He listened to the employee explain cloud backups and privacy settings with the intense, grave focus of someone being told how to defuse a bomb.

“Do you want everything restored from the old device?” the guy asked.

“No,” Shane said immediately.

The employee looked up.

Shane forced a shrug. “I want a clean start.”

“Sure. We can do that.”

A clean start. He liked the sound of that.

It was stupid, obviously. A new phone didn’t erase anything. It didn’t fix the rental house or his dreams or the way he still flinched when someone came up behind him too quietly. But when the employee handed him the new device, smooth and blank and unmarked, Shane felt a small, almost embarrassing rush of relief.

Something new.

Something Ilya had never touched.

He sat at his gate with his duffel under his knees, coffee cooling on the little table beside him, and stared at the blank message screen longer than he wanted to admit.

Then stared at Rose’s contact until the letters started to blur. This was ridiculous.

He crashed into grown men twice his size on the ice without thinking. He could stand in front of reporters after a loss and say the right meaningless phrases about structure and effort and needing to be better. He could handle hostile crowds, playoff pressure, screaming coaches, cameras shoved in his face after overtime losses.

But texting one actress who had been nice to him on a balcony felt like stepping onto thin ice.

He finally typed.

Shane- Hey, it’s Shane. New phone. Apparently mine decided to become haunted.

He stared at it. Too weird? No, she liked weird.

Maybe.

He sent it before he could overthink himself into deleting it. The response came less than a minute later.

Rose Landry- I knew it. You absolutely had haunted phone energy.

Shane smiled before he could stop himself.

Shane- That's a real thing?

Rose Landry: Oh, definitely. It's when someone stares at their phone like it personally betrayed them and/or contains an ancient curse.

Shane- It did delete your number.

Rose Landry- How rude! I'm unforgettable.

He laughed quietly, and an older woman sitting across from him glanced over with mild curiosity.

Shane ducked his head, still smiling.

Shane- Clearly the phone was jealous.

Rose Landry- That's the only logical explanation.

He hesitated, then opened his photos and found the screenshots of the books he had tried to send the night before. Nonfiction. History. Psychology. Ocean exploration. A biography of a polar expedition he had read during a long road trip when everyone else on the team had been playing cards. He selected them and sent them before he could decide it made him look like a sixty-year-old man trapped in a twenty-year-old hockey player's body.

Shane- You said you needed something to read on set. These are some of my favorites. Ignore the fact that two of them are depressing.

The typing bubbles appeared immediately.

Then disappeared.

Then appeared again.

Shane's stomach did something embarrassing.

Rose Landry- Deep ocean exploration, wartime codebreaking, trauma psychology, and doomed Arctic expedition. Shane Hollander, are you a skin walker in a hot body but really a million years old?

He bit the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling too wide.

Shane- You watch psychological thrillers for fun.

Rose Landry- I'm IN psychological thrillers. That's different.

Shane- Worse, probably.

Rose Landry- Fair.

A boarding announcement crackled overhead for a different flight. Around him, people shifted bags and wrangled children and complained into phones. Shane barely heard any of it.

Rose Landry- The ocean one actually looks good.

Shane- It is.

RoseLandry- Give me the non-hockey-player review.

He paused.

Then typed slower.

Shane- It's about how much of the world exists where no one can see it. Kind of terrifying. Kind of peaceful.

The message sat there after he sent it, more honest than he had expected. For a second, he wished he could snatch it back and replace it with something easier, something dumb about fish.

Rose did not make it weird.

Rose Landry- That might be the best book recommendation anyone has ever given me.

His face went hot.

Shane- Is the bar set low?

Rose Landry- Extremely. Most actors recommend memoirs by people who are still alive and already annoying.

He laughed again.

It was easy after that.

Too easy, almost.

They texted about airport food and set food and how both were crimes in different directions. Rose sent him a photo of the giant sunglasses she was apparently wearing indoors because she claimed the outside world had become "aggressively bright." Shane sent her a photo of his coffee cup with his name spelled "Sean," which made her declare the barista his enemy. He told her about Scott calling her balcony girl, and she responded with a string of laughing emojis followed by,

Rose Landry- Please tell Scott I accept this title but expect a better one by next week.

By the time his flight began boarding, Shane had forgotten to watch the gate entrance.

Not completely. He did not want fear to be his new default. He did not want safety to feel like a borrowed thing he could only hold when someone else distracted him well enough.

He stood with the boarding group, duffel over one shoulder, phone in hand, and sent one last message before stepping onto the jet bridge.

Shane- Boarding now. I'll text when I land.

Her reply came before he lost service.

Rose Landry- Safe flight, haunted phone boy.

He stared at it until the line moved.

Haunted phone boy.

It was stupid.

It made him smile.

The plane felt too small once he was seated. Not because he disliked flying, but because there was nowhere to go once the doors closed. He had always found airplanes easy before. A controlled space. A few hours suspended outside responsibility, where no one could ask him to do anything except sit still. Now, strapped into the window seat with a businessman already typing on a laptop beside him and rain tracking thin lines across the oval glass, Shane felt the old pressure creep back into his chest.

He turned the new phone over in his hands.

Clean start.

He had texted Rose. He had laughed in an airport. He had slept. Those were facts. Small ones, maybe, but real.

The plane lifted through the grey.

Somewhere above the clouds, exhaustion caught him again.

At first, the dream was sweet.

That was the worst part.

He was warm. Warm in that deep, boneless way he had only ever felt once, in a bath gone lukewarm around them, Ilya's chest solid against his back and those large hands so careful on his skin that Shane had not known what to do with it. In the dream, nothing was broken yet. There was no locked door forced open, no terror slicing through sleep. Only the low murmur of Russian near his ear, soft enough to be private, and Ilya's thumb tracing the inside of his wrist like he was memorizing the beat of Shane's pulse.

Zayka.

In the dream, Shane did not flinch, he leaned back.

He let himself be held.

Ilya's mouth brushed the curve of his shoulder, barely there, reverent, and Shane felt the old, traitorous ache bloom low in his stomach and high in his throat all at once. The wanting. The safety he had believed in for those few impossible hours. The strange, helpless certainty that no one had ever looked at him so completely and wanted every hidden, inconvenient part.

Then the water went cold.

The arms around him tightened.

The bathroom tiles stretched into the bedroom wall of the rental house, shadows pooling in the corners. Shane tried to move and couldn't. Ilya's breath was still at his ear, but the words changed shape, becoming something he could not understand, something low and possessive and endless. The hands that had been careful became restraints. The mouth at his shoulder became teeth. Shane opened his mouth to tell him to stop, but no sound came out.

Then Ilya was in the chair. Watching, waiting.

Shane woke with a violent jerk, the seatbelt cutting across his hips and his breath trapped halfway up his throat.

The businessman beside him startled awake and glared.

"You okay?" he muttered.

Shane nodded too fast.

"Yeah. Sorry."

He turned toward the window and pressed his forehead lightly to the plastic shade, eyes squeezed shut, willing the tremor in his hands to stop before anyone else noticed. The cabin lights were dim. The engines hummed steadily. Around him, people slept or watched movies or scrolled through phones, unaware that Shane's heart was trying to claw its way out of his chest.

It had been sweet. Then it had not. That was what made it so unbearable. He missed the sweet.

If Ilya were only the monster, maybe Shane could hate him cleanly. If every memory were fear, every touch poison, every word a lie, then maybe he could cut him out like a bad piece of himself and leave nothing behind but scar tissue. But his brain would not let him. His body would not let him. Sleep kept bringing him both versions as if they belonged to each other because they did.

The man in the bath.

The man in the chair.

The same hands.

The same voice.

The same impossible ache.

Shane swallowed hard and wiped at his face with the sleeve of his hoodie before the wetness at the corner of his eyes could become anything more obvious. He hated himself for missing him. Hated that some broken, confused part of him still wanted to know if Ilya's lip had healed. If the bruise on his jaw had darkened. If his ribs hurt from the elbow Shane had driven into him. He hated that he could still remember the look in Ilya's eyes when Shane told him to leave, the devastation there so naked it had almost looked human enough to forgive.

Almost.

He pressed his fists against his thighs until his knuckles ached.

No.

He had a new phone.

A flight home.

A season to train for.

Friends.

Rose.

He had things that were not Ilya.

He repeated that silently until the plane began its descent, until the clouds broke open beneath them and Montreal appeared in patches of grey and green and glass, until the wheels hit the runway hard enough to jolt everyone forward.

When the plane reached the gate, Shane turned on his phone with fingers that were mostly steady.

A message appeared almost immediately.

Rose Landry- Did the haunted phone survive the sky?

He stared at it for a long second.

Then typed back.

Shane- New phone survived. I did too. Not that you asked. I come second to a phone in your life.

Her reply came while passengers were standing and dragging bags from overhead bins.

Rose Landry- Good. I'd hate to have to haunt the airline on your behalf. And you're too pretty to come in second. That face of yours needs studying.

Shane let out a breath that was almost a laugh.

Not fixed. Not safe. Not whole.

But alive.

And for the first time in days, when he stepped off the plane and into the noise of the terminal, he did not feel entirely alone.

A week later, Shane had become very good at not being alone.

He never consciously decided it. It just... happened.

Like muscle memory.

Like survival.

Training took up most mornings. Long hours on the ice until his legs burned and sweat soaked through his gear, because exhaustion helped. Exhaustion dulled things. When his body hurt enough, when every muscle screamed from drills and skating and preseason conditioning, his brain got quieter. Hockey had always been that for him. Structure. Rules. Predictability. The ice made sense in ways people never really did.

JJ noticed first.

"You're overtraining," he said flatly one morning, pulling off his gloves after practice.

Shane frowned.

"No, I'm not."

"You stayed for an extra hour yesterday."

"So?"

"You were here before the staff."

Shane shrugged, avoiding eye contact while unlacing his skates.

"I'm getting ready for the season."

JJ leaned back against the stall.

“You always get ready for the season.”

A pause.

Then quieter:

“This feels different.”

Shane hated how observant everyone suddenly seemed.

“I’m fine.”

JJ snorted. “Sure.”

Thankfully, Hayden arrived before the conversation could become dangerous.

Emma strapped to his chest, coffee in hand, somehow looking more exhausted and more annoyingly happy than any human should be allowed.

“Hey, superstar,” Hayden said. “You wanna come over later? Jackie made enough food to feed a village.”

Shane said yes immediately.

Too quickly.

JJ looked at him. Then at Hayden. Then back again.

The expression on his face made Shane want to throw something.

“You know,” JJ said slowly, “for someone who likes being alone so much, you’ve suddenly become very clingy.”

“Shut up.”

“I’m serious.”

“You just don’t want me around. I’m supposed to be the captain now so I need to be more present.”

“No,” JJ said. “I’m saying I haven’t seen you voluntarily socialize this much since-, well since ever really.”

Shane looked away first. “I’m hungry,” he muttered. Smooth, very mature.

JJ sighed.

“Okay.”

But his voice had softened.

That was somehow worse.

The dreams didn't stop. That part frustrated Shane more than anything.

He could handle the fear. Sort of. Fear made sense. Fear was rational. What didn't make sense were the good dreams.

The sweet ones. Those felt cruel. Sometimes it was little things.

A hotel bed somewhere during playoffs, half asleep while Ilya pressed sleepy kisses against the back of his neck and muttered irritated Russian because Shane kept stealing the blankets.

Sometimes it was the bath. *Always* the bath.

Warm water gone lukewarm around them while Ilya held him like something precious instead of breakable, broad hands tracing lazy patterns against damp skin. In dreams, Shane always relaxed eventually. Always leaned back against that solid chest. Always let himself believe, just for a few impossible minutes, that he had finally found something safe.

Those dreams hurt the worst.

Because they felt real. Because they had been real. And then, inevitably, something shifted.

The water turned cold. The room darkened. The tender caresses changed. A hand gripped too tightly. The shadows stretched too long.

Sometimes he woke up gasping because dream-Ilya had suddenly become the thing from the chair again. Silent. Watching. Waiting in corners.

Sometimes he woke up reaching for him. That was the worst of all.

The first time it happened, Shane sat bolt upright in a hotel bed at three in the morning, horror crashing through him so violently he nearly threw up.

Because for one split second, before memory caught up, he had wanted him there.

Wanted warmth. Wanted the familiar heaviness beside him, a heavy arm holding him closer.

Wanted- no. *No*.

He sat in the dark for an hour after that, TV on low volume just for noise.

He never slept in silence anymore.

His parents noticed something was wrong too. Of course they did. Mothers especially seemed biologically incapable of missing things.

“You’re staying another night?” his mom asked carefully one evening while he hovered in the kitchen pretending to help.

“Maybe.”

“You’re always welcome.”

He nodded.

“I know.” And he meant it. But even there, in the house he’d grown up in, with familiar creaking floors and his dad asleep in the recliner watching hockey reruns, Shane couldn’t fully settle.

He checked the windows without meaning to. Checked locks, paused when floorboards creaked at night. Sometimes he woke up and forgot where he was for a terrifying second, heart pounding before recognition settled.

Home. You’re home. Safe. But the feeling never fully left. Like someone standing just outside your peripheral vision. Like waiting for something terrible to happen again. Eventually, staying there started feeling unfair.

He didn’t want his mom watching him too closely. Didn’t want his dad hovering awkwardly in the way dads did when they knew something hurt but didn’t know how to fix it.

So hotels became easier. Temporary, anonymous.

Busy. Never too quiet.

The apartment building had been impulsive. Or at least that was what he told himself.

An investment. A project.

Privacy.

He wanted security. He wanted control. He wanted somewhere no one could accidentally find him. No shared hallways. No random neighbors. No front desk gossip.

He bought a smaller luxury apartment building quietly, intending to renovate the penthouse and eventually move in once construction finished. He controlled who rented the units.

High security, a private garage only accessed through fingerprints. Full surveillance and modern digital locks.

He spent stupid amounts of money changing plans. He told himself it was because he was famous. A few articles had come out of him that had gotten him more attention. Rose had sent them to him when he was name 'People's Sexiest Man'. He had given his mother an incredulous look but she shrugged it away and said he was too handsome for his own good.

Because hockey players needed privacy. Because fans got weird sometimes.

But every contractor meeting felt suspiciously like building a bunker. Even he knew it.

Through all of it, somehow, Rose became... his constant. Unexpectedly one of his best, closest friends.

It started with texts. Small, random things. A photo of terrible craft services coffee from set. A picture of a bookstore shelf captioned:

Rose Landry- You've made me eighty years old. Looking for ocean books now.

Shane sent back- **Proud of you.**

Somewhere along the line, texting became calls. Calls became FaceTimes. Sometimes short, sometimes hours.

Sometimes Shane would finish training and sit in his hotel room eating takeout while Rose rambled about directors and wardrobe disasters and bizarre actor behavior.

Sometimes she called him from makeup trailers looking objectively ridiculous. One afternoon she answered looking vaguely possessed. Dark circles under her eyes. Fake blood near her temple.

Shane blinked. "...You look um-different."

"Thank you."

"No seriously."

"I'm playing an emotionally unstable teen daughter," she said solemnly. "So naturally they made me look horrifying."

He laughed harder than he had in weeks. Real laughter, the kind that left his stomach hurting.

Rose pointed accusingly. "Oh wow. You actually have emotions."

"Barely."

"You know," she said thoughtfully, "I'm kind of obsessed with making hockey players laugh now."

“Hockey players?”

“You specifically.”

Something warm lodged quietly beneath Shane’s ribs.

Uncomplicated. Easy. Safe.

Hayden noticed first.

“You seem better,” he said casually one afternoon while Emma slept against Shane’s chest.

Shane looked up. “What?”

“Lighter.”

He frowned. “I’m fine.”

“You keep smiling at your phone.”

Jackie looked up immediately from the couch.

“Oh my god.”

Shane groaned.

“No.”

“There’s a person,” Hayden said immediately.

“There’s absolutely a person,” Jackie agreed.

“There is not.”

JJ, traitor that he was, didn’t even look up from where he sat at the kitchen island.

“You’re always texting someone now.”

Shane nearly dropped his drink. “I hate all of you.”

Emma made a tiny sleepy noise.

Jackie grinned. “Oh, he’s blushing.”

“I’m leaving.”

“You smile now,” Hayden said, quieter this time. “That’s all I’m saying.”

That stopped him. Because he hadn't realized, not really. But maybe he did, a little. Less checking over his shoulder. Less dread in the mornings.

Not gone, never gone. But softer around the edges. Sometimes.

Especially when Rose called.

The best call came late on a Thursday.

Shane had just finished practice and collapsed into his hotel bed, still damp-haired and exhausted, when his phone lit up.

Rose Calling

He answered immediately.

"You look terrible," she said.

"Hi to you too."

"You're sweaty."

"Hockey."

"Disgusting. I could smell the fumes from here."

He smiled despite himself.

"What are you doing?"

Rose brightened.

"So."

That tone immediately worried him.

"What."

"I have a shoot."

"Congratulations?"

"Outside Montreal."

He sat up.

"What?"

"Tiny town like... twenty minutes out," she said. "Three weeks."

Shane blinked.

Something stupidly excited unfurled in his chest before he could stop it.

“Oh.”

Rose narrowed her eyes.

“Was that enthusiasm?”

“No.”

“That was absolutely enthusiasm.”

“Nope.”

“Wow,” she said. “You actually like me.”

“You’re okay.”

She gasped dramatically. “I’m okay?”

“Maybe slightly above average.”

“You’re obsessed with me.”

Shane rolled his eyes so hard it hurt. “When are you getting here?”

Rose smiled. Soft, easy.

“Few days.”

The excitement sat in his chest long after the call ended. Warm. Strange. Somehow hopeful.

For the first time in weeks, Shane found himself actually looking forward to something.

And when sleep finally came that night, the dream was soft again.

Just warmth.

Russian murmured sleepily against his skin.

A hand tangled loosely with his beneath blankets.

No fear, no chair. No shadows. Only grief when he woke up alone.

The first time Shane saw Rose in person again, he returned the tight hug, he’d missed her.

Which felt ridiculous, considering she was objectively impossible to miss.

She stood outside arrivals in oversized sunglasses despite the cloudy weather, dark hair pulled back messily beneath a baseball cap that absolutely did not disguise who she was. A

coffee balanced in one hand, phone in the other, one foot tapping impatiently against the concrete.

She looked... normal. Not a movie star.

Just normal, comfortable.

Real. And somehow that made the strange burst of nervousness in Shane's chest worse. He had not expected to be nervous.

They texted constantly. Called constantly. He knew what she sounded like when she was tired, when she was laughing too hard, when she was annoyed with directors, when she was secretly anxious before filming. He knew she hated mushrooms for reasons she refused to elaborate on and that she cried at documentaries about sea animals.

He *knew* her. Sort of. Still, standing there suddenly felt different. Real. His grip tightened unconsciously around the handle of her suitcase.

Before he could second-guess himself, Rose looked up.

Paused.

Then immediately grinned.

"Oh my god," she said, loud enough that two nearby people looked over. "Haunted phone boy!"

Shane rolled his eyes so hard it almost hurt.

"That's really sticking?"

"Forever."

Then she was walking toward him, easy and casual like they had been friends for years instead of weeks.

No awkward pause. No weirdness. No uncertainty.

Just: "There you are."

Something in Shane's chest loosened.

"You're dramatic," he muttered.

"You text me fourteen photos of rain yesterday and *I'm* dramatic?" She laughed immediately.

God. There it was again.

Easy. Everything with her felt weirdly easy. They fell into conversation without even trying.

About filming. Training camp. How she had already gotten lost twice in a tiny Canadian town somehow.

“How?” Shane asked. “There’s like three roads.”

“I have no sense of direction,” Rose said unapologetically. “If you dropped me in my own neighborhood I’d probably die.”

“That feels concerning.”

“It’s why I’m pretty.”

He snorted. “Confident.”

“Accurate.” By the second day, they had already fallen into a rhythm.

Rose texted him whenever filming wrapped.

Shane met her when practice ended.

Coffee. Dinner. Bookstores.

Random drives because Rose liked looking at houses she would never live in despite coming to Canada often for filming. “And why would I buy anything when I can just live with you?”

They talked constantly. Sometimes nonsense. Sometimes deeper than Shane expected. She never pushed. That was the thing he kept noticing. She noticed everything without making it feel like she was noticing.

Like the way he sat facing doors automatically. The way crowds made him tense. How loud places slowly wound him tight until his shoulders crept higher and higher. The first time she realized something was wrong happened accidentally.

A restaurant downtown they had decided on for dinner that catered to Shane’s strict diet but also had something for her to pick from. It had been too loud, too many people.

Someone recognized him halfway through dinner. Then someone else. Then another. Phones started coming out. A group lingering too close. Not aggressive, just... too much.

Too many voices. Too many people behind him. Shane felt himself slipping before he even understood it. The buzzing started first. Then the heat. Then the feeling of his skin being suddenly too tight. His knee bounced hard beneath the table. He kept scanning exits.

Too many people, too many-

“Hey.” Rose’s voice cut through gently. Not sharp or demanding. Just steady, serving as his anchor.

He blinked. “What?”

“You okay?”

“Sure.” Too fast, too automatic.

She tilted her head but didn’t call him out. Didn’t press.

Instead, she quietly stood. “Come on.”

“What?”

“Walk with me.”

Outside air helped clear his mind. He hadn’t realized how hard he was breathing until the wind hit his face.

Rose said nothing for almost a full minute. Then, casually, like it meant nothing, she looped her arm through his. Just there, warm, grounding.

Something in Shane eased instantly.

His shoulders loosened before he could stop them. The buzzing quieted.

“Oh,” Rose said quietly after a minute. He looked at her.

“You calm down when someone’s touching you.”

Shane frowned. “I do?”

“Little bit.” She squeezed his arm lightly.

“There.”

Weirdly enough- She was right. He felt... steadier. He brought his hand up to hold her fingertips, keeping her hand in the crook of his elbow.

Less like he was trying to crawl out of his own skin.

Rose smiled softly. “Huh.”

Then immediately ruined the moment.

“You’re basically a nervous rescue kitten.”

“Fuck off.”

“You absolutely are.”

After that, she just... adapted. Never made a thing of it. Never asked invasive questions.

But crowds? She linked arms automatically.

Busy streets? Hand lightly against his shoulder.

Too many people nearby? She'd quietly steer him somewhere calmer without comment.

And embarrassingly- It worked.

Every time.

Sometimes Shane didn't even realize he was spiraling until her hand brushed his sleeve or her shoulder bumped his and suddenly breathing became easier again. He tried not to think too hard about why.

A few days before the season opener, Rose decided he apparently needed "real clothes."

"You dress like a divorced suburban dad. You're way too pretty to be dressed like that."

Shane looked down at his hoodie. "This is offensive. I'm dressed ok."

"You own fourteen versions of the same sweatshirt."

"That's efficient. I'm always at practice or on the way to a game."

"You're twenty. You should dress like a twenty year old. You wear a black on black suit for every game."

"I'm tired."

"You're impossible."

Still, he went. Mostly because saying no to Rose felt weirdly impossible once she decided something. The shopping district was packed. Busier than Shane liked. The kind of place where people moved too close and noise echoed weirdly off buildings.

At first, it was okay. Manageable. Rose made everything easier somehow. She talked enough for both of them.

Made fun of ugly jackets. Threatened violence over cargo pants. Made him try things on he would never normally wear.

"You're hot," she declared casually outside one fitting room.

Shane nearly tripped.

"What?"

"I said what I said."

"You can't just say that."

“Why?”

“Because it’s weird.”

“You being objectively attractive isn’t weird.”

He stared.

Rose shrugged. “You hockey boys are so emotionally constipated.”

He hated how hard he laughed. Then someone recognized them. A pause, a whisper.

Then another. Phones lifted. Someone shouted Rose’s name. Then Shane’s.

And suddenly- Too much. Too fast. People moving closer.

Questions overlapping. Cameras.

“Are you dating?”

“Shane, over here!”

“Rose!”

“Photo please?”

His chest tightened instantly. Too many bodies.

But Rose was right there, a charming smile. She offered to take some selfies and signed some autographs so Shane relaxed and did the same to the people who came towards him. After a few minutes, they asked the gathered people if they could finish their day before posting the location on socials. Surprisingly, they agreed.

Someone stepped too close behind him. Shane froze, then- warm fingers slid around his wrist.

Rose.

“C’mon,” she said calmly.

Her hand tightened. Not pulling. Grounding again.

“Stay with me.”

He followed automatically.

Her arm linked through his as security finally moved in.

People pressed too close.

Questions louder now.

But Rose kept talking like nothing was happening.

Shane barked out a startled laugh. “You’re worried about shoes?”

“Yes.”

“You’re insane.”

“You knew this.” The laughter made breathing easier.

So did the way she kept holding onto him.

Steady, present.

Safe.

By the time they reached his car, both of them were half-laughing, half-out-of-breath.

“Oh my god,” Rose said, collapsing into the passenger seat. “That ended better than expected.”

“You looked weirdly calm.”

“I was lying.” He laughed again. Actually laughed.

The kind that made his ribs ache.

And for a second- everything felt normal.

Halfway to Rose’s rental, the sky opened.

Rain slammed against the windshield hard enough that Shane swore.

“Oh my god,” Rose laughed. “Canada is trying to kill me.”

“You wanted the weather.”

“This feels personal.” By the time they parked, the rain had somehow become worse.

“You ready?” Shane asked.

“No.”

“Cool.”

Neither moved.

Then Rose grinned suddenly. “Three...”

“No.”

“Two...”

“Rose-”

“One!” She shoved the door open.

Shane cursed and ran after her.

By the time they made it to the porch, both of them were soaked.

Completely soaked. Hair dripping. Clothes sticking. Rose doubled over laughing while Shane fumbled with her keys.

“This,” she said through laughter, “is your fault somehow.”

“How?”

“I haven’t decided yet.”

Inside was warm.

Quiet. Safe.

And for the first time in weeks, Shane realized something strange.

He wasn’t checking windows.

Wasn’t scanning exits.

Wasn’t waiting for something bad.

Because Rose was there. Talking, laughing.

Alive in the space. He stood there, trying not to spread water onto the floor. He watched as she put some of the bags down and then without a care, took off her shirt and let her pants drop. Shane quickly turned to give her some privacy but she laughed and went over to him.

“Now, don’t take this the wrong way, but I wouldn’t be a woman if I didn’t take this chance.” She said, leaning up a few inches and placing a soft peck right on his lips. “There, that’s out of the way. But if anyone asks, it was the longest, tongue filled, orgasmic kiss of your life.”

He just laughed as she ran upstairs and grabbed them towels. “Now, lets try on some of these clothes. Then we can watch that houseflipping show you like.

And somehow, impossibly- That made it feel safe.

Outside, across the street, hidden behind rain-streaked glass- A camera lens flashed once.

Then disappeared into the dark.

The next morning started normal. They had fallen asleep on the couch. Coffee was brewing and they were working on making fruit bowls together. Well, Shane was cutting the fruit as Rose looked through her phone.

Complaining about weather. Rose making fun of Canadian milk bags. Then her phone buzzed. She frowned.

“Oh no.”

“What?”

Rose turned the screen. A gossip account.

Blurry photos from yesterday. Them leaving the stores.

Laughing. Running through rain.

Headlines already speculating.

HOCKEY’S GOLDEN BOY & HOLLYWOOD’S NEW FAVORITE?

Shane groaned. “Great.”

“Could be worse.”

Then Rose stopped. Her expression changed.

“What?”

Slowly- She zoomed in.

One photo.

Different angle.

Not paparazzi crowd.

Farther away.

Through rain, through glass.

Taken from across the street.

Too close. Way too close.

The angle-

The house.

Shane went cold. Because he knew exactly where that photo had been taken.

Across the street. Watching. His stomach dropped.

No. No, no-

That wasn't normal.

Wasn't paparazzi.

Wasn't-

The mug shook slightly in his hands.

Rose looked at him. Then back at the screen.

And for the first time since meeting him-

She looked worried.

The silence that settled over the kitchen afterward felt wrong in a way Shane couldn't immediately explain. Heavy. Too aware somehow, as if the room itself had suddenly started paying attention. Rain still tapped softly against the windows, quieter now than the night before, but Shane found himself hearing everything again. The hum of the refrigerator. The old rental house creaking quietly as it settled. The faint sound of distant traffic somewhere farther down the road. His pulse, suddenly too loud in his ears. The mug trembled slightly in his hands before he carefully set it back down against the counter, fingers tighter around the ceramic than he realized.

"No," he said too quickly, the word coming out before he had really thought it through. "It's probably just paparazzi."

Even to him, it sounded wrong.

Thin.

Practiced.

Like something he had already rehearsed privately, trying to convince himself before anyone else could question it.

Because paparazzi took photos outside restaurants. Outside airports. Outside stores. Walking into buildings. Leaving buildings. Smiling in parking lots. They didn't sit across residential streets in the rain taking pictures through windows.

At least-

He didn't think they did.

Suddenly, terrifyingly, Shane wasn't sure anymore.

Rose stayed quiet for a moment longer than usual, not staring exactly, but watching him in that way she somehow had, the kind that felt observant without feeling invasive. Her eyes flicked briefly to the way his hands kept flexing unconsciously against the countertop, to how rigid his shoulders had become again, to the way his gaze had started drifting instinctively toward the front windows every few seconds.

“You’re shaking,” she said finally, voice soft enough not to feel accusing.

“I’m fine.” Too fast again.

Rose tilted her head slightly but didn’t argue. Didn’t call him on it. Didn’t do the thing people always did when they thought he was lying, where concern suddenly became pressure.

“Okay,” she said quietly.

Just okay. No push.

No demand.

And somehow, that made the knot in Shane’s throat tighten harder.

Because if she had pushed, maybe lying would’ve felt easier.

Instead, Rose stood from the table and quietly moved his tea farther back from the edge before he could accidentally knock it over.

“I’m gonna ask exactly one question,” she said after a moment, leaning lightly against the counter across from him. “And if you don’t want to answer, you don’t have to.”

Shane looked down at the grain of the countertop instead of at her.

“...Okay.”

Her voice stayed calm. Casual almost.

“Has someone scared you? Has someone hurt you?”

The question hit him harder than he expected. Not because it was invasive.

Because it wasn’t.

She hadn’t asked *who*.

Hadn’t asked *what happened*.

Hadn’t asked for details or explanations or names.

Just- Had someone scared you?

And god.

The answer was so obviously yes that it almost hurt.

For a second, Shane could see it all too clearly again. The chair in the dark. The shape unfolding from it while his body still struggled to wake. The metallic taste of fear flooding the back of his throat when realization hit. The awful confusion of recognizing someone you once trusted while your body screamed danger anyway.

He swallowed hard. "I..." His voice caught awkwardly. "It's complicated."

Rose held his gaze for a second, then nodded once. "Okay." That was it.

No pressure. No disappointed expression.

No gentle *you can tell me*. Just acceptance.

That almost made him tell her everything. About everything. The terrifying part where some awful, traitorous piece of him still missed Ilya sometimes. Still dreamed about warmth and Russian murmured half asleep against his skin before memory turned sharp again.

Instead, Shane rubbed both hands over his face.

"I probably sound insane."

"You absolutely don't," Rose said immediately.

He glanced up.

She shrugged lightly.

"I'm an actress," she said. "You'd be amazed what people do when they get weirdly obsessed."

Something in his stomach dropped.

The word sat strangely between them.

Obsessed.

Shane looked away first.

Rose seemed to catch herself a second later, expression softening.

"Hey," she said gently. "No spiraling."

"I'm not spiraling."

"You absolutely are."

Fair. She pushed off the counter and reached for her phone.

"Okay," she said, slipping effortlessly into action mode. "We're gonna be practical."

Shane frowned slightly.

“What does that mean?”

“It means we check security footage because production insisted on cameras, thank god. And it means I tell set security there might be someone weird nearby because I professionally hate creepy men.”

Despite everything, a quiet laugh escaped him.

“You say weird things.”

“You like weird things.”

Unfortunately- also true.

The footage ended up being frustratingly useless. Rain blurred most of the camera angles into streaks of movement and distorted headlights. Shadows shifted strangely. A dark figure might have stood near the curb at one point, or it might have been nothing more than tree branches moving in the wind. Every frame somehow made Shane feel worse instead of better, because uncertainty felt more dangerous than proof.

He hadn't realized he'd stopped breathing properly again until Rose quietly appeared beside him.

“You're doing the thing.”

“What thing?”

“The thing where you forget oxygen exists.”

Only then did he notice how tight his chest felt.

Rose linked her arm casually through his, like it meant nothing, warm and grounding and familiar enough now that Shane's body relaxed before his brain could catch up. It happened embarrassingly fast. The tension in his shoulders loosened. His breathing evened out slowly. The panic receded around the edges enough to feel survivable again.

“There,” Rose said softly, squeezing his arm once. “You're okay right now.”

Right now. Not forever. Not *everything's fine*.

Just right now. Present tense, manageable.

And somehow, that mattered more.

“You make everything quieter,” Shane admitted quietly before he could stop himself.

The words slipped out too honestly. Too quickly.

Rose paused. Then lightly bumped her shoulder against his. “Cool,” she said. “You make everything weirder.”

He laughed despite himself. “There’s the haunted phone boy smile,” she said immediately.

“You’re never letting that go.”

“Absolutely not.”

The rest of the morning passed strangely normal after that. Shane laughed hard enough at one point that he had to lean against the kitchen counter, tears threatening at the corners of his eyes while Rose dramatically argued that milk should “have dignity.”

And somehow, beneath the lingering discomfort of the photo, beneath the uneasy feeling crawling quietly under his skin, Shane realized something uncomfortable.

He had not laughed like this in weeks.

Maybe months.

Maybe longer.

Long enough that it felt unfamiliar.

By the time afternoon came, he knew he had to leave. Practice. Meetings. Real life waiting impatiently outside the temporary little bubble they had somehow built inside this rental house.

Still- he lingered near the front door longer than necessary.

Rose noticed immediately. “You’re being weird again.”

“I’m always weird.”

“True.”

She grabbed her jacket and linked arms with him automatically while walking him outside, like it had already become habit.

No awkwardness.

No big gesture.

Just easy.

And embarrassingly- Shane already knew it helped.

The moment her shoulder bumped lightly against his, something inside him settled again.

“You good?” she asked quietly before he climbed into the car.

He hesitated.

Then honest before he could stop himself:

“...Better.”

Rose smiled softly.

“Cool.”

The hotel felt wrong the second he walked inside. No laughter. No easy warmth filling space. Just silence pressing quietly against the walls. Shane checked the lock twice without meaning to, then hated himself for doing it. Showered. Tried watching game footage. Failed.

His thoughts kept circling.

The photo.

The angle.

The rain.

Too close.

Way too close.

The knock at the hotel door nearly made him jump out of his skin.

His stomach dropped instantly.

No.

No one should-

The phone rang before panic could fully take hold.

Front desk.

Shane stared at the screen for three full rings before finally answering.

“Hello?”

“Mr. Hollander?” the receptionist asked politely. “Someone dropped off a package for you.”

Everything inside him went cold.

“...A package?”

“Yes, sir.”

His pulse slammed hard against his ribs.

“Who dropped it off?”

A pause.

“I’m sorry, they didn’t leave a name.”

The room suddenly felt smaller. “I’m sorry, can you get rid of it please?”

Ilya had been trying. That was the humiliating part. For over two weeks, he had been trying so hard it physically hurt.

No calls. No showing up uninvited. No crossing oceans because panic told him distance meant disaster. He had even stopped texting after the last message, the one that had sat unanswered for days until eventually the silence itself began to feel like punishment.

I will wait until you are ready.

He had meant it.

Mostly. Or at least he had been trying to mean it.

Because every instinct inside him screamed that this was wrong. Space felt wrong. Silence felt unbearable. Loving Shane from thousands of miles away while pretending not to know whether he was sleeping or eating or overwhelmed or hurting somewhere without anyone noticing felt impossible in a way Ilya had not known another person could make him feel.

He had gone to meetings. Sat through dinners with his teammates.

Signed papers for his father’s care. Tried to behave like a functioning human being while something restless and ugly paced endlessly beneath his skin.

Svetlana had even told him, two nights earlier over too much vodka, that he seemed calmer.

He had lied and said she was right.

Then the article appeared. He had not even been looking for Shane.

The notification flashed briefly across his phone while one of his father’s doctors spoke in endless circles about his care plan, and for one stupid second Ilya almost ignored it.

Then he saw Shane’s face.

Smiling.

Actually smiling.

Something in his chest seized so violently it hurt.

He clicked the article before he could think better of it.

Rain blurred most of the photos, the quality grainy and poor, but it did not matter. He knew Shane instantly. Knew the shape of him in ways that had become humiliatingly instinctive. The curve of his shoulders beneath damp clothes, the way he tilted his head when he laughed, the slight pinkness in his cheeks from cold.

Laughing.

Shane was laughing.

And beside him- *A woman*. Red hair. Beautiful.

Too close. Her hand wrapped around his wrist.

Another photo. Shane smiling at her.

Soft.

Relaxed.

Happy.

Happy.

The word landed like something sharp lodged suddenly between his ribs.

He stopped hearing the lawyer.

Stopped hearing anything, really.

Another photo.

Them leaving a store together.

Her arm looped casually through Shane's.

Another.

Running through rain, bodies too close, both of them laughing hard enough Shane's head tipped back slightly, mouth open in a way Ilya had only seen a handful of times.

God.

God. He looked happy.

The article title blurred strangely beneath his vision.

HOCKEY'S GOLDEN BOY & HOLLYWOOD'S NEW FAVORITE?

“She is touching him.”

The words came out quietly enough at first that even Ilya barely registered saying them.

Across the conference table, the doctor paused mid-sentence.

“...Mr. Rozanov?”

Ilya looked down again.

Another photo.

Closer now.

The woman touching Shane’s shoulder while Shane looked at her with something easy in his expression. Comfortable. Familiar. The next one was of a kiss. Shane, his Shane, his omega, out kissing some woman.

Something hot and violent ripped straight through his chest.

Because Shane hated people touching him.

Shane tolerated people.

Endured crowds.

Flinched when strangers got too close. Tensed when people moved unpredictably around him. Even with Ilya, even after everything between them, Shane had taken time. Careful little moments of trust built slowly and reluctantly until eventually Shane leaned against him in hotel beds without thinking, let Ilya press sleepy kisses into his shoulder, let himself be held when nightmares woke him shaking.

And now-

This.

No.

The chair hit the floor hard enough to echo through the room.

Papers slid. Someone said his name. Ilya barely heard it.

“She is kissing him,” he said again, louder this time, staring at the screen like if he looked hard enough the pictures might rearrange themselves into something less unbearable. “Why is she touching him?”

His chest felt too tight.

Wrong. Everything suddenly felt wrong.

Because Shane had asked for space.

Space.

Not a replacement, not this.

Not someone else making him laugh.

Not someone else standing close enough to touch.

He had waited.

He had stayed away.

He had tried so fucking hard.

“Ilya- ”

He was already moving.

Phone.

Keys.

Passport.

The thought arrived fully formed before he could stop it.

Canada.

He needed to go.

Needed to see Shane.

Needed to explain.

Needed-

The whiskey tumbler shattered against the kitchen wall before he consciously registered throwing it.

Glass exploded across marble.

Someone cursed.

The lawyer stood abruptly.

“I think we should- ”

“Leave,” Ilya said quietly.

Nobody argued.

The apartment door slammed behind the last person.

Silence rushed in hard and ugly.

Ilya stood there breathing too fast, hands shaking badly enough he nearly dropped his phone. Another picture stared back at him. Shane soaked through from rain, laughing so hard he looked breathless while that woman grinned up at him.

Happy.

The word would not stop.

Happy.

Happy with someone else.

Something cracked painfully inside his chest.

Because maybe-

Maybe Shane really was done.

Maybe space had been rejection all along and Ilya had been too stupid, too desperate to understand it.

His hands shook harder.

No.

No.

Shane had wanted him.

Didn't he?

Hadn't he?

He grabbed his passport.

The apartment door opened hard enough to bounce against the wall.

"Ilya?"

Svetlana froze immediately.

The room looked wrecked.

Glass scattered across the floor.

A chair overturned.

And Ilya-

Jesus Christ.

He looked terrifying.

Not angry.

Worse.

Ruined.

Like someone had cut him open and forgotten to stitch him back together.

“Ilya.”

He barely looked at her.

Already moving.

Wallet. Keys. Jacket.

Fast.

Too fast.

“Ilya,” she repeated carefully, stepping further inside. “What happened?”

“Move.”

The word came rough. Strained.

Not sharp at her exactly.

Just-

Desperate.

Her stomach dropped.

“No.”

He exhaled sharply through his nose, visibly trying and failing to hold himself together.
“Svetlana.”

“What happened?”

“She is touching him.”

The sentence made no sense.

“What?”

He shoved the phone toward her hard enough she nearly dropped it.

Photos.

A woman.

Shane.

Rain.

Laughter.

Oh.

Oh no.

She looked back up.

Ilya was shaking.

Actually shaking.

“He asked for space,” he said, voice cracking strangely now. “I gave him space.”

The devastation in his voice hit hard enough to hurt.

“I waited.”

God.

“He thinks I left.”

“Ilya- ”

“He thinks I stopped caring.”

His breathing turned sharp, erratic. Like he couldn’t get enough air.

“He doesn’t let people touch him,” he said suddenly, quieter now, voice unraveling around the edges. “He gets overwhelmed. He hates crowds. He- ” His jaw tightened hard enough to hurt. “He doesn’t...”

He stopped. Swallowed hard. And suddenly- Svetlana realized he was crying.

Barely. But enough.

Enough to make her chest ache.

Because Ilya didn’t cry. Not after his mother. Not after anything.

“I have to go,” he said suddenly. Fast.

Too fast.

“He- ”

“No.”

His head snapped up. “What?”

“No,” she repeated carefully. “You are not getting on a plane like this.”

“I have to fix this.”

“No.”

“He is replacing me.” The sentence came out so quietly it almost didn’t sound like him.

Like heartbreak itself had scraped him hollow.

“I scared him.”

And there it was.

The awful thing sitting underneath all of it.

Not rage.

Fear.

Grief.

Devastation.

“Ilya,” she said softly.

He moved toward the door anyway.

Fast.

Frantic.

Pure instinct.

And something about him scared her suddenly- not because she thought he would hurt someone, but because he looked completely gone, like panic had swallowed everything rational whole.

So she grabbed him.

Hard.

Around the waist.

“No.”

“Svetlana- ”

“No.”

“I have to- ”

“You need to breathe.”

He fought her for a second.

Not violently.

Not at her.

Just-

Panic.

Like something trapped.

Eventually exhaustion won.

Because he had barely eaten.

Barely slept.

Had been quietly unraveling for weeks.

Hours later, they laid in bed the way they had years ago after funerals, after grief, after nights too ugly to survive alone. Svetlana stayed on top of the blankets while Ilya faced the wall beside her, silent in a way that felt frightening.

For a long time neither of them spoke.

Then quietly-

“She makes him laugh.”

The sentence sounded ruined.

Svetlana turned her head slightly.

Ilya still stared blankly toward the dark.

“He never laughed with me like that.”

Something about the heartbreak in his voice made her chest tighten painfully.

“He smiled,” he whispered after a while. “Like he was happy.”

The silence stretched.

Then softer:

“I tried so hard to give him space.”

And god- that hurt to hear. Because for the first time since she met him all those years ago, Ilya sounded completely, devastatingly heartbroken.

Chapter End Notes

Okay SO 😭

First of all: welcome to the Rose era. Before anyone panics, I need everyone to know that Rose and Shane are very much platonic soulmates with concerning levels of emotional support and mutual chaos and she won't be an Ilya fan-she's 100% in for Shane. Shane deserves a friend who makes him laugh, okay??

Second... yes. We are officially entering the “Ilya is not doing well” portion of the story.

I know some of you are probably feeling conflicted right now (honestly, same), but I promise there's a reason I'm taking things in this direction. The Shane/Ilya dynamic is about to get much messier before it starts becoming something more understandable. Not healthy yet. Definitely not healthy. But understandable.

Also... thoughts on Rose? 🙄 And how worried are we about that picture?

As always, comments make me feral and feed my soul

EDIT Very serious question:

Would anyone be interested in being an ARC/beta reader for the next chapter?
Because... uh.

How do I say this.

Things get a little emotionally catastrophic 😭

Like “I sat there staring at my document for a while afterward” levels of dark, and I want a couple people to sanity-check pacing/emotional impact before I traumatize the entire comment section.

(You have been warned.)

Chapter 18: Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

A little chapter to try to get into Ilya's mind before the next heavy part.

NO!!-this is not excusing him, only explaining part of the reason he is the way he is, just a little bit.

Chapter Notes

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

Ilya - 12 years old

It was an accident.

Grigori made him say it until the words stopped catching in his throat. He made him say it in the kitchen while the tea went cold on the table. He made him say it in the hallway where Ilya had stood barefoot and shaking the morning before, staring at his mother's bedroom door while two of his father's men moved around inside with lowered voices. He made him say it before the doctor came out with his face carefully blank. He made him say it before the archbishop arrived. He made him say it while Ilya could still see the bottle of pills tipped over beside her hand, white tablets scattered like tiny bones across the rug.

It was an accident.

His mother had been tired, Grigori said. She had taken too much medicine. She had not known what she was doing. She had been fragile after being sick for so long. It was a tragedy. A private family tragedy. Nothing more.

And because Grigori Rozanov was high enough in the police department that men lowered their eyes when he walked into a room, no one asked questions loudly enough to matter.

By the time they brought her to the church, the truth had already been buried once.

The church was small, older than it looked from the street, with dark wood worn smooth by generations of hands and a gold iconostasis that glowed behind the priest like a wall of fire. Icons watched from every direction, Christ solemn and sorrowful, the Mother of God holding her child with eyes full of grief, saints painted thin and severe with halos catching the candlelight. The air was hot from bodies and flames, thick with beeswax and incense, the sweet smoke curling upward from the censer as the deacon swung it in slow, silver arcs. Each time the chains chimed, Ilya flinched. The sound was delicate, almost beautiful, but it went through him like a warning.

The coffin stood open in the middle of the church, facing the altar.

His mother lay inside it in white.

Someone had placed a narrow embroidered crown, a venchik, across her forehead, sewn with gold thread with holy words Ilya could not make himself read. An icon rested in her hands. A cross lay nearby. Her blonde curly hair had been arranged carefully around her face, and a cloth covered part of her body so neatly that she looked arranged instead of resting. Near the head of the coffin sat a small dish of koliva, wheat and honey shaped beneath sugar, with a candle pressed into it and burning steadily. Ilya stared at that candle because it was easier than looking at her mouth.

They had painted her lips. That was the part he hated most.

His mother had not worn lipstick in weeks before she died. Months, maybe. She had stopped caring about pretty things. She had stopped caring about food and dresses and music and whether the curtains were open. She had moved through the apartment like someone listening to a voice no one else could hear, one that kept calling her farther and farther away. But now they had painted her, powdered her, dressed her, crowned her, and everyone around him murmured about how peaceful she looked.

Peaceful.

Ilya wanted to scream every time he heard it.

She did not look peaceful to him. She looked stolen.

The priest began the prayers, his voice low and rhythmic, rising and falling with the choir's responses until the whole church seemed to breathe around them. There were psalms, litanies, the repeated pleas for mercy, the mournful singing of "Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us." People crossed themselves again and again. Forehead. Stomach. Right shoulder. Left. They bowed. They held slender candles in trembling fingers, little flames reflecting in wet eyes. The priest walked around the coffin with the censer, and incense spilled over his mother's body, over the icon in her hands, over Grigori's dry face, over Ilya's clenched fists.

Grigori stood beside him in a dark suit, tall and straight and terrifyingly composed. He looked every inch the grieving husband, solemn enough for the room, respectable enough for the priest, important enough that no one dared wonder why the dead woman in the coffin had grown so thin before God finally received her. Men from the department stood near the back. Ilya recognized some of them. They had come to their home before. They had drunk with Grigori. They had laughed too loudly in the sitting room while his mother kept her eyes lowered at dinner. Now they stood with their hats in their hands and grief on their faces as if grief was another uniform they knew how to wear when commanded.

Svetlana was not supposed to be standing with him.

She had just turned 13 and was not family, though she had been in Ilya's life since they were five years old and, in all the ways that mattered, she was closer than blood. Their mothers had

known each other. They had grown up in the same courtyards, sat at the same kitchen tables, passed childhood illnesses back and forth, learned secrets before they had words for them. Svetlana had been there when Ilya's mother still laughed. She had been there when the laughing became quieter. She had been there the first time Grigori's voice turned cold enough that Ilya went silent without understanding why.

Grigori had tried to send her to the other side of the church with her own parents.

She had come back anyway.

Now she stood close enough that her sleeve brushed Ilya's, her candle held in one hand, the other hidden between them where Grigori could not easily see it. Her fingers found Ilya's and squeezed. Not hard. Just enough to keep him standing.

Do not fall apart, that squeeze said. Or maybe, fall apart if you have to. I am here.

Ilya did not know which one he needed more.

The prayers went on and on. The priest spoke of rest, forgiveness, the resurrection, the soul departing from the body and finding mercy in the hands of God. At some point, he read the prayer of absolution, holding the gilt bible over her face as the words moved through the church. Ilya watched his mother's face and wondered whether God listened to prayers for women no one had protected while they were alive. He wondered if God knew it had not been an accident. He wondered if God had seen the pills too. He wondered how God would let the sweetest, most gentle omega be treated so harshly by the alpha that had been meant for her.

He had found her before anyone else.

That thought came like a blow, as it always did. One moment he was in the church, and the next he was back in the hallway, calling for her because she had not come to his game. She never missed a hockey game where he was playing and he had perfected a move just to see her smiling again. The door had been cracked open. The curtains had been drawn. The room had smelled stale and medicinal, and she had been lying on her side as if sleeping, one hand near the rug, the pill bottle tipped beside her. For one impossible second he had thought she had dropped something and would wake if he cleaned it up before Grigori saw. He had crouched, fingers reaching for the little white tablets, and then he had seen her face.

He did not remember screaming.

Grigori said he had.

At the funeral, Grigori's hand closed around the back of his neck.

To anyone watching, it might have looked like a father steadying his son during a moment of unbearable grief. But Grigori's fingers pressed into the soft places beneath Ilya's skull with exact, punishing pressure.

"Stand still," he murmured without moving his lips.

Ilya froze.

Svetlana's fingers tightened around his.

When it came time for the final farewell, people began moving toward the coffin one by one. They crossed themselves, bowed, kissed the icon, kissed the cross, and some bent to kiss his mother's forehead or hand. The last kiss, the old women whispered. The final goodbye. Their black scarves dipped as they leaned over her. Some sobbed openly. Some whispered apologies that came too late. Some touched Grigori's arm afterward and told him she was with God now, that he had done everything he could, that no one could have known.

No one could have known.

Ilya felt the words crawl over his skin.

Everyone had known something.

They had known she had stopped leaving the house. They had known Grigori answered for her when people asked questions. They had known she flinched at sudden sounds. They knew her hands shook when she poured tea. They had known her son watched the doors before he spoke. They had known enough to lower their voices. Enough to pity her. Enough to do nothing.

Then it was Ilya's turn.

He could not move.

The candle in his hand had burned low enough that melted wax touched his fingers, but he did not feel it until Svetlana gently took it from him and set it aside. "Ilyusha," she whispered, using the name only she and his mother ever used. "Come on."

Grigori heard.

His jaw tightened.

Ilya stepped forward because Svetlana's hand was at his back and Grigori's was at his neck, one touch trying to hold him together and the other reminding him who would decide whether he was allowed to break. He crossed himself because that was what a good Orthodox boy did. He bowed because everyone watched him. He looked at the icon in his mother's hands, then at the little crown around her forehead, then at her face.

She had been beautiful once.

Not in the painted way she looked now, not this waxen imitation arranged for mourners, but truly beautiful. Warm. Soft-eyed. Hair coming loose from its pins while she made breakfast. Bare feet tucked beneath her on the sofa. Laughing quietly when Ilya tracked snow into the hall and Grigori was not home to see it. She used to cup his face between both hands and tell him he had her eyes. She used to kiss his forehead and say softness was not weakness, no matter what his father believed. She used to pull him beneath the covers during storms and whisper stories against his hair until the thunder passed.

Now her skin was cold beneath his lips.

A sound broke out of him.

It was small. Not a wail. Not anything dramatic enough to satisfy the grief tearing through him. Just a wounded, helpless sound from a child who had found his mother dead and then been ordered to lie about it.

The grip on his neck became unbearable.

“Enough,” Grigori whispered. “Do not embarrass me.”

Not her.

Me.

Ilya swallowed the next sound so hard it hurt.

At the cemetery, the sky was low and gray, the kind of heavy Russian gray that made the whole world seem made of ash. The priest continued the prayers beside the grave, his vestments moving in the wind, his voice thinner outside than it had been in the church. The coffin was lowered. Someone gave Ilya a handful of earth. He stared at it in his palm, black and damp and freezing cold, while the adults crossed themselves and murmured for him to throw it down.

He could not make his hand open.

Grigori leaned close.

“Accident,” he said quietly.

Ilya looked up at him.

His father’s face was calm, but his eyes were dead and flat and waiting.

“You understand me?” Grigori asked. “If anyone asks. The priest. Your coaches. Svetlana. Anyone. It was an accident.” Ilya’s mouth trembled.

Grigori’s hand came to rest on his shoulder, heavy as iron. “Your mother was ill. She made a mistake with her medicine. That is all. You do not shame this family with ugly stories.”

Ilya looked past him to where Svetlana stood with her parents, crying silently into her scarf. She was watching him, and even from several feet away he knew she did not believe the lie. She had always been too sharp. Too loyal. Too good at seeing the things adults tried to hide.

“I found the pills,” Ilya whispered.

Grigori smiled.

It was worse than anger.

“And you will forget what you saw.”

Ilya did not forget. He threw the earth into the grave. The sound it made on the coffin lid stayed with him for the rest of his life.

After the funeral, people came back to the apartment for the meal. Kutya on the table. Black bread. Fish. Pickled things. Tea no one drank before it cooled. Vodka poured and swallowed by men who spoke too low, too carefully, whenever Grigori passed. The mirrors had been covered. His mother’s chair sat empty. Someone told Ilya to eat because children needed strength, and he stared at the food until his vision blurred.

Svetlana found him in the hallway outside his mother’s locked bedroom.

Grigori had taken the key.

She did not ask if he was all right. She was thirteen, not stupid. Instead, she stood beside him with her shoulder touching his and said, “I do not believe them.”

Ilya’s throat closed.

Svetlana looked at the door. “I do not believe it was an accident.”

He turned his head sharply, terror cutting through the grief. “Do not say that.”

Her eyes filled again. “Ilya.”

“Do not say it,” he whispered, and he sounded so frightened that her face changed. “He said not to say it.”

Something old died in Svetlana’s expression then. Some last childish belief that fathers, even cruel ones, had limits. “What did he do?”

Ilya could not answer.

He only shook his head.

She took his hand and held it between both of hers. “I will not say anything,” she promised. “Not where he can hear.”

That was the beginning of the second life.

The first life had been before. Before the pills. Before the funeral. Before the lie. Before Grigori became the only voice in the apartment and his mother became a locked room no one was allowed to mention.

The second life was all lessons.

Grigori taught him that grief was self-indulgence. That crying was manipulation when women did it and weakness when men did it. That his mother had been soft and softness had killed her. That Ilya looked too much like her, which meant he would have to work twice as

hard to overcome what she had put into his face, his voice, his nature. He said it as if resemblance was an infection. As if his mother had left behind something contaminated inside him.

“You have her eyes,” Grigori told him one night, standing behind him in front of the bathroom mirror, one hand gripping his jaw hard enough to ache. “That is unfortunate. People will see them and expect softness from you.”

Ilya stared at his reflection. Pale. Too pretty, Grigori always said, like it was an accusation. His mother’s fair hair. His mother’s mouth. His mother’s eyes red from crying he had tried to do silently into his pillow.

Grigori squeezed his jaw tighter. “So you will give them something else to remember.”

The beatings were not constant.

That might have made them easier to explain.

They came like the weather. Sometimes after a loss. Sometimes after a win, if Grigori decided arrogance had crept into Ilya’s posture. Sometimes because Ilya answered too slowly, or looked away too fast, or said his mother’s name in the wrong tone. Grigori was careful where he left pain. Careful enough that coaches saw a tough boy, not a frightened one. Careful enough that doctors saw bruises and believed hockey. Careful enough that Ilya learned the difference between injuries that could be hidden beneath pads and injuries that would cost him ice time.

He also learned that Grigori did not hit him when he performed well enough to be useful.

So Ilya became useful.

He went back to hockey too soon because Grigori decided the house had indulged grief long enough. The first time he stepped onto the ice after the funeral, he nearly vomited from the cold smell of it, from the scrape of blades and shouts echoing off the boards, from the terrible realization that the world had continued while his mother had stopped. Then someone checked him hard into the glass during drills, and pain flashed clean and bright through his shoulder.

For one second, he felt nothing else.

No coffin. No pills. No church. No lie.

Only pain.

Then rage.

Then movement.

Hockey saved him because it gave him somewhere to put the thing Grigori was making inside him. Every bruise became proof he could take more. Every goal became a few hours where Grigori watched him without contempt. Every fight became a language adults

rewarded instead of punished. Coaches called him intense. Determined. Mature. Fearless. They said grief had sharpened him. They said his father was doing a good job keeping him disciplined after tragedy.

No one understood that Ilya was not fearless.

He was simply more afraid of going home weak than he was of bleeding on the ice. He didn't really care about the game anymore. But his mother loved that he played-that he was so much better than anyone else on the rink.

The first envelope of prize money came after a tournament when he was fourteen. It was not much, but to Ilya it felt impossible. His own money. Earned by his own body, his own talent, his own refusal to stay down. He held it all the way home inside his jacket, fingers brushing the edge of the envelope again and again. For one reckless afternoon, he imagined buying better tape, maybe a used stick he had been looking at for months. He imagined sending something to Svetlana at boarding school, because she had left the year before and the distance had nearly gutted him. A book, maybe. Chocolates. Something small enough that Grigori would not notice.

Grigori noticed before dinner.

"Give it to me."

Ilya froze in the kitchen doorway.

His father did not look up from the table, where police files sat stacked beside a glass of vodka. "Ilya."

Slowly, Ilya took out the envelope.

Grigori opened it, counted the bills, and set them beside his papers. "This goes to the family."

"But Coach said it was mine."

Grigori looked up then.

Ilya knew immediately that he had made a mistake.

"Yours?" Grigori repeated softly.

Ilya said nothing.

"Who pays for your training? Your skates? Your travel? Who feeds you? Who keeps a roof over your head?" Grigori leaned back in his chair, studying him with that cold police stare that made grown men confess to things. "You think because someone clapped for you, you are now a man?"

Heat crept up Ilya's neck.

Grigori tapped the envelope. “You are not earning treats. You are beginning to repay what you cost.”

After that, every prize went to Grigori. Tournament money. Small sponsorship gifts. Cash slipped to him by men who liked backing promising boys before anyone else knew their names. Some of it went back into hockey, because Grigori understood investment. Better camps. Better coaching. Better blades. Things that made Ilya more valuable. Some went to bills. Some to vodka. Some disappeared into places Ilya was never allowed to ask about. When Svetlana needed something at school, Ilya learned to bargain with performance. A hat trick could buy her a birthday parcel. A tournament win could buy permission to call her longer than ten minutes. Obedience could sometimes purchase mercy, if Grigori was in the mood to feel generous.

By fifteen, Ilya no longer asked to keep anything.

By sixteen, he understood that his body was not his either. It belonged to the ice, to Grigori’s ambition, to every scout watching from the stands, to the family name his father cared about more than the family itself.

By seventeen, people said tragedy had made him strong.

Ilya let them believe it.

The truth was uglier.

Tragedy had made him obedient first.

Violence came later.

Present

Ilya woke in the dark with the taste of incense in his mouth and Shane’s photograph glowing in his hand from his phone. He hadn’t had that dream in years.

For several seconds he did not understand where he was. The bedroom ceiling above him was too high. The bed was too large. The silence was too expensive. No covered mirrors. No church bells. No police men in the hallway lowering their voices because Grigori Rozanov had told them what the truth was allowed to be. Just his apartment, dark and airless, curtains drawn against the city, the room smelling of stale coffee and sweat and food he had ordered but never eaten.

His phone screen had dimmed, but Shane was still there.

Shane walking beside Rose.

Rose touching his arm.

Shane smiling like his world had not ended.

Ilya stared at the picture until his vision blurred, until the shape of Shane's face became less an image and more a wound he could press on whenever the numbness got too complete.

He had not slept properly in days.

Or maybe he had slept too much.

Time had started moving strangely. He lost whole afternoons and then woke at midnight with his heart trying to break his ribs. He missed meals, then forced himself to eat and felt sick after two bites. He stood in the shower and forgot whether he had washed his hair. He went to practice and heard nothing his coach said, only Grigori's voice in memory telling him stronger, tougher, again, again, again. He checked his phone until his thumb ached. He opened Shane's messages and typed apologies he deleted before sending, because every apology sounded like another way to ask for something.

I am sorry.

Delete.

I miss you.

Delete.

I think I am becoming something terrible.

Delete.

He could not send Shane his damage and call it honesty. He had already given Shane enough reasons to be afraid.

A knock came at the apartment door.

Ilya ignored it.

The knock came again.

Then keys.

Only one person had keys.

Svetlana let herself in like she had been doing since they were teenagers and she had decided his life was something she had partial custody over, no matter what blood said. She found him in the bedroom ten minutes later, still sitting in the dark, still holding the phone, still not moving.

She did not gasp.

That was Svetlana. She had seen too much of him to waste breath pretending to be shocked.

“Oh, Ilyusha,” she said quietly.

The childhood name nearly undid him.

He turned the phone face down.

Too late.

She had seen.

For a long moment, neither of them spoke. Then she crossed the room and opened the curtains. Gray Montreal light spilled in, exposing the empty cups, the untouched plates, the clothes on the floor, the man in the bed who looked nothing like the charming, dangerous thing the world thought it knew.

“You smell terrible,” she said.

A laugh dragged itself out of him, thin and dead. “You always know what to say.”

“I learned from you.”

He looked away.

Svetlana sat on the edge of the bed, close but not touching. She had been his best friend since they were five years old, and she was still careful with him in ways that made him feel both loved and ashamed. She had known him when he was soft. That was the awful thing. She had known him before Grigori finished carving him into something useful. She had known his mother’s laugh, the real one, not the quiet nervous one from later years. She had stood beside him at the funeral when everyone else accepted the accident because Grigori told them to. She had written to him from boarding school every week after she left at fifteen, pages and pages of gossip and complaints and jokes and little pieces of normal life folded into envelopes like offerings.

She was the only person alive who remembered him before.

And now she was looking at him like she was afraid of what after had become.

“You missed practice,” she said.

“I had practice yesterday.”

“That was three days ago.”

He went still.

Her face softened, which was worse. “When did you last eat?”

“I eat.”

“When?”

He said nothing.

She reached for the phone.

His hand snapped out and caught her wrist.

The movement was too fast. Too hard.

They both froze.

Ilya let go first.

Svetlana looked down at the place his fingers had been, then back at his face.

Horror moved through him, immediate and nauseating. “Sveta.”

“I know,” she said quietly.

“No.” He sat up, his heart slamming. “No, I did not mean-”

“I know you did not mean to hurt me.”

“I did not hurt you.”

“No,” she said. “You scared me. There is a difference.”

The room seemed to close around him. There were words he could have used. Defenses. Explanations. He was tired. She had startled him. He did not like people touching his phone. Any of them could have been true enough to pass for truth.

Instead, all he heard was Grigori.

You are making me do this.

You make things difficult.

You force my hand.

Ilya pressed both hands over his face.

Svetlana did not move closer. That was how he knew he had frightened her badly.

“Ilya,” she said, and her voice was careful now. Not cold. Never cold, but careful. “Yesterday, when you called me, you said Shane needed to be controlled before he ruined himself.”

His stomach turned.

“I was upset.”

“You said he did not know what was best for him.”

“Stop.”

“You said if he would just listen to you, everything would be fine.”

“Stop.”

“My mother used to say that your father said that about your mama.”

The words went through him like a blade.

He stood too quickly, dizziness washing black over the edges of his sight. For a moment, he had to grip the dresser to stay upright. “Do not compare me to him.”

“I am not trying to hurt you.”

“You think I am him?”

“No.”

“You just said-”

“I said you are using his words.”

Silence fell so hard it felt physical. Svetlana stood too, slow and cautious. “You made me promise once,” she whispered. “Do you remember? We were seventeen. You had just won that junior tournament, and Grigori took the money before you could even call me. You were so angry you could barely speak. You told me if you ever sounded like him, I had to tell you.”

Ilya remembered.

Of course he remembered.

He had been sitting on the floor of his bedroom with a split lip and an envelope torn open beside him, the money gone. Svetlana had been on the phone from boarding school, whispering under her blanket so no one would hear. He had told her he would rather die than become Grigori. He had meant it then with the absolute sincerity of a boy who still thought hatred was a cure.

“I am telling you,” she said.

Ilya turned away from her.

His reflection stared back from the dark window. Pale face. Hollow eyes. His mother’s mouth. His mother’s eyes. Grigori’s posture. Grigori’s rage wearing grief like a coat.

“I love him,” he said, and it sounded pathetic even to him.

“I know.”

“No. You do not.” His voice cracked. “You think it is only an obsession.”

“I think you love him and you are obsessed with him. Both can be true.”

He laughed once, ugly and broken. “Very comforting.”

“I am not here to comfort you with lies.”

That almost made him smile, because she never had been. Not even at twelve. Not even beside his mother’s locked bedroom when she told him she did not believe the accident.

Then the smile died.

“When I found her,” he said.

Svetlana’s eyes filled instantly.

“I never told you everything.”

“I know.”

“I saw the pills.” His voice went distant, scraped hollow. “They were on the floor. Some of them had rolled under the bed. I remember thinking I should pick them up before Papa came in, because he hated mess. Is that not funny?”

“No.”

“I thought she would wake up and he would be angry about the mess.”

Svetlana covered her mouth.

“He made me say accident before she was even cold.”

“Ilya.”

“And I did.” His throat tightened. “I said it. At the church. At the cemetery. To you. I lied to you.”

“You were a child.”

“I lied.”

“You survived.”

The word struck him strangely.

Survived.

Was that what this was?

He looked around the ruined bedroom, at the phone turned face down because Shane's smile beside someone else had been enough to send him under, at his best friend standing several feet away because he had grabbed her wrist too hard without thinking, at his own hands shaking like they belonged to someone else.

Survival looked too much like haunting.

"I don't know how to stop," he whispered.

Svetlana's face broke.

Not completely. She was too practiced for that. Too formed by her own years of watching Grigori from the edges of rooms, of seeing what men like him did and learning when to speak, when to wait, when to run. But the crack was there.

"I know," she said.

"No," Ilya said. "You don't understand. I know I am wrong. I know. I can hear myself sometimes, and it is like-" He stopped, swallowing hard. "It is like his voice in my mouth. But then I think about Shane away from me, scared or lonely or with someone touching him, and everything in me says to bring him back. Keep him safe. Make him understand. And in the moment it feels true. It feels like the only true thing."

Svetlana stepped closer.

This time, he stepped back.

Pain crossed her face, but she stopped.

"I cannot be near you if you are afraid of me," he said.

"I am afraid for you."

"That is not what I asked."

She did not answer.

That was answer enough.

Ilya closed his eyes.

There it was, then. The final cruelty. Grigori had not only made him afraid. Grigori had made him frightening.

For the rest of the evening, Svetlana stayed anyway. She cleaned because she needed something to do with her hands and because the apartment had begun to look like the inside of his head. She threw away old food, opened windows, changed sheets, poured out the alcohol without asking, and counted the pills in the bathroom with a face so pale he wanted to be angry just to make her stop looking like that. He did not have the energy. Or maybe, worse, he had the shame.

She made him soup and sat across from him until he ate half.

She called his coach and lied beautifully.

She texted his agent.

She placed his phone on the kitchen counter between them like a weapon they had agreed not to touch.

After midnight, she fell asleep on the couch, still wearing her boots, refusing the guest room because neither of them was pretending she trusted him alone. Ilya stood in the doorway and looked at her for a long time. She was not his sister. Not blood. Nothing bound her to him except history and choice and the stubborn loyalty of a girl who had once stood beside a twelve-year-old boy at his mother's coffin and decided he was hers to keep alive.

That made it worse somehow.

Family could be an obligation.

Svetlana was choosing this.

He went back to the bedroom and picked up his phone.

Shane's messages waited.

For a long time, Ilya only stared at the empty text box. Then he typed:

I am sorry.

Deleted it.

Typed:

There is something wrong with me.

Deleted that too.

Typed:

I miss you so badly I am scared of what I become without you.

His thumb hovered over send.

Then, slowly, he deleted every word.

Because it was true. Because it was cruel. Because Shane did not owe him the burden of keeping him human.

Ilya set the phone down and looked toward the window. The city below glittered cold and distant, indifferent to ruined men in expensive apartments, indifferent to boys who found

their mothers dead and fathers who taught them to lie about it, indifferent to love that curdled into possession when left alone too long in the dark.

“Mama,” he whispered, the word barely audible. “Tell me how to stop.”

There was no answer.

There had never been an answer.

Only the memory of incense. Only the taste of smoke. Only the sound of earth hitting a coffin lid. Only Svetlana slept in the next room because she was afraid to leave him alone. Only Shane’s name burning silently in his hand.

And beneath the grief, beneath the shame, beneath the horror of recognizing Grigori’s voice inside his own, the wanting remained.

Patient. Hungry. Waiting for weakness.

By the next week, Svetlana had stopped pretending this was only depression.

She wanted it to be. Depression was terrible, yes, and dangerous in its own quiet ways, but it was human. It had language. It had doctors and pills and therapy and plans people could say aloud without their voices lowering. Depression could explain the darkness under Ilya’s eyes, the weight loss, the missed practices, the way he sat on the edge of his bed staring at nothing for so long that she sometimes had to say his name twice before he heard her.

It did not explain the rest.

It did not explain how he went still whenever Shane’s name appeared on the television, not tense, not angry, but fixed, like some buried animal instinct had seized him by the throat. It did not explain the scent of him changing, sharper and wrong beneath the stale sweat and exhaustion, grief and aggression curdled together until even she could feel her shoulders tightening when she came too close too quickly. It did not explain the way he refused food until she mentioned, carefully, that Shane would hate seeing him like this, and then he forced down three bites with the bleak obedience of a man swallowing broken glass. It did not explain why he had nearly put his fist through the wall when a sports commentator laughed about Shane looking “comfortable” in Montreal’s new line combinations, then five minutes later folded over the kitchen sink with his hands braced on the counter, breathing like he was going to be sick.

Svetlana had seen pining before, though never this close. Everyone knew the old stories. People dressed them up in romantic language when they wanted to make it sound beautiful, like it was proof of devotion instead of a biological collapse. Alphas found their mates and, if separated too long before the bond settled, something in them began to misfire. At first it looked like heartbreak. Restlessness. Sleeplessness. Irritability. Possessiveness getting sharper around the edges. Then the body started following the mind down. Appetite disappeared. Sleep became unreliable. Their temper shortened until violence sat beneath the

skin waiting for any excuse. Some became reckless. Some became paranoid. Some fixated so completely that friends and doctors had to step in before longing turned into something uglier.

Omeegas pined too, but differently. Later, usually. Their bodies held out a few weeks longer, as if biology gave them one last chance to stay sensible before grief dragged them under. They became quieter first. More withdrawn. More pliant in ways that could be mistaken for calm if no one looked carefully enough. They slept too much, ate too little, nested compulsively or stopped nesting at all. Their scents thinned. Their instincts turned inward, submissive and sorrowful, less explosive than an alpha's but no less dangerous if ignored.

But alphas burned outward.

And Ilya had always burned hotter than most.

Svetlana stood in his kitchen with a mug of coffee going cold in her hand and watched him sit at the table without touching the toast she had made. He was wearing sweatpants and a shirt from yesterday, hair damp from the shower she had bullied him into taking, face clean enough that the hollowness of it was worse. His cheekbones looked too sharp. His eyes kept moving to his phone even though she had placed it facedown beside her instead of beside him.

"You need help," she said.

His mouth twisted. "You have said."

"No. I mean more help than me."

That got his attention. Not much. Just a flick of his eyes.

Svetlana pulled out the chair across from him and sat. "Should I call your agent?"

"No."

"Ilya."

"No."

"You cannot keep playing like this."

"I can play."

"You missed practice for three days."

"I said I can play."

"You almost broke your hand on the wall last night because someone said Shane looked comfortable."

His face closed.

There it was again. That frightening, Grigori-like shuttering. The emotion did not leave him. It only disappeared from the surface, shoved down so violently she could almost hear the lock turn.

Svetlana softened her voice. "I am not saying this to shame you."

"You think I am pining."

She did not answer quickly enough.

He laughed, low and humorless, and rubbed both hands over his face. "Jesus Christ."

"I think your body is doing what alpha bodies do when they are under too much separation stress from someone they have already chosen."

"He did not choose me."

The words came out flat.

Svetlana's heart twisted. "That is not what I said."

"He did not." Ilya stared at the untouched toast like it had personally offended him. "He left. He stopped answering. He is in Canada with his friends and his team and Rose fucking Landry touching his fucking arm, and I am here acting like some pathetic animal because my body decided something he never agreed to."

"It does not make you pathetic."

She could not lie to him. So she said, "It means we have to be careful. Maybe find a new mate."

He looked up then, and the misery in his face was so raw she had to grip the mug tighter to keep from reaching for him. He looked younger when he was stripped down like this. Not softer, exactly. Ilya had not been allowed to keep softness in any uncomplicated way. But younger. Like the boy at the funeral was still inside him, still waiting beside a coffin, still being told to swallow the truth until it poisoned him.

"What do you want to do?" he asked.

"I want to call your agent and say you need to be evaluated. Physically, mentally, whatever language gets them to listen. You could go on IR."

"No."

"You are injured."

"I am not telling them I am pining."

"I did not say we tell them that."

“They will know.”

“Not if they are stupid.” That almost got a smile from him. Almost.

Svetlana leaned forward. “You need time off the ice.”

“I need Shane.” The words landed between them with terrible simplicity.

Neither of them moved. Ilya looked away first, jaw flexing. “Forget I said that.”

“No.”

“Sveta.”

“No,” she repeated, gentler this time. “That is the problem. You keep trying to make the honest thing disappear after you say it.”

He closed his eyes.

She reached for his phone, and this time he did not stop her. That, more than anything, frightened her. Ilya had always fought for control even when it hurt him. He had always preferred anger to helplessness. Now he only sat there, shoulders rounded, hands loose on the table.

“I am going to look at the schedule,” she said.

His eyes opened immediately. “Why?”

“Because before I call anyone, I want to know what the next two weeks look like.”

“Svetlana.”

She ignored the warning and opened the NHL app. His passcode was still her birthday, which made her chest ache in a way she did not have time for. She navigated Boston’s, her thumb moving quickly while Ilya watched with the stillness of a starving wolf pretending not to smell blood.

Then she stopped.

“Oh,” she said.

His gaze sharpened. “What?”

Svetlana did not answer right away. She looked again, certain she had misread it, but there it was. Montreal and Boston. Not once. Not some distant future possibility she could manage him around.

Three games.

Three games in two weeks.

A strange, almost ugly hope moved across Ilya's face before he could hide it.

Svetlana hated it.

Not because she wanted to deny him Shane. God help her, maybe Shane was the only thing that could interrupt the collapse before it became irreversible. But hope in Ilya, right now, did not look like relief. It looked like hunger given direction.

"Show me," he said.

"Ilya."

"Show me."

She turned the phone toward him slowly.

His eyes dropped to the screen.

Boston at Montreal.

Montreal at Boston.

Boston at Montreal again.

Back to back in the way only a brutal schedule could be, games stacked close enough to feel less like coincidence and more like temptation. His breathing changed as he read the dates. Not calmer. Not exactly. Deeper, maybe. Focused. The terrible loose edges of him pulling inward around a single point.

Shane.

Svetlana watched him carefully. "This does not mean you get to do anything stupid."

He did not look at her. "Define stupid."

"I am serious."

"So am I."

"Ilya."

His fingers brushed the screen, not quite touching Shane's team name. "Three games."

"Yes."

"In two weeks."

"Yes."

His mouth parted slightly, and for one second his face did something that broke her heart. Not a smile. Not even close. It was worse than that. It was a man drowning who had just seen

land, even if reaching it meant tearing through everyone in his way.

Svetlana took the phone back.

He let her.

Again, terrifying.

“You are going on injured reserve,” she said.

His head snapped up. “No.”

“You are not stable enough to play against him.”

“I am more stable if he is there.”

“No. You are more focused. That is not the same thing.”

“I need to see him.”

“I know.”

“You do not.”

“I *do*,” she said, and her voice cracked. “I know more than you think I know. I know what it is to watch you disappear when he is not near you. I know you have lost weight. I know your hands shake when his name comes up. I know you sleep with your phone in your hand like a child holding a blanket. I know you are scared, and I know that could make you snap.”

He flinched.

She kept going because if she stopped now, she would lose her nerve. “And I know if you get on the ice with him like this, with cameras everywhere and other alphas around him and adrenaline already in your blood, you might do something you cannot take back.”

His expression hardened.

For a moment, Grigori looked out through his eyes.

Then Ilya looked down.

“I would never hurt him.”

“No,” Svetlana said softly. “But you might hurt everyone around him.”

His silence was answer enough.

She stood, taking the phone with her. “I am calling your agent.”

“No.”

“I am calling him.”

Ilya rose from the chair so fast it scraped hard against the floor.

Svetlana froze.

So did he.

The room held its breath around them.

He looked at her hand gripping the phone. Then at her face. Then at the few careful feet of space between them, space she had not meant to put there but had. Shame moved across him, devastating and immediate.

He stepped back first.

“I’m sorry,” Ilya said, voice rough.

Svetlana blinked.

He swallowed, throat working. “Call a doctor. Tell them I need something to stabilize me.”

Relief nearly made her knees weak.

Then he added, very quietly, “But I am not missing all three games.”

There it was.

The compromise that was not a compromise.

Svetlana stared at him.

Ilya looked back, pale and hollow and frighteningly calm. “Make them think whatever you want. But if Montreal is coming here, if he is going to be in the same building as me, I am not staying away from him completely.”

“Ilya.”

“I need to see him.”

“No.”

“Once,” he said, and the word broke in the middle. “Just once, Sveta. I will not touch him. I will not go near him if he does not want me. I will not do anything. But I need to see him with my own eyes and know if he is all right.”

Svetlana wanted to believe him.

That was the worst part.

She wanted to believe him because the boy she loved was still in there somewhere, buried beneath Grigori's lessons and alpha instinct and the terrible ache of an unfinished bond. She wanted to believe him because he sounded so sincere, so ruined by the simple fact of wanting, and because she remembered him at twelve years old promising over his mother's grave that he would never become his father.

But she also knew sincerity had never made dangerous people safe.

So she held the phone against her chest and said, "Then we make rules."

His eyes lifted.

"You do not go near that hotel alone. You do not text him without showing me first. You do not follow him. You do not corner him. You do not talk to anyone on Montreal's roster. You do not start a fight because someone stands too close to him."

His jaw tightened.

"Ilya."

"Yes."

"I mean it. If you cannot agree to that, I call your agent, your coach, and whoever else I have to call, and I tell them enough to keep you away from those games completely."

For a second, she thought he would rage.

Instead, he laughed once, empty and miserable. "I just need to be near him."

"You became very stupid in love."

He looked down, and there it was again, the almost-smile. Faint. Painful. Gone too quickly.

Then he nodded.

"Rules," he said.

Svetlana did not relax.

Not really.

Because when she looked back down at the schedule glowing on his phone, those three games did not look like salvation.

They looked like a countdown.

The change terrified Svetlana more than the breakdown had.

Three days after Boston hit Montreal's schedule, Ilya started acting almost normal.

Not truly normal. She had known him too long to mistake performance for recovery, but close enough that people stopped asking questions. He went back to practice. Showered without being told. Ate enough food that she no longer had to sit across from him counting bites like he was an injured animal relearning survival. He laughed with teammates again, low and dry and sharp in the familiar way that made people relax around him. He showed up to training early. Stayed late. Watched film. Slept more than four hours at a time.

Everyone praised the improvement. The coach said the time off from media pressure must have helped.

His agent sounded relieved.

Teammates slapped him on the shoulder and joked that Rozanov had finally crawled out of whatever cave he disappeared into.

Only Svetlana knew better. Because none of it happened until Boston got closer. It was not healing.

It was anticipation.

The closer the game came, the calmer Ilya became, as though his body had finally been promised water after weeks in the desert. The sharp, ugly edge of the pining softened into something more focused. Dangerous in a quieter way. He stopped pacing at night. Started sleeping again. Ate without argument. Practiced harder than she had seen him practice in months.

But every evening, after dinner, he sat on the couch with game footage open on the television.

Not just Shane.

Everyone near Shane.

Montreal defense, their lines.

Who protected him. Who touched him after goals. Who stood too close during scrums.

Landry showed up twice in media clips.

Svetlana pretended not to notice the way Ilya rewound those clips until his jaw hurt.

She also pretended not to notice the list.

Small.

Folded once.

Tucked inside his wallet.

Not names exactly.

Observations.

Protective tendencies.

Habits.

Weaknesses.

Who Shane leaned toward. Who he smiled at. Who seemed trusted.

That frightened her most.

Not rage.

Focus.

By the time game day came, Ilya looked almost healthy.

He dressed carefully.

Shaved.

Styled his hair.

Put on the expensive coat Shane had once quietly complimented months ago without realizing Ilya had remembered every word.

Svetlana watched him button the sleeves.

“You look like you are going on a date.”

The corner of his mouth twitched.

“Maybe,” he said quietly.

Her stomach dropped. “You remember the rules?”

“Yes.”

“No touching.”

“Yes.”

“No cornering him.”

“Yes.”

“No following him.”

His expression flickered.

“I said yes.”

“And if he does not want to talk to you?”

The silence lasted too long.

Then: “I leave.”

She searched his face.

He looked sincere. That somehow worried her more. The arena felt wrong before warmups even started. Too loud. Too bright.

Too much energy vibrating through the concrete like something alive.

Ilya walked beside her through restricted access with terrifying stillness, headphones around his neck but not playing anything, jaw tight enough to ache. He barely spoke. Barely blinked.

Svetlana touched his wrist once.

“Breathe.”

He did, slow. Controlled.

Like he was holding something enormous inside himself with both hands.

When Montreal finally stepped onto their side of the ice for warmups, she saw it happen.

The moment.

The exact second Shane stepped onto the rink.

Everything in Ilya stopped. His shoulders., his breathing, his expression. Even the restless movement that had lived under his skin for weeks. Gone.

Like something in him had finally aligned.

Shane skated onto the ice laughing at something a teammate said, visor catching arena light, hair damp from the locker room, jersey hanging familiar and devastating across broad shoulders.

For one terrible second, Ilya looked younger.

Not happier. Relieved. Like pain had briefly loosened its grip.

“There he is,” he said, so quietly she almost missed it.

The words did something awful to her.

Because he sounded reverent.

Hungry.

Broken.

Shane moved through warmups, stick handling lazily, glancing around the stadium every few seconds.

Ilya smiled before he could stop himself.

“He is looking for me.”

Svetlana turned sharply.

“You do not know that.”

But then Shane looked again.

And again.

Toward the visiting family section.

The smile disappeared from Ilya’s face.

Slowly, inevitably, his eyes followed Shane’s line of sight.

And stopped.

Rose Landry. Wearing Shane’s jersey.

Laughing with someone beside her, waving once when Shane glanced over.

Shane smiled. Small. Easy, familiar.

Ilya stopped breathing. Something inside him seemed to collapse inward all at once.

The relief vanished. The softness was gone.

Only emptiness remained.

“Oh,” he said.

Just that. Quiet. Flat. Like he had been hit somewhere no one could see.

Svetlana immediately reached for him. “Ilya-”

He turned before she could finish.

No anger, not yet.

Just devastation sharp enough to make him move.

“I need a minute.”

“Ilya.”

He was already walking.

Fast.

Too fast.

By the time he reached the locker room, the devastation had become something uglier.

He paced in full gear, skates carving short violent lines into the rubber flooring, helmet abandoned somewhere behind him. Gloves off. Back and forth. Back and forth.

Rose fucking Landry in Shane’s jersey.

Shane smiling at her.

Shane looking for her.

Months.

Months of breaking apart.

Weeks of starvation and humiliation and wanting so badly it made his ribs ache.

And Shane had moved on.

Or worse.

Chosen.

The locker room door opened.

One teammate.

Then another.

Conversation died quickly.

Because everyone knew Rozanov’s moods.

And this one felt dangerous.

Ilya stopped pacing.

Turned slowly.

His expression had gone cold.

Too calm.

The kind of calm teammates learned not to interrupt.

When he finally spoke, his voice was low.

Controlled.

“The Voyageurs runs through number twenty-four.”

Shane.

Nobody needed clarification.

“They protect him too much,” Ilya continued. “Defense keeps lanes open for him. They give him room to breathe. I want that gone tonight.”

A few players exchanged looks. Something about Rozanov’s tone felt personal.

“Pressure him every shift,” Ilya said. “Do not let him settle. Keep him moving. Keep him working. Push him into the glass if you have the chance. Separate him from support. Make him uncomfortable.”

One defenseman snorted. “And if he gets kicked out of the game?”

Ilya smiled. It did not reach his eyes.

“I do not want comfortable,” he said smoothly. “Then I get the check, just set me up. The refs won’t kick me out of the game.”

The room went quieter.

Then:

“Keep their defense off him,” Ilya said. “If he wants ice, he earns every inch.”

He reached for his helmet.

“And if he ends up against the boards,” he added, voice going softer in a way that somehow felt worse, “I’ll keep him there a little longer.”

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note:

Rose Landry hive, how are we feeling???

Also... um.

I will probably have a partition in the next chapter so if people do not want to read that section it possibly can be skipped. Working on it today.

About Ilya.

So, funny story: when I said he wasn't doing well, I may have been *dramatically underselling the situation.* Maybe...probably...

Next chapter gets *dark*. Like "someone please put this man in therapy and maybe temporary supervised housing" dark. We're diving harder into Ilya's mental state, pining, trauma, obsession, and unfortunately the man has discovered the dangerous combination of heartbreak + hope + zero coping skills.

Shane, sweetie, I'm so sorry in advance. But I promised a happy ending and will deliver.

Please scream in the comments. The emotional support is mutual at this point.

Chapter 19: Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Please mind the tags and content warnings for this next chapter. Things are going to get significantly darker before they get better. I'll provide a brief summary on chapter 20 incase people are triggered and dont want to read this one-I think its the last crazy crazy chapter.

As always, thank you for every comment, bookmark, kudos, theory, and emotional breakdown in my inbox. I read every single one and love seeing what everyone thinks.

Thank you to my beta reader Riana2- you're a gem.

Chapter Notes

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

The stale, recycled air of the hotel corridor tasted like anonymity, a flavor Ilya Rozanov had come to despise. He leaned against the wall opposite the service elevator, the picture of casual patience, one ankle crossed over the other. His target emerged a moment later: a young man in a too-large Montreal polo, his arms laden with a crate of bottled water that shimmered under the fluorescent lights. The kid's nametag read 'Leo.'

"You are Leo," Ilya said, not a question. His voice was a low, pleasant rumble, the one he used for sponsors and polite interviews.

Leo startled, juggling the crate. "Oh, uh, yeah. Wow. Hi. You're Ilya Rozanov."

"I am." Ilya pushed off the wall, his height becoming an implicit pressure. "You are new with team."

"Started last week," Leo said, a flicker of pride in his eyes. It was that pride Ilya would use.

“Good. Is important job. Help the team so much.” Ilya nodded at the bottles. “You know which room is Shane Hollander?”

Leo’s expression turned cautious. “Yeah, but I can’t really- ”

Ilya’s hand was already moving, smooth as a card trick. A few folded bills, substantial enough to feel thick, slid into the breast pocket of Leo’s polo. “Is a prank. Between rivals. You understand? Like... tradition.” Ilya’s smile was a conspiratorial slash, charming and utterly false. “His water only. The blue bottle, yes? You mark it. A special electrolyte mix. Very funny. He will be... drowsy. Sleep well and be fine for morning practice. Harmless.”

Leo’s throat worked. His eyes darted to the crisp edges of the money peeking from his pocket. The internal war- professionalism versus the allure of easy money from an NHL star- was brief and pathetic. Ilya watched it conclude. “Harmless?” Leo echoed, voice thin.

“Konechno. Of course. A joke.” Ilya’s gaze held his, a blue anchor. “You do this, you put bottle in his room with others, you say nothing. Or...” He let the alternative hang, a silent vacuum filled with the threat of unspecified consequences. The kid was eighteen at most. A paycheck-to-paycheck life was written in the fraying threads of his sneakers.

Leo swallowed, nodded once, a sharp, jerky motion. “Blue bottle. Got it.”

“Good man.” Ilya clapped him on the shoulder, a gesture that felt like a seizure. He melted back into the corridor’s shadows before Leo could exhale, his own pulse a steady, satisfied drum against his ribs. The mechanism was in motion.

Across the city, in the quiet gloom of a downtown wine bar, Shane stared into the crimson vortex of his untouched Merlot. Rose sat across from him, her presence a solid, warm anchor in the swirling sea of his dread. The game was over, a messy, physical loss where every shift had felt like a confrontation with a ghost. Ilya had been a constant, a dark star on the ice whose gravity Shane had felt in every turn, every blocked shot. The final buzzer had been a reprieve.

“You’re somewhere else,” Rose said softly, not a reproach, but a lifeline thrown.

Shane’s finger traced the stem of his glass. The noise of the bar- the clink of glass, the low hum of conversation- faded into a distant murmur. He had practiced this confession in the mirror, in the shower, during endless sleepless nights. The words had fossilized in his throat. Now, with the alcohol a gentle loosening agent in his veins and Rose’s patient silence an invitation, they broke free.

“Can I tell you something that has to stay between us?” He asked, not looking directly into her eyes.

At her nod, he paused for a few seconds before gathering his courage. “I’m an Omega.”

The words dropped between them, absolute, like a stone into a still pond. Rose didn’t flinch. Her eyes, sharp and kind, remained on his face. She waited.

“It’s not public. It’s... it’s a secret. The league, my team... it’s- I’m having a hard time.” The explanation tumbled out, clinical and defensive. The suppressants, the quarterly checks, the constant, low-grade fear of a scent, a slip, a rumor. From the outside he looked exactly like he was supposed to. Inside he was getting tired of hearing himself talk. The platitude about improving and helping the team win echoed hollowly in his memory, a script he was so fucking tired of reading from.

Rose listened, her head tilted. When he finished, she reached across the table and covered his hand with hers. “Okay,” she said, simple and profound.

The simplicity undid him. The next confession was a raw, torn thing, hauled up from a place that was all bruised and longing. “Boston wasn’t... it wasn’t just a fight, with who I was kind of seeing... It wasn’t just him being an asshole. He... he knew. He scented me. And he...” Shane’s voice hitched. He couldn’t name the room, the wall, the terrifying, exhilarating certainty in Ilya’s eyes. “It was messed up. It was so far over the line, Rose. I didn’t want- it doesn’t even start to cover it.” He thought of the door clicking shut, sealing him in a room saturated with the ghost of a mouth that had unraveled him completely, the promise of weeks apart that had felt like a chasm even then.

He took a gulp of wine, the bitterness fitting. “And I think I’m in love with him anyway.”

There it was. The rotten, glorious truth of it. He expected shock, revulsion, a lecture. Rose sat back, her gaze turning inward. After a long moment, she sighed, a sound of deep understanding. “Oh, Shane. The heart wants what it wants, even when it’s terrible for us.”

“It’s not *wanting*,” Shane whispered, desperate. “It’s... it’s a sickness. It’s just part of my brain forcing me to think that he’s meant to be like this perfect partner for me. It’s bullshit. It’s like he carved a space out inside me and now everything else just... echoes. He texts me about protein and I feel cared for. He looks at me across a crowded elevator and I feel... seen. In a way that scares the shit out of me. After what he did, how can we be anything after?” He missed the attention, missed being noticed. Missed the strange certainty of someone remembering small things about him without being asked. That alone felt dangerous enough.

“Am I the first person you’ve told? Other than him and your parents.” She waited for his nod. Rose swirled her wine. “You’ve spent your whole life hiding a core part of yourself. He saw it. Instantly. That kind of recognition... it’s a drug. Even if the delivery system is a wrecking ball.” She leaned forward. “But love isn’t a referendum on his behavior. It’s just a fact. The question is, what are you going to do with it?”

Tears pricked hot at the corners of Shane’s eyes. He blinked them away, furious. “I don’t know,” he admitted, the sound hollow. “I don’t know what I want. I want to not want him. I want to be normal. I want to not feel my heart stutter when his name comes up on my phone. I want to not remember what his hands feel like.”

They talked until the bar staff began wiping down nearby tables, the conversation a winding path through fear, biology, trauma, and the stubborn, illogical persistence of affection. Shane confessed the sleepless nights, the way his mind replayed every interaction on a loop, searching for a clue, a reason, an off-ramp from this feeling. Rose offered no easy answers, only the solid ground of her listening, the absence of judgment a balm on the raw nerve of his shame. When she finally glanced at her phone and winced- her 5 AM call time for the film shoot looming- Shane felt a pang of loss. Her clarity was a temporary shelter, and now the walls of his own life were closing in again.

“You’ll figure it out,” she said, standing and pulling on her coat. “Not tonight. Maybe not for a while. But you will. And I’m here, no matter what you figure out.”

He hugged her tight, a lump in his throat. “Thanks, Rose.”

“Text me when you get back to the hotel.”

He nodded, watching her go, the space she left behind feeling immediately colder, larger.

Back in the sterile silence of his hotel room, the emptiness was a physical weight. The conversation replayed in his head, a dizzying loop. He shucked his jacket, his movements automatic. There, on the desk beside the standard-issue coffee maker, was the cluster of water bottles. One of them, a blue-tinted sport bottle, sat slightly apart from the others. One of the new team assistants had asked everyone what flavor they liked for the electrolyte powders the coach had them drink before games.

His throat was parched from talking, from fear, from everything. He opened the bottle and drank half of it in long, deep pulls, trying to get rid of the taste of the wine. The water was cool, faintly metallic. He finished it, tossed the empty bottle towards the trash can (it missed, rattling against the wall), and fell onto the bed without bothering to undress.

The drowsiness hit him not with a wave, but with a stealthy, rising tide. One moment he was staring at the textured hotel ceiling, the next his thoughts were unraveling into warm, woolly strands. His limbs grew heavy, as if filled with sand. A distant, rational part of his brain fired a warning flare- he hadn’t realized he’d been that tired- but the signal couldn’t traverse the sudden, syrupy void of his consciousness. His last coherent sensation was the faint, phantom trace of cedar and cold air in his nostrils, a scent-memory that felt more real than the room around him. Then, nothing.

The keycard reader gave a soft, green-eyed blink and a click that was deafening in the silent hallway. Ilya slipped inside, closing the door with infinite care until the latch engaged with a sound no louder than a heartbeat.

Darkness, split only by the faint orange bleed of city lights around the edges of the blackout curtains. The room smelled of clean linen, stale air, and *him*. Shane. That honeysuckle, rain-on-concrete Omega scent, now laced with the chemical tang of the drugged water and the deeper, more vulnerable aroma of utterly defenseless sleep.

Ilya stood still, letting his eyes adjust. There was Shane, a dark shape on the king-sized bed, one arm flung over his eyes, his breathing deep and unnaturally even. The drugs had worked. A cold thrill, sharp and possessive, shot through Ilya's veins. This was wrong. He knew it was wrong. The knowledge was an intellectual ice chip in the furnace of his need. He crossed the room, his steps silent on the plush carpet.

He looked down at the sleeping man. Shane's face in repose lost its usual guarded tension. He looked younger, softer. Beautiful. Ilya's hand lifted, trembling slightly not from fear but from the intensity of the hunger that roared to life within him. His fingers hovered just above the pulse point on Shane's exposed neck. The skin there was pale, delicate. He saw the translucent bite guard around his neck. It would be *so* easy to rip it away now. The urge was primal, a deep, atavistic roar in his blood: *Bite. Claim. Mark. Make him yours in the way that cannot be undone.*

His own breath came short. He imagined the press of his teeth, the sharp, bright pain that would wake Shane into a dazed, bonded confusion, the flood of bonding hormones that would seek and soothe and addict. It would be so easy. Shane was his for the taking, right now. His rival. His Omega. *Moy*. His.

He let his fingers brush the warm skin. Shane made a soft, sleepy sound- a faint "mmph"- and turned his head slightly into the touch, a trust given in absolute unconsciousness.

The trust was the knife that severed the primal cord.

Ilya snatched his hand back as if burned. A low curse hissed between his teeth in Russian. "Cyka." This wasn't winning. This wasn't even possession. This was spoliation. It was the act of a coward and a villain, and while Ilya was many things- ruthless, obsessive, whatever it was- he was, in his own twisted calculus, not that. Not with Shane. Not like this. The ghost of Sveta's imagined critique- that he was going too far- flickered, not as a deterrent, but as a

point of pride. He would be as crazy as he needed to be, but even his madness had lines, and this, in the silent dark with Shane pliant and unaware, was one.

The fight left his body in a rush, leaving behind a hollow, aching need. The predatory tension melted into something worse: a yearning so profound it felt like grief. He sank onto the edge of the bed, the mattress dipping under his weight. Gently, carefully, he rearranged Shane's limp form, pulling him from the center of the bed. Shane went willingly, a warm weight in his arms. Ilya stretched out beside him, on top of the covers, and gathered the unconscious man against his chest.

Shane's head settled with a sigh. Ilya held him, one arm a firm band across his back, the other hand cradling the back of his head. He buried his face in Shane's soft hair, inhaling the scent that drove him to madness and moments of shocking clarity. Here, in the silent dark, with the world held at bay, he could pretend. He could pretend this was earned. That this surrender was given, not taken. That the steady thump of Shane's heart under his palm was a rhythm meant for him, a counter-beat to the frantic, lonely tempo of his own.

He held him for what felt like both an instant and an eternity. He memorized the weight, the heat, the perfect fit of Shane's body against his own, the way his breathing deepened and evened out as if recognizing, even in sleep, the shape of the one who held him. Finally, with a resolve that cost him dearly, he leaned down and pressed his lips to Shane's forehead. The kiss was chaste, lingering, a sacrament offered in the church of his own delusion.

"Moy prekrasnyy," he whispered against the warm skin. *My beautiful one.* Then, he untangled himself.

He slipped off the bed, straightening the covers Shane had disturbed. At the door, he paused, looking back. His eye caught a small, gift-wrapped box on the dresser he'd missed on his way in. It had a small tag in flowing script: For Shane. A teammate, probably. The whole floor was reserved for Montreal. It was unimportant, a speck of normalcy in the abnormal vacuum of this room. He left it.

He exited as silently as he had entered, the corridor swallowing him whole. The door clicked shut, sealing Shane inside with only the ghost of his presence, the memory of a held breath in the dark.

Shane woke to a headache that was a dull, insistent throb behind his eyes, a vise slowly tightening. Sunlight, fierce and accusatory, stabbed around the edges of the blackout curtains, painting sharp lines on the ceiling. He groaned, pushing himself up on his elbows. The room spun lazily, a nauseating carousel. He felt thick-headed, groggy, as if he'd slept for a century and yet not at all, his body heavy with an odd lethargy.

And then he froze. The scent.

It was faint, a whisper clinging to the collar of his own shirt, imprinted on the pillowcase beside him- the side of the bed that felt vaguely, unsettlingly warm, as if a body heat had just recently vacated it. Leather. Cigarette smoke. The faint, clean sharpness of expensive soap. Rozanov's scent.

His heart slammed against his ribs, a frantic bird in a cage. He scrambled upright, his eyes darting around the empty room. Nothing was out of place. The door was locked, the chain engaged from the inside. Impossible. A hallucination. A cruel trick of his longing-hazed brain, conjured from the depths of a drugged sleep. He brought the pillow to his face and inhaled deeply. There- gone. A phantom. It had to be.

But the conviction, the eerie, visceral feeling of not having been alone, clung to him like a chill. He replayed the night: the blue bottle, the sudden, overwhelming fatigue. A prank from Hayden? It felt different. This sleep had been absolute, a void. He touched his forehead where a strange, lingering warmth seemed to pulse, a sensation entirely separate from the headache.

He showered until the water ran cold, scrubbing at his skin as if he could erase the sensory memory, the feeling of phantom arms. It didn't work. The scent, or the ghost of it, seemed baked into his sinuses.

The morning team workout was a special kind of torture. The bright lights of the hotel gym felt surgical, exposing. Every shout from a coach, every clang of a weight plate, was amplified and abrasive, grating against the raw edges of his nerves. He moved through the drills mechanically, his body obeying while his mind splintered. He replayed the faint scent, the crushing weight of his confession to Rose, the helpless, drowning feeling of not knowing

what he wanted. *Just to keep improving. Do what I can to help the team win.* The empty script played in his head, a taunt. How could he improve when he was coming apart at the seams? How could he help anyone when he couldn't even decide if he wanted to be near the man who haunted him?

Back in his room, the silence was a tomb. He ignored the gift box on the dresser. It sat there, a quiet accusation. He ordered room service- a bland chicken where he threw the bread out and salad- and picked at it without tasting, the food like ash in his mouth. The melancholy was a heavy, liquid lead, filling the hollows of his bones, weighing down his limbs until even lifting the remote felt like a Herculean task. He spent the day in its grip, curled on the bed in a pair of sweatpants, staring at his phone as the sunlight tracked its slow arc across the carpet.

Texts came, little digital intrusions from a world that expected Shane Hollander to be functional.

Mom- Hope you're resting up for tonight! We're watching! Love you!

He stared at the message, the cheerful exclamation points like tiny stabs. He typed back, his thumbs clumsy: Thx. All good. The lie was a pebble in his shoe, a constant, minor agony.

Dad- Tough loss last night. Shake it off. Focus on the next one.

He replied: Yep. On it.

Two words that felt like lifting stones.

Rose Landry- Filming running late. Might miss puck drop. So sorry. You okay?

He stared at this one the longest. The concern was a pinprick of light in the gloom. He could tell her. He could say he felt haunted, sick, wrong. He could say he woke up feeling like he'd been held, and now the emptiness was crushing him. He could ask her to come, to be his tether, to talk him down from this ledge of paralyzing confusion. The weight of asking felt immense. He was a burden. He was a mess. He was the future captain of Canada's best team, crumbling in a hotel room because he could still smell his rival on his pillow.

His thumbs moved, independent of his heart.

Shane- Don't worry. Get your rest. I'm ok.

He sent it. The silence from her end felt heavier than any response. He imagined her on set, worrying anyway, and hated himself a little more.

He put the phone down, the lie sitting heavy in his stomach. He wouldn't call. He couldn't drag her into this spiral. He needed to move, to outrun the ghost in the room and the one in his head.

He pulled on running gear, the familiar ritual of lacing his shoes a small comfort. He texted Hayden.

Shane: You up for a run? Need to clear my head.

Hayden's response was almost instantaneous.

Hayd: Already in the lobby. Was about to head out. You're buying post-run coffee.

The city air was a cold slap, a welcome shock to his system. He fell into step beside Hayden, their sneakers hitting the pavement in a steady rhythm along the riverwalk. Hayden, bless him, didn't ask questions. He launched into a detailed, passionate complaint about the hotel's "cardboard disguised as wheat toast," and for a few miles, Shane could almost pretend he was normal. The burn in his lungs, the sweat cooling on his skin, the mundane sound of Hayden's voice- it pushed the scent, the feeling, the haunting to the edges of his mind.

But it was still there, a low-grade hum beneath everything, like a radio tuned to a station just out of range. His body felt different. Not sore, but... aware. As if his skin had been mapped by hands he couldn't see. He ran harder, trying to outpace the sensation, until his breath sawed in his chest and Hayden shot him a concerned look.

Hayden nodded, not pushing. They finished the loop in a companionable, breathless silence. Over coffee, Shane managed to laugh at Hayden's stories, to contribute to the debate about

the best power-play formation. He performed Shane Hollander so convincingly he almost fooled himself.

Almost.

As game time approached, the leaden feeling solidified into a cold, hard decision. He couldn't do it. Not tonight. The thought of lining up across from Rozanov, of the puck dropping between them, of that intense, focused gaze locking onto his from mere inches away... his stomach turned over, a slick wave of panic that had him swallowing hard against a rise of bile. The memory of that proximity- in Boston, in elevators, in his own damned dreams- was too fresh, too charged with the confession he'd made to Rose. *I think I'm in love with him*. To stand that close now would be to offer himself up, naked and trembling, on the altar of his own weakness.

He found Coach Williams outside the locker room, amidst the pre-game chaos of equipment bags and shouted conversations. "Coach. Got a sec?"

Williams turned, his face already in game-mode sharpness. "Hollander. What is it?"

"Tonight... can we switch? Put me on D. Let Hayden take the face-offs." The words came out in a rush, too fast.

Williams frowned, the lines around his eyes deepening as he assessed him. "You're our best in the circle, Hollander. You know that. It's our best weapon."

"I know." Shane forced himself to meet his coach's gaze, to not look away like a guilty thing. "Just... not tonight. Please." The raw edge in his own voice surprised him, a crack in the facade. He saw the moment Williams registered it- not just the request, but the shadows under his eyes, the pallor of his skin, the tight set of his jaw that had nothing to do with game focus.

Williams studied him for a long, silent moment. The noise of the hallway faded into a buzz. He was weighing the weapon against the soldier holding it. Finally, he gave a curt, almost

imperceptible nod. “Fine. Second pairing with Petrov. He’ll cover your ass if your head’s not in it. But you’re back in the dot next game. Understood? This isn’t a permanent vacation.”

“Understood.” The relief that washed through him was thin and bitter, tainted with shame. It wasn’t a solution. It was a retreat. A white flag waved from the battlements of his own psyche.

As he pulled his jersey over his pads later in the buzzing locker room, the familiar fabric felt like a disguise, a costume for a role he could no longer fully play. The red and blue crest hung over his heart, a symbol of everything he was supposed to be: strong, dependable, unshakeable. He was stepping onto the ice not as Shane Hollander, center, cornerstone of their entire playing strategy, but as a fugitive. He was putting a few more precious feet of frozen distance between himself and the inevitable, terrifying collision he both feared and craved, the collision that felt more like a homecoming every time he tried to run from it.

Defense was still too close. Ilya would still be there, a force of nature on the ice, and the boards were a small world. But for tonight, hiding in plain sight on the blue line would have to be enough. It was the only move he had left.

Ilya let himself into his condo, the door clicking shut behind him with a finality that echoed in the vast, minimalist space. It was cold, sterile. A showroom. It held nothing of him, except one thing.

He didn’t bother with lights. He went straight to the secure laptop in his study, booted it up, and navigated through encrypted layers to the live feed. The apartment in Montreal was dark, empty. As it always was. He’d watched it for hours after he’d left Shane there, a silent witness to his own absence. He’d watched Shane pace, sleep, finally leave. He’d watched nothing happen for months.

Now, he scrolled back through the archived footage, his fingers steady on the trackpad. He knew the time stamps by heart. He found the segment he wanted: Shane, alone in the gray light of morning after their first night. He was sitting on the edge of the disheveled bed, head

in his hands. Ilya zoomed in. The resolution was high enough to see the tremor in Shane's shoulders, the way he dragged his palms down his face, the lost, shattered expression he thought no one could see.

Ilya watched it. Then he watched it again. He watched the moment Shane found the tank top, the way his fingers clenched in the fabric. He watched him bring it to his face, just for a second, eyes closed. A current of pure, undiluted possession shot through Ilya, hot and bright. This was his. This moment of vulnerability, this secret grief, belonged to him. He had put it there.

He lost track of time, sitting in the dark, replaying the same few minutes of digital memory. The ghost of Shane's weight was still in his arms, the feel of his hair against Ilya's lips, the steady proof of his heartbeat. The real, living man was across the city, probably awake now, confused, maybe scared. The thought should have troubled him. It only made the feeling sharper, sweeter. He had been a ghost in Shane's room, and now he was a ghost in Shane's mind. It was a start.

He skipped the team's optional morning workout. The disciplined part of his brain, the part that had built his career, protested weakly. He silenced it. What were wind sprints compared to the echo of a heartbeat against his palm?

He arrived at the arena with the rest of the crowd, slipping through the players' entrance at the last possible second. The familiar pre-game rituals- the tape, the stretches, the sharp smell of analgesic cream- felt distant, like he was performing them through a pane of thick glass. His mind was elsewhere, in a quiet hotel room, holding the shape of a sleeping man.

Then he stepped onto the ice for warm-ups.

His eyes found Shane immediately, a flash of red against the white. But something was wrong. Shane wasn't lining up for the face-off drills in the center position. He was gliding along the blue line, taking passes from Petrov, settling into a defensive stance.

A cold, sharp dislocation speared through Ilya's chest.

He skated to the center circle, his movements automatic. Pike was there, not Shane. Pike, who was good, but who wasn't *him*. The puck dropped, and Ilya won the draw cleanly, but the victory was ash. His gaze tracked Shane, who was deliberately not looking at him, who was mirroring Petrov with a focus that felt like a physical wall.

The game began.

It was a disaster. A slow-motion car crash that everyone in the building could see.

Ilya's passes were a half-second off, his timing scrambled. He overskated pucks, fumbled routine receptions. He was a step behind every play, his legendary anticipation utterly absent. His body was on the ice, but his mind was trapped in a loop: *He moved. He's hiding. From me.*

Every time he looked up, Shane was there, but not where he was supposed to be. Not in the place Ilya had carved out for him in the geometry of the game. He was a defenseman, hanging back, blocking shots, making safe, short passes. He was avoiding the center of the ice, avoiding the collisions, avoiding him.

On the bench, Ilya sat staring straight ahead, unseeing. His coach's voice was a distant buzz. A teammate clapped him on the shoulder; he didn't feel it. The score ticked against them. He took the next shift, and it was worse. He tried to force it, to hunt for the spark through sheer will, but his focus was shattered. He took a stupid penalty- a lazy hook born of frustration- and sat in the box, watching Shane.

The final buzzer was a mercy. They'd lost, decisively. Ilya was a non-factor on the scoresheet. In the handshake line, he kept his gaze forward, his expression a mask of blank indifference. But when he reached Shane, his hand extended automatically, he couldn't help it. His eyes flicked up.

Shane's gaze met his for a fraction of a second. There was nothing there. No anger, no fear, no challenge. Just a flat, professional distance. It was a void. It was a wall higher than any he'd ever faced on the ice.

Then Shane's hand was gone, and he was moving past, heading for the tunnel without a backward glance.

Ilya stood frozen for a moment in the midst of the dispersing line, the roar of the crowd a meaningless din. The hollow ache from the morning was back, but it had been filled with a new, chilling substance: a certainty. He had miscalculated. The visit, the holding- it hadn't drawn Shane closer. It had sent him scrambling for the farthest corner of the chessboard.

He had wanted to be a ghost in Shane's mind. He hadn't considered that a ghost could be ignored.

Skating off the ice, the weight of his own failure was a physical thing. He had played a horrible game. But that was just the score. The real loss was the look in Shane's eyes- the utter, complete absence of the connection Ilya had felt thrumming between them just hours before in the dark. He had traded a moment of stolen closeness for a chasm that now stretched across the ice, wide and cold and silent.

For Shane, the ice had become a minefield of his own making. Playing defense had been a tactical retreat, but it offered no peace. Ilya's presence was a constant gravitational pull, warping plays, drawing Shane's eye even when he fought not to look. Every time Ilya carried the puck over the blue line, Shane felt a jolt of adrenaline that had nothing to do with defense and everything to do with the man skating toward him with that focused, predatory intent. He played adequately. He was a ghost in red and blue, performing his role by rote.

The texts came within minutes of each other, after the final buzzer of the third game.

Shane's phone buzzed as he sat in the quiet of the locker room, a towel over his head.

Unknown Number: Shane, it's Margot Silva from HNL Communications. We're scheduling a joint press conference for you and Ilya Rozanov for tomorrow, 11 AM at the arena offices before your flight. You're the new captains, we want to drum up some positive excitement for the season. Your agent has the details. See you then.

His stomach dropped through the floor. A joint press conference. Trapped at a table, microphones between them, forced to perform camaraderie. The thought made his skin crawl.

Ilya received the same text. His first reaction was not dread, but a fierce, sudden spark. A press conference. A controlled, League-sanctioned environment where they would be placed together, expected to interact. It was a chance. An opening. He stared at the message, the noise of the room fading. *Maybe*, he thought, a dangerous hope tightening in his chest. *Maybe there will be a moment. A room. A way to speak.*

Shane became a nervous wreck. The few hours were a blur of misplaced anxiety. He called Rose three times that night, his sentences fragmented.

“It’s just a presser,” she said, her voice calm through the speaker. “You’ve done a thousand.”

“Not with him,” Shane said, pacing his living room. “Not... after everything. They’ll ask about the rivalry. They’ll want soundbites. I can’t... I can’t look at him and do that.”

“Then don’t look at him. Look at the reporters. Give them your standard captain answers.”

“You don’t understand.” His voice broke. “He *sees* me. Even when I’m hiding. I shouldn’t even be captain. They only gave it to me because he made captain.”

There was a long pause. “Do you want me to come? I can shift some things.”

The offer was a lifeline. He ached to grab it. To have her there, in the front row, a steady presence. But the guilt was immediate and crushing. She was in the thick of her shoot, exhausted, doing the work she loved. “No,” he said, forcing conviction into his tone. “No, you’re busy. I’m being stupid. I can handle it.”

He couldn't. He slept in fits, the phantom scent of leather waking him. He rehearsed answers in the shower, his reflection pale and anxious in the steam.

Ilya's approach was more direct. Hope was a plan, and a plan required logistics. The arena offices were a maze of conference rooms and greenrooms. He needed a guarantee. A young, harried-looking intern from the events team was identified, cornered near the coffee station during the venue walk-through the day before. The transaction was quicker, smoother than the one with Leo. More money, less explanation. The request was simple: find a reason to get both captains into the designated greenroom alone, just for a few minutes before the press conference. A "technical check" for their mics, a "last-minute briefing" that only concerned them. The intern, wide-eyed at the cash and the intensity in Ilya's blue gaze, nodded.

The next morning dawned cold and bright. Shane arrived early, wearing a suit that felt like a straitjacket. He was ushered by a fluttering assistant into a small, bland greenroom. There was a couch, a water cooler, a screen showing a muted news feed. He was alone. He poured a water, his hands trembling so badly the bottle clicked against the rim of the paper cup.

Then the door opened, and Ilya walked in.

The assistant mumbled something about "audio setup" and "be right back," closing the door behind her. The click of the latch was deafening.

They were alone.

Shane froze, cup halfway to his lips. Ilya stood just inside the door, his own posture uncharacteristically still. He looked... prepared. And nervous. Shane had never seen him look nervous.

“Hollander,” Ilya said, his voice low.

“This is a mistake,” Shane whispered, not moving. “They’ll be in any second.”

“We have few minutes. I made sure.”

The admission should have angered him. Instead, it just made the room feel smaller, the air thinner. Of course Ilya had orchestrated this. He always did.

Ilya didn’t move closer. He stayed by the door, as if reading the panic in Shane’s stance. “I need to say this. I... I am sorry. For Boston. For what happened. For all of it. It was not...” He struggled, his English fracturing under the weight of the emotion. “It was not right. What I did. What I took. I had no right.”

The apology hung in the air, raw and stark. It wasn’t the flippant, arrogant thing Shane had expected. It sounded carved out of him. Shane’s breath hitched. He wanted to throw the water in his face. He wanted to scream. He set the cup down on the table with a shaky hand, the water sloshing.

“Your apology,” Shane said, the words scraping his throat. “It’s a start. But it’s just a start. It doesn’t fix what’s broken. It’s not enough. Nowhere near enough.”

“I know,” Ilya said, his head bowing slightly. The silence wasn’t filled with anger this time, but with a vast, aching chasm of everything unsaid. “It is like poison, leaving it like this.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Shane’s voice cracked. He hugged his arms around himself, his gaze dropping to the industrial carpet. “*It is* poison. I drink it every day. I think about you, and it *hurts*, Ilya. It physically hurts. Because I don’t know how to... how to put what you did in one box and what I feel in another. They’re all mixed up. The fear and the... and the want.” He finally looked up, his eyes bright with unshed tears. “And I can’t forgive you for that. I don’t know how.”

Ilya flinched as if struck, a full-body recoil that he couldn't suppress. The desperate, tentative hope that had been burning in his eyes guttered and dimmed, replaced by a bleak, horrified understanding. He had broken this. He had taken something rare and fragile and stepped on it, and now Shane was showing him the pieces, and they were too shattered to be put back together. "What can I do?" The question was barely audible, a whisper torn from somewhere deep and wounded. "Tell me. Please. What can I do to earn it?"

"There's nothing!" The words burst out of Shane, a sob he'd been holding back for weeks, for months. A tear finally spilled over, tracing a hot path down his cheek. He didn't wipe it away. "Don't you get it? You can't *earn* this! You broke a trust that didn't even exist yet, and now anything that could have been... it's twisted. It's broken glass. Any relationship between us wouldn't work. It would be built on that. On me being afraid of you and... and wanting you anyway. That's not a foundation. That's a trap. For both of us." His voice dropped to a shattered whisper. "It would destroy me. And you'd get bored of the pieces."

A sharp rap sounded at the door, making them both jump. A voice called through, "Ten minutes to stage, gentlemen!"

The interruption was a guillotine. The real world, with its cameras and expectations, rushed back in.

Ilya's eyes never left Shane's face. He saw the tears, the tremor, the utter defeat. And he saw, as Shane wiped angrily at his eyes, the way his gaze momentarily lost focus, glazing over not with fear, but with a dazed, almost hypnotic pull, when Ilya took two small, unconscious steps forward.

That tiny, involuntary reaction was a spark in the desolation. It was a crack in the door Shane was trying so hard to slam shut.

"There is always a way to earn it back," Ilya said, his voice firming, a new resolve hardening in his blue eyes. The apology was given. It was not enough. He saw that now. He needed a new strategy. "You just have not seen it yet."

"I don't see any possible way, Rozanov. I think it's easier for us just to pretend none of this ever happened. I can't live like this anymore and the best solution I see is just be done with it all."

Before Ilya could respond, the door opened, and the assistant was back, all efficient smiles. “Ready to head to the stage?”

Shane turned away, blindly grabbing his cup of water, his heart a shattered, conflicted mess in his chest. Ilya followed, his own expression settling into the cool, unreadable mask of the public figure, but inside, the gears were already turning. Forgiveness was not a gift to be given. It was a prize to be won. And he had just seen, in the glazed-over sheen of Shane’s beautiful, tormented eyes, that the game was far from over.

Ilya’s expression, which had been open and ravaged, smoothed over, settling into the cool, impenetrable mask of the public figure. But his eyes, as they held Shane’s for one final, searing second, were not resigned. They were calculating, focused, alive with a new, ferocious purpose. The apology was given. It was heard. It was not enough. He saw that now, with devastating clarity.

The press conference was a special kind of torture.

Shane sat ramrod straight in his chair, his smile a fixed, polite thing that felt carved from wood. He answered questions about “team culture” and “season expectations” with the smooth, rehearsed cadence of a veteran, but his delivery was stiff, airless. He could feel the heat of Ilya’s body beside him, a constant, low-grade radiation that made the fine hairs on his arm stand up. Every time Ilya leaned forward to speak into his microphone, the subtle shift in the air, the faint leather-and-soap scent, was a tiny explosion in Shane’s periphery.

Ilya, for his part, was the picture of relaxed, charismatic control. He joked with the moderators, gave thoughtful answers about adjusting to captaincy, and even managed to pay Shane a perfectly bland, professional compliment about his two-way game. It was flawless. It was a lie so convincing it made Shane’s stomach twist. This was the man who had held him while he slept, who had just minutes ago been raw and pleading in a greenroom. Now he was *the* Ilya Rozanov, NHL Star, all easy smiles and clever quips. The whiplash was nauseating.

Shane kept his gaze firmly on the reporters, on the back wall, on his own hands folded on the table. He did not look to his left. Not once. But he felt Ilya’s eyes on him during his own

answers, a heavy, assessing weight. Like Rozanov was not just looking at him but comparing him against some private version he had kept all this time.

When it finally ended, Shane was out of his seat before the moderator had finished thanking them, a murmured “excuse me” lost in the shuffle of rising bodies and clicking cameras. He didn’t wait for the league handlers. He moved with single-minded purpose through the back corridors of the arena, a path he knew from countless visits. His heart was a frantic bird against his ribs, his skin feeling too tight, too hot. He needed walls. A lock. Silence.

He found a staff bathroom in a disused hallway near the equipment bays, far from the media scrum. He slipped inside, flipped the lock, and leaned back against the cool metal door, dragging in deep, shuddering breaths. The fluorescent light buzzed overhead. He pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes, trying to push out the image of Ilya’s face in the greenroom, the sound of his shattered apology, the terrifying promise in his final words.

Outside, Ilya endured the final handshakes and photo ops with a smile that was starting to feel like a crack in porcelain. The second he was free, he pulled out his phone. His thumb moved with practiced efficiency, bypassing lockscreens to open a simple, unmarked mapping app. A single pulsing blue dot glowed on the grid-like schematic of the arena. Not moving. Deep in the bowels of the building.

He stared at it, his chest tight. Shane had run. Of course he had run. Ilya had seen the rigid line of his spine during the conference, the way he’d practically fled the stage. The urge to go after him was a physical ache, a magnetic pull stronger than reason. He forced himself to take a few slow breaths, leaning against a concrete wall in a quiet corridor. He couldn’t go in hot. He couldn’t let Shane see the jagged edge of his own need, the desperation that had him tracking his phone like a stalker. *Act normal. Give him some distance. Give him space. He needs to feel safe.*

It was the hardest performance of his life.

He followed the dot’s signal, his footsteps echoing in the empty service hallway. He stopped outside the indicated door- a utility bathroom. He hesitated, his hand hovering over the

handle. Then, schooling his features into a mask of calm indifference, he tried the knob. Locked.

He knocked. A short, firm rap. "Hollander."

A beat of silence, then the sound of the lock sliding back. The door opened just enough to reveal Shane's face, pale and tense under the harsh light. His expression, which might have been relief at the end of his panic, instantly hardened into exasperated weariness when he saw who it was. He let out a short, humorless breath and rolled his eyes, a gesture so familiarly *Shane* it sent a pang through Ilya's chest.

"I thought I made myself clear," Shane said, his voice flat. He didn't open the door wider.

"You did," Ilya said, keeping his own voice low, even. He kept his hands in his pockets, his posture loose, non-threatening. "Clear you are hurt. Clear you are angry. Not clear how to fix." He met Shane's gaze, trying to project a calm he didn't feel. "We cannot... leave it like this. In poison. Meet me. Somewhere public. A coffee shop. A park. Anywhere you choose. You set place, you set time. We just talk. No touching. No... demands. Just talk."

Shane's jaw tightened. He looked past Ilya's shoulder down the empty hall, then back, his eyes guarded. "There's nothing to talk about, Ilya. Talking just... reopens it. I said everything in there."

"You said you could not forgive. You did not say why I cannot try." Ilya's mask of calm strained at the edges. The frustration, the helplessness of being so close yet held at arm's length by nothing more than Shane's will, began to seep through. "You want me to just... disappear? To pretend you are not all I think about?"

"Yes!" Shane shot back, a flash of real anger in his eyes. "That's exactly what I want! I want you to leave me alone!"

The words, spoken with such vehemence in this cold, concrete space, were a direct blow. Ilya's careful control snapped. "I could make you talk to me," he said, the words leaving his

mouth before he could cage them, low and dark. It wasn't a true threat; it was the frustrated, childish cry of someone denied what they wanted most.

The effect on Shane was immediate and devastating. All the color drained from his face, replaced by a look of cold, utter betrayal. He didn't flinch back. He seemed to grow stiller, harder. "You could," Shane said, his voice dangerously quiet. "You could, couldn't you? Because you're not opposed to using force to get your way. We've established that."

It was the truth. The unvarnished, ugly truth Shane had learned in a Boston room. Ilya had shown his hand, and now Shane would forever hold it against him. The accusation landed with the precision of a surgeon's knife, severing the last of Ilya's momentum. All the fight drained out of him, leaving behind a hollow, aching cold.

He took a full step back, putting more of the gloomy hallway between them. The tracker in his pocket felt like a condemnation. Shane's eyes, sharp and unforgiving, saw right through his performed calm to the obsessed, unstable core beneath. There was no winning this. Not here. Not like this.

Ilya's expression closed off completely, becoming as impassive and cold as the walls around them. The hope from the greenroom was ashes. The carefully constructed plan was dust.

"Fine," Ilya said, the word final and brittle. "We see each other in two months, then. When the schedule says we must."

He turned and walked away, his footsteps the only sound in the corridor. He didn't look back. Behind him, he heard the soft, definitive click of the bathroom lock re-engaging. A door shutting, once and for all.

For now.

The silence after the bathroom door clicked shut seemed to vibrate in Ilya's ears for days. The flight back to Boston, the practices, the empty condo- all of it was filtered through the cold, final sound of that lock. He had replayed Shane's words on a loop. *You're not opposed to using force*. They were a verdict. A life sentence. He had tried to box the feeling away, to

channel it into the punishing routine of training, but it leaked out as a brittle, sharp-edged focus that made his teammates give him a wide berth.

A week later, in the visiting locker room at Madison Square Garden, the noise was a physical thing- tape tearing, blades being sharpened, the thump of gear bags. Ilya was methodically layering on his armor, the ritual usually a calming prelude to battle. Then his phone buzzed with a specific, programmed tone.

A text from the lead operative on Shane's security detail, a man named Kieran.

Kieran- Boss - subject has a follower. New pattern. Leaving small packages at the new construction site of his house and slipping them to hotel staff during away games. Seems like a fan. They know the travel schedule and how to get items close to the team. We tried to tail after a drop at the Montreal hotel last night but lost them in the crowd. Description: tall build, pronounced limp on the right side. Wears hood up, face covered. Methodical.

Ilya's blood went cold, then hot. Most of Shane's fans were respectful, if passionate. This was different. This was a breach. The new visibility- the People magazine spread, the constant paparazzi shots with Rose Landry- had drawn out something darker. A predator who knew how to move in the shadows, who knew where Shane was building a home.

His first, primal instinct was to demand the body-cam footage, to see the threat with his own eyes, to dissect every frame. His thumb hovered over the call button. Then he stopped.

You're not opposed to using force.

He had promised Svetlana he would try to be better. Had promised Shane. More than that, he needed to prove to the hollow, aching part of himself that he could respect a boundary. Even this one. Even when every cell screamed to take over, to control, to eliminate the threat personally.

He typed back, each word feeling inadequate.

Ilya- Follow him closer. Make sure he is safe. Report any change.

Kieran- Copy.

He put the phone away, the weight of the threat settling in his gut alongside the older, familiar weight of his failure. As he finished lacing his skates, a new, more personal anger began to burn through the cold concern. Scott Hunter. The calm, steady veteran who had been a buffer in the elevator, whose hand had rested on Shane's shoulder. Who had Shane's ear. Who knew what he was whispering into it. Shane was too quiet, too internally chaotic for this kind of stubborn, walled-off rejection. This wasn't just Shane's hurt. This was the influence of others. People like Hunter, like Landry and Pike who must be painting Ilya as a monster and building a fortress around Shane to keep him out.

The team spilled out of the tunnel for warm-ups, the roar of the New York crowd a wall of sound. Ilya's eyes scanned the ice, finding the red and black of the Admirals. And there he was.

Shane. In the family section of the crowd.

He looked the same. That was the first terrible, beautiful thing Ilya noticed. The same efficient stride, the same focused set of his shoulders as he took a pass. He was laughing at something Pike said. The sight was a punch to the sternum.

Then Ilya's gaze slid left, and the simmering anger ignited.

Scott Hunter was skating around his team, saying something, gesturing with a gloved hand. A closed circle. Ilya's hands tightened around his stick. *Of course*. Who else would Shane listen to? The respectable older captain, the pillar of stability. The anti-Ilya. Hunter, who had never lost control, who had never wanted anything with a desperate, ruinous hunger.

Ilya forced himself into motion, taking a lap, firing pucks at the net with a force that made the goalie flinch. His professional composure, usually an impenetrable shield, felt thin, cracked. Every glance toward the Admiral's end was filtered through a lens of dual obsessions: the

phantom of a limping man in a hoodie leaving packages in the dark, and the solid, infuriating reality of Scott Hunter's easy camaraderie.

During a line rush drill, fate- or the cruel mechanics of the game- brought them into proximity. Ilya cut across the slot as Hunter drifted back to defend. For a fraction of a second, their paths intersected. Ilya didn't look at him. He kept his eyes forward, his face a mask of cold indifference. He knew Shane was looking at him.

He allowed himself one glance back as he circled toward the crowd. Shane was watching him, his expression unreadable from this distance. Then Hunter skated up, tapping the glass in front of Shane's seat with his stick, drawing his attention away, and said something that made Shane's head bow in a short nod.

The gesture, so simple, so proprietary, sent a white-hot wire of fury straight through Ilya's core. The stalker was an abstract threat, a shadow. This was concrete. This was a man physically inserting himself between Ilya and what was his, reinforcing the walls Ilya was locked out of.

He slammed his stick against the boards in a sharp, frustrated crack as he stepped over the bench. A teammate glanced at him; Ilya ignored him.

The game was a distraction, a blur of checks and whistles. His body played, but his mind was elsewhere- tracking Shane's movements with a different kind of intensity, watching Hunter, calculating the invisible influence that had turned a complex, painful connection into a simple, solid "no."

In the second period, they collided legally in the corner, a hard, clean check that pinned Hunter against the glass for a moment. Hunter shoved back, his visor tilted up, and their eyes met through the cage.

Ilya stayed against the glass for a second too long. The cold certainty settled over him again, colder than the ice. The stalker was a problem to be managed by professionals he'd hired. But Scott Hunter? The influence of friends? The narrative being built around Shane that excluded him?

That was a different kind of war. And waiting two months to fight it was no longer an option. The game, the rules, the boundaries- they were all just glass waiting to be shattered. The only thing that mattered was the man in red and blue, and the dangerous, limping shadow that knew where he slept.

The game against New York was never just a game. It was an exorcism Ilya couldn't perform, a rage he couldn't name, all channeled into sixty minutes of sanctioned violence. And Scott Hunter, the venerable Admiral's captain, became the living, breathing proxy for every wall Shane had built.

The last period was a simmer. Ilya shadowed Hunter, a deliberate shift in focus that confused the coverage. Early on, after a whistle, Ilya glided past the Boston bench, his voice a low, carrying sneer meant only for Hunter's ears.

"They keep you on for your wisdom, da? Or because you are too slow now?"

Hunter, wiping his visor, didn't even glance over. "Focus on your own game, Rozanov."

The dismissal stung. It was the calm, paternal tone that made Ilya's teeth grind.

The chirps escalated with the physicality. In the corner, Ilya finished a clean, hard check on Hunter that drove him into the glass. As they untangled, Ilya leaned in, his breath fogging Hunter's cage. "He looks to you for advice? What do you tell him? How to be a good little follower? How to hide?" The words were vile, meant to wound.

Hunter shoved him back, a flash of real anger in his eyes. "Shut your mouth."

"Make me," Ilya hissed, a feral grin behind his own cage.

The officials kept a close watch, but Ilya was a master of the grey area. A cross-check to the small of the back after a puck was gone. A "stumbling" knee-on-knee collision in the neutral

zone. Each infraction was just barely on the wrong side of legal, each accompanied by a verbal dagger.

“Does your mate know you spend so much time with Hollander?” Ilya taunted during a line change, his voice dripping with false curiosity. “Or does he trust that the old dog has no teeth?”

That one earned him a glare that could have frozen the ice. It also earned him his first penalty, a tripping call that was as much for the accumulated nuisance as the specific infraction. In the box, Ilya didn't simmer. He vibrated, his eyes locked on Hunter, who was calmly directing the New York power play. The respect he commanded, the unflappable steadiness- it was everything Ilya was not, and everything he irrationally believed Shane had been taught to want.

“You're chasing ghosts, kid,” Hunter spat, getting to his feet slowly, a hand going to his shoulder.

“I am chasing what is mine,” Ilya shot back, his English fracturing under the emotion. The referees converged, sending him to the box for charging.

Two minutes in solitary silence, watching Shane. Shane, who did not look at the box, who was speaking intently with Pike. The jealousy was a black, toxic smoke in his lungs.

His third penalty was pure frustration. Hunter made a simple, elegant outlet pass to start a breakout. Ilya, beaten, stuck out his leg in a lazy, reckless slew-foot that sent the older man crashing to the ice in a heap. It was a dirty, dangerous play. The arena booed. The referees didn't hesitate: a five-minute major for kicking.

As he skated to the box, the Admiral players hurled abuse. Ilya ignored them. His eyes were on Hunter, who was being helped up, testing his ankle. And on Shane, who had finally, *finally* looked over. There was no concern for Hunter in that glance. It was a look of pure, horrified recognition- *This is what you are. This is the unhinged thing you become.*

In the penalty box, serving for the last few minutes of the game, the cold reality of that look settled over him. He had not just hurt Hunter. He had proven Shane right. The victory, when it came- a narrow, gritty Boston win- tasted like ashes.

The handshake line was a formality Ilya usually endured with blank indifference. Tonight, it was a gauntlet. He moved robotically, nodding at opposing players, his grip loose. Then Scott Hunter was in front of him.

The older man's hand was extended, his face a mask of professional courtesy, though his eyes were cold. Ilya took his hand. And then he pulled.

It wasn't a violent yank, but a firm, inexorable tug that brought Hunter a crucial half-step closer, breaking the flow of the line. Ilya leaned in, his voice a bare, guttural whisper meant for Hunter alone, the Russian accent thick as blood.

"Stay away from Hollander." The words were ice and venom. "First and final warning."

He released him as suddenly as he'd pulled, the ghost of a snarl on his lips. Hunter stared back, shock and then a dawning, steely anger tightening his features. He said nothing. He didn't need to. The line moved on, the moment swallowed by the crowd's roar and the shuffling of tired players.

Ilya skated off, his heart a battering ram against his ribs. He hadn't reached Shane. All he had done was plant his flag in the middle of a war he was now fighting on two fronts: against a phantom with a limp, and against the living, breathing man Shane actually trusted. And as the tunnel darkness swallowed him, the chilling certainty was that he was losing them both.

The month that followed was a slow, corrosive descent into the architecture of obsession.

Ilya's world narrowed to two focal points: the pulsing blue dot on his tracker app and the barren landscape of his own mind, where he drafted and discarded increasingly extreme blueprints for reconciliation. The cold finality of the bathroom door, the warning to Hunter- they weren't endpoints. They were catalysts.

The idea of kidnapping him to Russia came to him first, fully formed and shockingly plausible, as he stared at a map on his wall. He had resources, connections, properties in remote locations. The legalities there... could be bent. An Alpha and an Omega, found together, could be compelled toward a bond for “public harmony” under certain archaic, region-specific statutes he knew existed. He imagined it: Shane, confused and furious in a dacha surrounded by snow-pines, cut off from everyone, with only Ilya to rely on, to talk to, to eventually... understand. The fantasy was vivid, cinematic. He spent an entire day mentally designing the sequence- the intercept after a game, the private jet, the isolation. He dismissed it by nightfall. It would be a bond of captivity, of resentment. He would own a shell. He didn’t want a shell. He wanted the fire, the fight, the want that he had seen glimmering beneath Shane’s fear.

The fantasy of the mating bite was more visceral, a constant, throbbing temptation. He’d wake from dreams with his teeth aching, the phantom taste of Shane’s skin- that clean, rain-swept scent mixed with the copper tang of blood- lingering on his tongue. It would be so fast. One moment of surrendered control during a check, in a hallway, and it would be done. The biological imperative would take over, flooding Shane with bonding hormones, rewriting his fear into dependency, his anger into a desperate, primal need for the Alpha who had claimed him. Ilya’s body ached with the simplicity of it. But he remembered the trust in Shane’s unconscious sigh when he’d held him in the hotel room. To violate that so completely... it wouldn’t be a bond. It would be a biological prison sentence for them both. He wanted Shane to kneel for him, not because chemistry forced him, but because he could no longer bear the distance.

The threat was the coldest, most calculating option. A single, anonymous tip to the league’s medical board, a leaked “rumor” to the right gossip columnist. Shane’s carefully constructed life- the captaincy, the endorsements, his pristine public image- would unravel. The scrutiny, the prejudice, the invasive tests. In that chaos, who would Shane have? His friends? His family? They would be powerless against the machine. Ilya could be the only one who understood, the only one who had ever truly seen him. He could be Shane’s sole refuge in the storm Ilya himself had summoned. It was elegant in its cruelty. He drafted the email in his head a dozen times. He never typed a word. Because the look that would follow- not just hurt, but a final, absolute extinction of any lingering warmth- would be a victory colder than the Siberian ground. He didn’t want a broken prisoner. He wanted a willing counterpart.

He wanted Shane to choose him. To walk across the gap, eyes open, and choose the chaos, the hunger, the realness Ilya offered over the safe, curated life he was clinging to.

So he watched. The security reports came in daily, clinical and detailed.

Report 17- Subject attended team charity event with teammates Dagenais and Pike. Prolonged physical contact observed (backslapping, shoulder clasps). Subject appeared relaxed. Laughter frequency high.

Report 22- Subject spent off-day at private residence of S. Hunter. Duration: 4 hours 17 minutes. No visual. Vehicle remained parked.

Report 29- Subject accompanied by R. Landry to film premiere. Red carpet. Significant physical proximity, hand-holding for photographers. Returned to her apartment building. Did not emerge until 0700 the following morning.

Ilya's eyes would skim these lines, his brain performing a selective filtration. He absorbed the data about potential threats, about the limping figure who had not been seen again but whose pattern suggested patience. He memorized routes, schedules, vulnerabilities.

The rest- the laughter with Pike, the hours at Hunter's, the nights with Rose- he consciously, violently skipped over. The words entered his vision and dissolved into static before they could reach the part of him that would trash another hotel room. They were irrelevant. They were the scenery of the prison Shane had chosen. They were not the man himself. The man himself was still the one who had trembled when Ilya stepped closer, whose eyes had glazed with a want that belonged to Ilya alone.

The unhinged ideas were a pressure valve, a dark playground for his desperation. Each one was a path to possession, and each was ultimately a dead end leading to a version of Shane he did not want. The realization did not calm him. It made the waiting more excruciating. He was left with only the raw, unadorned need, and the fragile, terrifying hope that the thread he had seen- the one in Shane's glazed-over eyes- was stronger than the walls being built by everyone else.

He was banking his entire, fractured future on a single, silent look exchanged in a greenroom. Everything else was noise.

The blueprint was beautiful. Clean lines, generous windows facing the lake, a thoughtful flow between rooms. Shane traced a finger over the rendering of the great room, the cedar finishes

warm and inviting even in the digital image. He should feel something- pride, anticipation, *something*. He felt like he was reading the specs for a building that belonged to someone else.

He closed the laptop. The silence of his apartment pressed in, thick and expectant. He had done everything right. The architecture courses were challenging, engaging his mind in a way hockey drills no longer did. The cabin construction was progressing on schedule; he'd just approved the timber for the exterior cladding. He'd had dinner with Rose and the team last night, laughing at Hayden's stories, listening to Jackie's latest drama. He'd nodded, smiled in the right places, asked questions.

His heart just... wasn't in it. It felt like he was operating a very convincing puppet of Shane Hollander. The strings were in his hands, he knew the motions, but the connection between action and feeling was severed. He moved through his days with a meticulous, joyless efficiency. Even the time with friends, which did provide a genuine, fleeting lightness, was followed by a deeper crash- a bone-tired desire to just be horizontal in the dark, alone, where he didn't have to perform.

The call to the coaches' office the next morning was a cold shock to the system.

He stood in front of Coach Williams' desk, with the head trainer, Gary, leaning against the filing cabinet. The air smelled of stale coffee and the stick tape.

"Shane," Williams began, his voice uncharacteristically careful. "We're not here to rake you over the coals. We're concerned."

Gary nodded, his eyes kind but clinical. "Your body composition metrics from this week show a drop. Not huge, but it's a trend over the last month. Your reaction times in the high-intensity drills are a fraction off. Your power output is maintaining, but your recovery heart rate is elevated."

"It's the middle of the season," Shane said, his voice tighter than he intended. "Everyone's tired."

“This isn’t ‘everyone’ tired, Hollander,” Williams said, leaning forward. “This is *you* tired. And ‘you tired’ is still better than ninety percent of the league on their best day. But it’s not your standard. We notice the gap.”

The words ‘the gap’ echoed in the hollow space inside his chest. They saw a gap in his performance. They didn’t see the canyon inside him.

“I’m fine,” Shane insisted, the lie automatic. “It’s just a rhythm thing. I’ll adjust.”

“Are you sleeping?” Gary asked.

“Enough.”

“Eating?”

“Yes.”

“Anything outside hockey stressing you? The endorsements? The media?”

“No.” The answer was too quick, too sharp. He saw the glance they exchanged. He was bristling, a cornered animal. He forced his shoulders down. “Look, I appreciate the concern. Really. I’ll... I’ll focus on nutrition. Get more sleep. I’ll be back to baseline by next practice.”

He left the office before they could ask more questions, the heat of shame crawling up his neck. They’d noticed. He was slipping. He couldn’t slip. Slipping meant questions, meant scrutiny, meant someone looking too close at the pills in his bag, the scent patches he replaced with ritualistic precision, the way he sometimes stiffened for a fraction of a second when a teammate clapped him on the back without warning.

He didn't go home. He went straight to the team's performance center, empty in the mid-afternoon lull. The silence was a challenge.

He started with weights, loading the bar past his usual working sets. The burn in his muscles was a clean, simple pain. It erased the more complicated one. Rep after punishing rep, he chased the feeling of total exhaustion, the point where his body would be too spent to host this buzzing, empty anxiety. He moved from the rack to the leg press, to the cables, a relentless circuit. His breath sawed in his chest, his vision spotting at the edges. On the final set of weighted pull-ups, his grip failed. He dropped the last few inches, his knees buckling as he hit the floor, one hand slamming against the rack to steady himself. He stayed there, head bowed, sweat dripping onto the rubber mat, his whole body screaming.

Not enough.

He forced himself upright, legs trembling, and walked to the cold plunge pool. The shock of the ice water was a violence that stole his breath. He submerged to his chin, teeth chattering, his muscles seizing then going numb. He counted to three hundred, the numbers a lifeline in the blinding, electric cold. When he climbed out, his body was a foreign, heavy thing, the pain blunted to a distant ache. Good. Now he could continue.

He did another hour of cardio, a brutal, mindless interval session on the bike until the clock on the wall swam in his vision. Only then, when he was certain every ounce of energy was extracted, did he allow himself to stop.

At home, he stood under a cold shower until his skin was numb. He leaned his forehead against the tiles, the water pounding his shoulders. He felt off. Not sick, not injured. Just... wrong. A fundamental disconnection. The scent patches were secure. The suppressors were working; he wasn't feeling any pre-heat agitation, no unusual sensitivity. It was something else. A quiet, persistent void in the back of his mind, a silent alarm that something vital was missing. He had dismissed it as stress, as the grind of the season.

But as he turned off the water and faced the condensation-filled bathroom, the truth was in the profound, aching loneliness that remained, even when his body was too exhausted to feel anything else. It was in the way his first instinct, bone-deep and humiliating, was still to reach for his phone after a day like today. To tell someone. And the only someone he viscerally wanted to tell was the one person he could not, would not, ever call.

He went to bed early. When Rose texted later, a funny picture from her set, he made himself type back a laughing emoji, a few words. The exchange was warm, and for a moment, he did feel lighter. But as he put the phone down, the silence rushed back in, heavier than before. The comfort of friendship was real, but it existed on the surface. Beneath it, in the deep, private water where he actually lived, he was still just... alone. And part of him, the part that scared him most, was starting to prefer the solitude. At least there, no one could see the gap.

The morning light felt abrasive. Shane woke with a hollow, gnawing pit in his stomach that rejected the very idea of food. The thought of choking down a protein smoothie made his throat close. He pushed himself out of bed, the movements automatic, and pulled on running gear. The world needed to be blurred, the static in his mind drowned out by the rhythm of his feet and the burn in his lungs.

He shoved in his earbuds, selected a playlist of aggressive, wordless electronica, and ran. He pounded the pavement of his neighborhood, past manicured lawns and quiet houses, a ghost in motion. He ran until his legs burned and his breath heaved, until the empty feeling was at least matched by a physical exhaustion he understood.

Returning, sweat-soaked and momentarily numb, he almost missed it. It was on the front step, partially hidden by a potted fern. A small, flat box, wrapped in plain brown paper. No postage. Hand-delivered. Yet again another package.

His heart didn't just skip a beat; it stuttered, a frantic bird trapped against his ribs. *Ilya*. It had to be. The timing, the stealth, the sheer, unsettling persistence. This made... four? Five? He'd lost count. He never opened them. He couldn't. Opening it would be an acknowledgment, a thread pulled that would unravel the fragile containment he'd built.

A cold wave of nausea, distinct from his earlier hunger, washed over him. He wasn't ready. Not for gifts, not for apologies wrapped in paper, not for whatever carefully chosen artifact Ilya thought could bridge the chasm between them. Rage, quick and hot, flashed through the fatigue. How dare he? How dare he keep inserting himself into the quiet spaces Shane was trying to claim for himself?

He bent, picked up the entire box between thumb and forefinger as if it were contaminated, carried it straight to the large black trash bin at the side of the house, and dropped it inside.

The dull thud it made was unsatisfying. He slammed the lid closed, the sound final in the quiet morning.

In the shower, he scrubbed his skin raw, as if he could wash away the psychic imprint of the box, the run, the lingering scent of his own panic. The water was scalding, then ice-cold. He felt no cleaner.

Lunch with his parents was a performance in minimalist appetite. He pushed roasted chicken and asparagus around his plate, constructing little architectural piles he then dismantled.

“Not hungry, sweetie?” his mother asked, her eyes missing nothing.

“Just a headache coming on,” he murmured, avoiding her gaze. “Pre-game nerves.”

The car ride to the stadium was its own special torture. His father drove, the radio off, leaving a silence his mother filled with a cheerful, oblivious commentary that felt like needles under Shane’s skin.

“I saw that interview with that Russian boy- Rozanov- on the sports channel this morning,” she said, adjusting her scarf. “So confident! He said he’ll win the MVP again, no question. And did you know he’s already eight goals ahead in the scoring race? Eight! At this stage!”

Shane stared out the window, watching the city blur past. Each word was a tiny hammer tap on a bruise he was trying to ignore. That Russian boy. A scoring race he was no longer even close to leading. The MVP Ilya claimed as if he was entitled to it again this year. It was all a reminder of the gap- the one his coaches saw in his metrics, and the vast, uncrossable one that now existed between him and the man who was supposedly his rival.

The game was fine. Montreal beat New Jersey easily enough. He played a solid, unspectacular sixty minutes. He celebrated goals with a brief, closed-lipped smile. The win didn’t settle him. It was just another data point in a season that felt increasingly like it was happening to someone else.

Back at his parents' house, the emptiness in his chest expanded, becoming a yawning, quiet ache. The adrenaline of the game had faded, leaving behind the familiar, weary residue. He stood in the doorway of the living room, watching his mother read. The words came out softly, almost childlike. "Mom... would you mind?"

She looked up, set her book aside, and understood without him having to finish. She patted the couch beside her. He didn't sit beside her. Instead, he lay down, curling onto his side, and gently rested his head in her lap, just as he had as a little boy chased inside by a thunderstorm. Her hand came down, cool and gentle, smoothing his damp hair back from his forehead.

They spoke softly, about nothing. The pattern of the upholstery. A movie she wanted to see. The neighbor's new dog. Her voice was a balm, her touch a grounding wire. The frantic, scattered energy of the day began to settle, the sharp edges softening into a manageable melancholy. He calmed, his breathing deepening, soothed by the oldest, safest familiarity he knew.

But as he lay there, safe in the circle of her arms, a truth whispered up from the depths of the calm. This was comfort, but it was not the exact comfort he wanted. The hollow space inside him, the one that food couldn't fill and wins couldn't celebrate and a mother's love could only temporarily soothe, remained. It had a shape, a scent, and a name. And the terrible, silent confession he made to himself in the dark, quiet safety of her lap, was that the something else he still, desperately wanted, was the very thing that had broken him.

The dream didn't start with a scene. It started with a sense- a heavy, familiar weight pinning him to the mattress, the smell of cedar and sweat and something darker, metallic, like ozone after a strike. He was in his own bed, but the room was wrong, shadows too deep, the air too hot and thick to breathe.

Ilya was above him, but not as he was. This was Ilya distilled to his most elemental: a silhouette of pure, predatory intent. Shane couldn't see his face, only the gleam of eyes in the dark and the hard line of a smile. He was naked. Shane was naked. The feeling of skin on skin was so lucid, so hyper-real, it bypassed thought and went straight to his nerve endings.

“You know we were destined. Before we were even born, we were meant to be together,” the dream-Ilya murmured, his voice a vibration Shane felt in his bones. A large, calloused hand smoothed over Shane’s hip, a touch that was both possessive and curiously admiring. “Even in your head, you try to be such a good boy for me.”

Shane tried to speak, to protest, but his mouth wouldn’t work. His body was pliant, liquid, arching into the touch against his will. This wasn’t the frantic heat of memory; it was slower, more perverse. It was a ceremony.

Ilya’s hands were everywhere, not in passion, but in cataloging. They mapped the dip of his spine, the span of his ribs, the sensitive skin of his inner thighs, with a clinical, worshipful attention that made Shane burn. He was being studied like a specimen, and his body sang under the examination.

Then the dream shifted, turned dirty. Ilya’s mouth was on him, not with desire, but with a devastating, focused purpose. There was tenderness, a relentless, perfect expertise that dismantled Shane piece by piece. He was laid bare, spread open, not just physically but in some core, private way. The pleasure was a sharp, unbearable wire pulled taut, a sensation so intense it blurred into pain. He heard himself making sounds- whimpers, choked-off pleas- that were utterly foreign.

“You see?” Ilya whispered against his skin, his breath scalding. “You can try to hide. You can throw my boxes away. But here? This is where you are real. This is where you belong.”

The dream-Ilya didn’t ask. He commanded. He turned Shane onto his stomach with effortless strength, one broad hand splayed between his shoulder blades, holding him down. The position was one of utter submission, and Shane’s body melted into it, a sob catching in his throat. What followed was a blur of overwhelming sensation- a claiming that was less about sex and more about eradication. It was being rewritten from the inside out, each deep, punishing thrust a correction to his resistance, a searing brand of ownership. The words were a dark chant in his ear: “Mine. You are mine. This is all you are for.”

He came in the dream with a violence that felt like his soul was being torn out, a white-hot rupture of shame and absolute, catastrophic pleasure. And through it, Ilya held him, kept him together even as he was being shattered, until the world dissolved into a profound, velvety blackness that felt like both death and home.

He woke with a gasp so sharp it hurt his throat.

The room was his room. The gray pre-dawn light filtered through the blinds. He was alone. The weight was gone. The scent was gone.

But the feeling was there, a full-body echo so potent it left him trembling. The sheets were tangled, damp with sweat. An embarrassing wet spot that horrified him. His skin was hypersensitive, every brush of the cotton a torment. And between his legs, a throbbing, urgent ache- a hard, insistent reality that was a brutal punchline to the dream's psychological violation.

A wave of heat, unrelated to the dream's fever, washed over him. It was his own biology, responding to the phantom, kicking into gear. His heart hammered, a frantic, trapped rhythm. His hand twitched toward the nightstand, toward his phone.

The impulse was so strong it was a physical pull. His fingers actually brushed the cool edge of the device. He could call. He could say nothing. He could just breathe into the line, and Ilya would know. Ilya would come. He would finish what the dream started, and in the harsh light of reality, maybe it would feel the same. Maybe the real thing would finally fill the void that ached like a fresh amputation.

He snatched his hand back as if burned.

"No," he rasped into the empty room. The sound was pathetic.

He threw the covers off and stumbled to the bathroom. He didn't turn on the light. He fumbled for the shower controls and cranked the handle all the way to the left.

Ice-cold water exploded from the showerhead, a shocking, brutal cascade. He gasped, his body seizing, every muscle locking against the assault. He stepped under it anyway, letting the needles of cold hammer his head, his shoulders, his dream-sensitive skin. He stood there, shaking violently, teeth chattering, forcing himself to endure.

His gaze fell to the small, discreet cabinet under the sink. Inside, still in its packaging, was the silicone plug. He'd bought it online after the last close call, a clinical, pragmatic preparation for a heat he feared was coming, a heat that would be worse, more desperate, because of the obsession poisoning his system.

He didn't move.

He stood under the freezing spray until his shivering stopped, replaced by a deep, penetrating cold that reached his bones. Until every residual tremor from the dream was silenced. Until the frantic beat of his heart slowed to a weary, mechanical thud. He stood there until the only thing he felt was the cold, and the only thing he wanted was the emptiness it brought.

Finally, he turned the water off. The silence was absolute. He stepped out, towed himself with rough, efficient strokes, avoiding looking at his own reflection in the dark glass. He was in control. The dream was just synaptic garbage. The craving was a chemical lie. The plug in the cabinet was a contingency, not a destiny.

He walked back to his cold, empty bed. And quickly changed the bedding. He curled onto his side, pulling the covers up to his chin. The hollow feeling was back, but it was a clean hollow now, scoured out by ice. It was better than the alternative. It was the only victory he had left, and he clung to it in the dark, waiting for a few hours to start the day..

The two games in Winnipeg were a blur of white noise and screaming joints. Every shift felt like dragging his skeleton through wet concrete. The puck was a distant, irrelevant thing. His mind was a single, screaming vector pointing southeast, towards Montreal. Towards the pulsing blue dot that hadn't moved from the new construction zone in hours. *Shane's new house*. He'd never seen it. The security there was a notch above anything else- a professional, integrated system that had, so far, defied his usual methods of ingress. No cameras. No eyes inside. It was a blind spot, and the darkness of it was a physical itch behind his eyes.

He was in his hotel room after the first game, calculating drive times, weather windows, the precise logistics of a visit, when his phone rang. SVETA. It was as if she had a psychic tether

to his worst impulses.

He answered, his voice flat. “Sestra.”

“Do not ‘sestra’ me with that tone, Ilyanusha” she said, but her voice was tight with worry, not anger. “I am looking at summer. If you are going back to Russia, arrangements must be made. Flights for me and I need to let them know I’m taking a vacation. The dacha needs to be opened. Or are you staying in Boston?”

He stared at the city lights of Winnipeg through his window. Summer was an abstract concept, a future that didn’t exist. There was only now, and the distance between here and there. “I will think about it closer to the end of the season.”

A pause. He could hear her disbelief. “Ilya, the season ends in a few months.”

“Then I have weeks to think.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “What do you need?”

“What I need is for my friend not to sound like a ghost.” She took a steadying breath, changing tactics. “The holidays next week. What are you doing? You will come to New York, yes?”

Another lie, smooth and cold on his tongue. “Some of the guys without family. We are having something. Team bonding.”

“Which guys?”

“Does it matter?” he snapped, then immediately regretted it. He heard her sharp intake of breath. The concern radiating through the phone was a weight he couldn’t bear. They all felt it- Svetlana, his coaches, his teammates with their sidelong glances. The great Ilya Rozanov, shrinking inside his own skin, playing the worst hockey of his career. *They will know*, he’d told Svetlana once, afraid they’d discover he was pining. Now, he was pretty sure they just thought he was breaking. It was more humiliating.

“I have to go,” he said, his voice softening despite himself. “Early practice.”

He hung up before she could dissect another lie.

His room was a sterile box. The only thing of note was the large television, angled precisely toward the bed. For months, it had been a window. He would lie there, in the dark, and watch the silent, grayscale feeds from the Montreal apartment. Shane making coffee. Shane staring at his laptop. Shane sleeping. It was a sacrament and a torture. He hadn't done it in weeks. It hurt too much to only be able to see the omega from so far away. The memory of Shane smiling at Rose Landry, wearing his jersey, was a fresh burn over an old wound. The feeds just made the distance feel infinite.

He played the second game against Winnipeg like a man underwater. He was slow, a step behind, his legendary anticipation utterly absent. He took a stupid, lazy penalty and sat in the box, not with rage, but with a hollow indifference that was worse. The final buzzer was a mercy. In the locker room, still in his gear, he looked at the team doctor.

“My knee,” Ilya said, his voice devoid of inflection. “It is not stable.”

An examination revealed nothing conclusive- some general inflammation, consistent with the grind of the season. But Ilya was insistent, his eyes flat. “I cannot push. It will go.”

The doctor, wary of the star player's demeanor as much as the potential injury, agreed to list him as day-to-day. The team would fly to the next city. Ilya would stay, “rehab,” and join them when cleared.

As soon he was alone, the performance ended. The “injury” vanished. He rented a nondescript sedan with cash, using a false ID from a compartment in his bag he hoped he'd never need. The drive was four hours of tense, silent focus. He didn't think. He drove. The tracker was his compass.

The house was not what he expected. It was modern, all sharp angles and dark wood, rising from a wooded lot still raw with construction. It was a fortress. Shane's fortress. Ilya parked a quarter mile down the road, in the shadow of a large delivery van, and watched through high-powered binoculars.

He saw him. Just once. Shane emerged onto the back deck, a silhouette against the sliding glass doors. He was holding a mug, looking out over the scraggly, unfinished yard. He stood there for a long time, perfectly still. Ilya's breath caught. Even at this distance, through lenses, the sight of him was a physical blow. The line of his shoulders, the tilt of his head- it was all Shane, and it was all impossibly far away.

He watched until the sun dipped below the trees and the chill of a Canadian spring night seeped into the car. Lights came on inside, moving from room to room. A warm, golden glow in the kitchen. A softer light in what must be the living room. Finally, an upstairs light- a bedroom. Ilya's grip on the binoculars was so tight his knuckles ached.

He saw Shane's shadow move across the drawn blinds. Then the main light went out. Only a dim, amber lamp remained, casting a faint halo through the fabric.

He is in bed. He is right there.

The impulse was a tidal wave, crashing over the crumbling seawall of his restraint. It would be so easy. The security system was external, designed to keep out casual threats. Not him. Not someone who had studied, who wanted this more than he wanted air. He could be inside in minutes. He could be in that room. He could finally, finally close the distance. He could take the confusion from Shane's beautiful face and replace it with the simple, devastating truth of touch. He could remind him. He could make him see. He could have the submission that was his right, the surrender that lived in the glazed-over look in Shane's eyes.

He saw it all in a flash: the startled gasp, the struggle that would melt into shuddering recognition, the way Shane's body would arch into his, finally, *finally* home. The fantasy was so vivid the car seemed to hum with it.

He closed his eyes.

You're not opposed to using force to get your way.

Shane's voice, cold and clear, cut through the fever-dream.

Ilya's head dropped forward, resting against the steering wheel. A low, ragged sound escaped him, part groan, part sob. The war inside him was a silent, devastating rout. The starving animal lunged, and the man, the pathetic, lovesick man who wanted to be chosen, beat it back with the only weapon he had left: the memory of Shane's disgust. He turned the car on and drove back to the hotel. He called down to the lobby and extended his stay for another two weeks. This was as close as he could be to the omega, so he'd rather just die there.

He had stopped eating two days ago. The thought of food was repulsive. He'd forced down water in his hotel room, and it had sat in his stomach like a lead weight. His body was consuming itself, and he let it. It felt fitting.

On the third morning, a sliver of morbid practicality cut through the fog. He called his lawyer, his voice a dry rasp.

"Draw up a will," he said, no preamble. "Simple. Everything to Shane Hollander. The Montreal player. Sole beneficiary. No conditions."

The lawyer, used to the eccentricities of wealthy clients, asked if he was sure. Ilya ended the call. It was dramatic, he knew. A final, grand gesture from a man who only knew how to operate in extremes. But if the nothingness swallowed him whole, at least something of his would go to Shane. A posthumous claim. A final, silent *I was here, and you were everything*.

Svetlana arrived the next day, her key turning in the lock. She found him in the same position on the bed, still in the clothes he'd worn for the past few days. She didn't cry or fret over him. She got angry. She brought broth, threatened, cajoled, sat on the edge of the bed and spoke softly of home, of summer plans, of anything to spark a reaction. He drank water to make her stop talking. He got up, showered mechanically because she stood in the bathroom doorway until he did. The world moved on without him. Rumors swirled in the sports blogs: *Rozanov's mysterious ailment... Career-worst slump... Without him, Boston's playoff hopes fade...*

A week into the nothingness, his phone rang on the nightstand. The sound was alien. He ignored it. It stopped. Then it rang again, persistent. Family from Russia, maybe. News of a death. His father. His brother. It would be a fitting endnote.

He fumbled for the phone. The name on the screen punched the air from his lungs.

SHANE

He scrambled, the phone slick in his trembling hand, nearly dropping it as he swiped to answer. He brought it to his ear, his voice a raw, desperate gasp.

“Shane?! Are you ok?” The only possibility that could explain this call was danger, threat, the limping man from the reports.

There was a beat of silence on the other end, filled with the faint sound of Shane’s breathing. It was the most beautiful sound Ilya had ever heard.

“I’m... I’m fine,” Shane’s voice came, quiet, tense. “I just... I got some papers. From a law firm. Representing you.”

Ilya closed his eyes. The will. It had been fast. Of course it had. He’d paid a premium for urgency. “Oh.”

““Oh?”” Shane’s voice sharpened, a crack in the calm. “Ilya, it’s a will. It names me as... everything. What is this? What’s wrong?”

The concern in Shane’s voice, however anger-tinged, was a spark in the void. It hurt. “Nothing is wrong,” Ilya murmured, the lie effortless and transparent. “It is just... practical.”

“Bullshit.” The word was sharp, final. “This isn’t practical. This is... this is a cry for attention or help from another planet. Talk to me. What’s happening?”

Ilya let his head fall back against the headboard. He was so tired. “Nothing matters anymore, Hollander. That is what is happening. I feel... dead inside. The game, food, breathing... it is just noise. So I put the noise in order. In case the feeling becomes real.”

The silence from Shane’s end this time was different. Heavier. Ilya could almost hear him thinking, wrestling with the magnitude of what he was hearing. When he spoke again, his voice was lower, strained. “You don’t get to do that. You don’t get to just... give up.”

“Why not?” Ilya asked, genuinely curious. “What is left to fight for?”

“Everything!” The word burst out of Shane, charged with a frustration that felt like life. “Your career, you idiot! Your team! Your... your life! You fight because that’s what you *do*. You’re the most stubborn, relentless person I’ve ever met. Since when do you just lie down?”

“Since you told me to leave you alone,” Ilya said softly, the truth a simple, devastating stone dropped between them. “That is the fight I cannot win. So what use are the others?”

Shane was silent for a long moment. Ilya heard him take a shaky breath. “Then find a new fight. I don’t know... get help. See someone. But don’t you dare send me paperwork like this again. Do you understand me? Fight.”

The command, coming from Shane, was a ghost of the old dynamic. It stirred something- not hope, but a faint, reflexive response. “How are you, Hollander?” Ilya asked, turning the focus, craving any detail of his existence.

A deflection, immediate and practiced. “I’m fine. That’s not what this is about.”

“Please,” Ilya begged, the word leaving him in a broken whisper, all pride incinerated. “Talk to me. Just once. Not about wills or fights. Just... talk. Tell me about your day. Anything.”

He heard the conflict in Shane's breathing, the internal war. He could picture the exact expression- the clenched jaw, the eyes screwed shut, the war between self-preservation and that damned, inherent compassion that Ilya loved and relied upon.

"I can't," Shane finally said, the words thick. "Not... not yet. Just... please. Eat something. See your team. Fight."

"For what? There is nothing left to fight for in me." Ilya pressed, a prisoner grasping at the terms of his release.

A long pause. "Give me some time."

It wasn't yes. It wasn't forgiveness. But it wasn't the final, slamming door. It was a crack of light under a threshold. It was a thread.

"Khorosho," Ilya whispered. Okay.

The line went dead.

Ilya held the phone to his ear for another minute, listening to the empty dial tone as if it might carry the echo of Shane's voice. Slowly, he lowered it. He looked around the room, the same room he'd been dead in for days. Fight.

He pushed himself to the edge of the bed. His limbs felt like they were made of rust and lead. He stood, the floor solid under his feet. Find a new fight.

He didn't know what that was. But Shane had called. Shane had told him to fight. And for now, that was the only compass point he had in the gray, endless waste. It was enough to make him take one step, then another, toward the kitchen, and the terrifying, simple prospect of a piece of bread.

The silence in the new house was different. It wasn't the empty quiet of his old apartment, which had felt temporary, a placeholder. This silence was deeper, soaked into the raw drywall and the new hardwood floors. It was a silence he'd built for himself, and it was crushing him.

Shane moved through the rooms like a ghost in his own home. The construction was nearly done, but it felt less like a sanctuary and more like a beautifully designed cage. He'd tried everything. He studied blueprints until the lines blurred. He met with the foreman, making minute decisions about faucet finishes and grout color that felt absurdly meaningless. He went to team dinners, smiled at Hayden's jokes, listened to Rose's stories from set. He performed life.

But his heart wasn't in it. It was a cold, heavy stone in his chest. He'd stopped checking his phone for a specific name, but his body hadn't gotten the memo. Every buzz sent a jolt through him, followed by a sickening drop when it wasn't him. The news alerts were worse. He'd told himself he wouldn't look, but his thumb would swipe on its own accord.

Rozanov Placed on IR with Undisclosed Injury.

Mystery Surrounds Boston Star's Sudden Decline.

Without Rozanov, Playoff Hopes Fade for Bears.

Each headline was a twist of the knife. Undisclosed. That was the word that haunted him. In the dark, quiet hours, his mind supplied the worst possibilities. A career-ender. Something chronic. Something... self-inflicted. He remembered the hollow look in Ilya's eyes in that greenroom, the terrifying flatness of his voice in the bathroom corridor. What is left to fight for?

He'd never known Ilya to simply give up. To be injured and not fight through it. The Ilya he knew- the Ilya that lived in his bones, infuriating and magnetic- would play on a broken leg out of sheer spite. This withdrawal was something else. It was a surrender. And Shane, against every instinct of self-preservation, felt responsible for it.

The legal pages had felt heavy as lead in his hands. This was the ultimate, perverse gift. The final box he couldn't throw away. It was Ilya saying, *If I cannot have you in life, you will have all of me in death.*

For hours, he paced the empty rooms, the envelope burning a hole on his counter. He thought of calling Rose, of calling his parents. But how could he explain this? *The man who assaulted me just left me his entire fortune because he seems to be giving up on living.* It was a madness no one else could navigate.

The silence of the house became a scream. The carefully chosen tiles, the perfect sightlines to the trees, the whole peaceful future he'd blueprinted- it all felt like a joke. A beautiful, empty set for a play that had already ended.

The fear curdled into a desperate, angry resolve. He couldn't let this stand. He couldn't be named the beneficiary of a ghost. He had told Ilya to fight. On the ice, in life. This was the opposite of fighting. This was a white flag made of legal parchment.

Finally, as dusk painted the bare trees outside in shades of charcoal and gold, he stopped pacing. He picked up his phone. His thumb hovered over Ilya's name, the one he'd sworn never to call again. The panic was now a sharp, clear point of action.

He pressed call.

He listened to it ring, each tone a hammer strike against his ribs. He almost hung up. Then it connected, and the raw, desperate gasp on the other end- "Shane?! Are you ok?"- told him everything. The worry wasn't for himself. It was still, always, for Shane.

And in that moment, holding the damning paperwork, listening to the voice of the man who'd seemingly decided to will himself out of existence, Shane knew the fight wasn't over. It had just changed forms. And he was now, irrevocably, in the middle of it.

The silence after the call was worse than the silence before.

It wasn't empty anymore; it was thick with the echo of Ilya's voice- that raw, hollow whisper that bore no resemblance to the arrogant, unstoppable force Shane had spent years battling. I feel dead inside. The words coiled in the air of his new, pristine kitchen, a toxic vapor seeping into the clean lines and fresh paint.

He looked down at the legal documents fanned across the countertop. Last Will and Testament. The crisp paper, the embossed letterhead, the unassailable finality of it. This wasn't a love letter or a threat. It was a contingency plan for a void. Shane's hands, which had steadied during the phone call, began to tremble again. He carefully gathered the pages, his fingers avoiding the clauses that detailed the vast, terrifying transfer of assets, and slid them back into the envelope. He didn't throw it away. He carried it to his bare, minimalist home office and placed it in the center of the empty desk. A monolith.

At practice, he was a step slow. His passes were a fraction off. Coach Williams watched him with a silent, weighing gaze that Shane refused to meet.

"Hollander. A word." Williams caught him after a particularly ragged drill. "Your head's not in it."

"It's in it," Shane said, the lie automatic.

"Is it?" Williams crossed his arms. "Because what's on the ice right now isn't you. It's a competent impersonation. We need you. I need you present."

The word present felt like an accusation. He wasn't present. He was trapped in a phone call, in a legal envelope, in the memory of a voice stripped of all its fight.

He tried to lose himself in the comfort of friends. He met Rose for coffee, and she talked about a difficult scene, her hands animated. He nodded, smiled at the right moments, and inside, he was screaming. The normalcy of it, the health of it, felt like a performance he was too tired to sustain. She reached across the table, her concern a gentle pressure.

“You seem a million miles away, Shane. Is it the cabin? The press?”

“Just tired,” he murmured, the go-to excuse that was becoming his truth. “Long season.”

She didn’t believe him. He saw the doubt in her eyes, but she let it go, and he was simultaneously grateful and aching lonely. He was pulling away, building the same walls he resented Ilya for trying to scale, but his were made of polite smiles and deflection.

At night, in the echoing silence of the new house, the temptation was a physical ache. His phone was a dark rectangle on the nightstand.

You don’t get to just... give up.

He’d said it with such conviction on the phone. But the conviction was crumbling. Because he understood, in a way that chilled him, the math of it. Ilya had built his entire world on a single, obsessive point: Shane. Shane had systematically removed himself as that point. What was left to hold the structure up? The answer, in the form of a will, was nothing.

The guilt was a cold, heavy companion. He had wanted the pressure to stop, the violation to end. He had never wanted this... this extinguishing. He had drawn a line in the sand, and Ilya hadn’t crossed it; he’d laid down on his side of it and gone still. The responsibility was a weight Shane didn’t know how to carry.

One afternoon, he found himself standing in the doorway of his home office, just staring at the envelope on the desk. The silence around him was no longer just the absence of sound. It was a waiting silence. It was the silence of a man standing over a chessboard after his opponent has, without a word, tipped over his own king and walked away.

He had told Ilya to fight. To find a new fight. But as the days bled into one another, the unspoken question became the loudest thing in the beautiful, empty house: what if Ilya’s only way of fighting was this? This last, desperate gambit to ensure that, in some form, he could not be left behind?

Shane had asked for time. But time, in the silent, waiting space he'd built for himself, was just another word for the slow, dawning realization that he was now, irrevocably, tied to Ilya Rozanov's survival. Not by desire, not by bond, but by the cold, legal promise of an inheritance he never wanted, from a man who sounded like he was already half a ghost. And the most terrifying part was the tiny, shameful spark beneath the worry- the part that missed the attention, the certainty, the all-consuming focus that had once made him feel terrifyingly, addictively seen.

The fight had changed. And he was now, permanently and without his consent, in the middle of it.

And then, the one that made Shane's coffee turn to acid in his stomach: *Rozanov Hospitalized After Collapse at Private Residence*.

The article was sparse, citing "severe exhaustion and dehydration." It mentioned he was stable, under observation. The comments sections were a circus of speculation- overtraining, substance abuse, a secret illness.

Shane knew. He knew with a cold, sick certainty that settled in his bones. This wasn't manipulation. Manipulation was boxes on doorsteps and bribed hotel clerks. Manipulation was forceful kisses and tracked phones. This was something else. This was the sound of an engine that had run at redline for too long, finally seizing, not with a bang, but with a silent, terminal sigh.

He shouldn't go. It was the worst possible idea. Ilya was in a private hospital, but still in Canada, and showing up there was walking back into the labyrinth he'd just escaped. He told himself he was going for confrontation. To look Ilya in the eye and finally scream at him for this, for the ultimate guilt trip, for using his own disintegration as a weapon. He packed a bag, told his coaches a family emergency had come up, and drove south, his knuckles white on the wheel.

He expected the fortress. The private security, the hissed threats, the explosive rage of a cornered animal. He used a side entrance, gave a name that wasn't his, and moved through the hushed, sterile halls with a pounding heart, braced for war.

What he found was silence.

The private room was dim, the blinds half-closed. Ilya lay in the bed, dwarfed by it. He was asleep, or unconscious, an IV line taped to the back of a hand that lay palm-up on the white sheet. He was pale, the sharp angles of his face stark and shadowed, dark lashes stark against skin that had lost its vitality. The machines beeped softly, monitoring a rhythm that seemed too slow, too quiet. The terrifying, kinetic force that was Ilya Rozanov was gone. In its place was a man who had, quite simply, stopped fighting.

Shane stood in the doorway, the anger draining out of him, leaving a hollow, echoing shock. He'd come ready for a storm. He'd found the eerie calm after the storm has passed, leaving only wreckage.

He must have made a sound, a shift in the air, because Ilya's eyes opened. They were the same impossible blue, but the fire was out. They focused on Shane slowly, without surprise, without the predatory gleam or the desperate hope. Just a flat, weary recognition.

"You came," Ilya said, his voice a dry rasp, barely audible over the hum of the machines.

"You collapsed," Shane replied, his own voice strangely small. He didn't move from the doorway.

A faint, almost imperceptible shrug lifted Ilya's shoulder. "Da."

The simplicity of it was devastating. Shane stepped inside, letting the door sigh shut behind him. He didn't sit. He stood at the foot of the bed, a safe distance, yet feeling unbearably close. "The will... was that part of this? We spoke and I thought you'd be better."

Ilya's gaze drifted to the window. "It was... putting things in order. The noise." He echoed his own word from the phone. "Before the quiet."

This wasn't a gambit. It was a conclusion. Shane felt the last of his defensive anger crumble, replaced by a wave of aching, complicated sorrow. "You can't just... do this."

"Why?" Ilya asked, still looking away. "You have your life. Your new house. Your friends. Your... safety. This is what you wanted. No more Ilya to trouble you." He said it as a statement of fact, not a reproach.

"That's not- " Shane cut himself off, frustration and grief tangling in his throat. He took a step closer. "What hurt the most... after everything, after Boston, after all the messed-up shit... I thought we were getting somewhere. Before you went too far. I thought maybe... there could be something real. Not just the... the heat of it. But something else. And you ruined it."

Finally, Ilya's eyes slid back to him. There was no defense in them. Only a profound, exhausted sadness. "There was something real," he whispered. "For me. From the first time I scented you. From the first time you came over to say hello to me."

Shane's breath hitched. "Was it one-sided?"

Ilya turned his face away again, a clear, painful rejection of the question. His profile was a stark line against the pillow. "It does not matter."

"It matters to me. I liked you, Rozanov. I liked you a lot and I thought--"

"If you only knew," Ilya breathed, the words barely there. "You can't... like me, Hollander. I am not a good man. I do terrible things. I think terrible thoughts. I see you, and I want to own the air you breathe. That is not... liking. That is a sickness. I do not deserve you to waste your 'like' on me." The confession was stripped of all pride, all arrogance. It was just a bleak report from a ruined interior.

The space between them crackled with a tension that had nothing to do with threat and everything to do with a magnetic, painful pull that had survived the collapse. Shane moved then, without thinking. He crossed the last few feet to the bedside. He reached out, his hands

trembling slightly, and took Ilya's face in his hands, turning it firmly, gently, back toward him.

The touch was electric. It was the first skin-to-skin contact in months. Ilya's eyes flew wide, a shock of pure, unguarded feeling flashing through the exhaustion- yearning, shame, a helpless surrender to the touch. Shane felt it too, the insane, gravitational pull, the rightness of his palms against the rough stubble and too-warm skin. He held his gaze, forcing the connection Ilya had always demanded, but now Shane was the one initiating it.

"I don't know what to do," Shane whispered, his thumbs stroking the sharp crests of Ilya's cheekbones. "I don't know where to go from here. You're here, and you're... you're vanishing. And I..." He couldn't finish. *And I can't stand it.*

Ilya leaned infinitesimally into the touch, his eyes closing for a second. When they opened, they were glistening. "You go," he said, his voice breaking. "You go live. That is where you go. That is the only good choice."

They stayed like that for a long moment, suspended in the quiet beep of the monitors, the world outside the room ceasing to exist. Shane didn't forgive him. The hurt was still a lodged shard of glass in his heart. The fear was still there. But the man in the bed was not the monster from his nightmares or the obsessed suitor from his waking hours at that moment. He was just a man, broken by his own nature, who had finally chosen Shane's peace over his own possession.

Ilya's gaze remained fixed on the window, on a world that seemed to have lost all its color. Shane's words hung in the antiseptic air.

"I will unblock your number," Shane said, his voice softer now, the anger spent, leaving behind a weary determination. "When you get your phone back. Maybe we can... talk. Just talk. And maybe, eventually, we can work on at least being... I don't know. On speaking terms. Not like this."

Ilya nodded, a shallow dip of his chin, still refusing to look at him. To look would be to hope, and hope was a poison he was trying to purge from his system. "Khorosho," he rasped. Okay.

He heard the rustle of Shane's jacket, the soft sound of his footsteps retreating. The door opened and sighed shut. The silence that followed was different. It wasn't the hollow silence of surrender. It was a silence charged with a faint, terrifying echo of possibility. It was worse.

Outside the hospital, the cold air hit Shane like a slap, but it felt clean. The leaden weight in his chest, which had been his constant companion for weeks, had shifted. It wasn't gone, but it had cracked open, and through the crack poured a strange, frantic energy. He hadn't forgiven Ilya. The man in the bed was a ghost of the monster he'd feared, and that was somehow more devastating. But he was *here*. And Shane had touched him. And for the first time, it hadn't felt like a battle.

He pulled out his phone, his thumbs flying. He texted his parents: *Headed back. I'll see you at the arena before the game*. He had four hours to get to the arena. He needed to move, to think, to process.

He was in the dimly lit parking structure, focused on the glow of his screen, searching for his rental car key in his pocket. The blow to the back of his neck was explosive- a short, sharp impact of shocking violence. There was no pain, just a brilliant white flash behind his eyes, and then the world tipped sideways into silent, velvet black.

Consciousness returned in nauseating waves. A throbbing, sickening ache radiated from his neck through his skull. He was lying on something lumpy and unfamiliar. He tried to move, to push himself up, and panic detonated in his chest.

He was tied. Thick, coarse plastic bit into his wrists and ankles, securing him spread-eagle to a metal-framed bed in the center of a dank, unfamiliar room. Bare, whitewashed walls, a single bare bulb overhead, the smell of mildew and dust.

"No... no, no, NO!" The yell tore from his raw throat, a raw sound of pure terror. He pulled against the ropes, the friction burning his skin, but they held fast.

A shadow detached itself from the corner. The figure stepped into the weak pool of light.

Chris Hill.

His former teammate's face was a mask of twisted, possessive glee, but his eyes were the worst part- glittering with a fervent, unhinged light Shane had never seen before.

"Welcome back, sleeping beauty," Hill sneered, his voice a low, ugly thing. "Took you long enough. Guess Rozanov didn't wear you out too bad at the hospital, huh?"

Shane's blood ran cold. "Chris... what are you doing? Untie me. This isn't funny."

"Funny?" Hill let out a sharp bark of laughter. "No, it's not funny, Shane. It's serious. I've been so patient. Watching you. Following you. All this time, you were hiding your little secret from me. From everyone." He leaned in, his breath hot and sour on Shane's face. "An Omega. My perfect, pristine captain. All along. I thought I was just going crazy when I started wanting you."

The world tilted again. Hill knew. How did he know?

"I saw the way you looked at him," Hill spat, the jealousy curdling his words. "Rozanov. I saw you reach out to him. After everything I've done for you. After Mexico." The memory of that unwanted kiss, the disgust Shane had felt, flashed between them. "And then I find out... you gave it to him. Your first time. You let that Russian animal have what was mine."

"It wasn't like that- " Shane began, but Hill's open hand cracked across his face with brutal force. Shane's head snapped to the side, stars exploding in his vision, the coppery taste of blood filling his mouth.

“Don’t lie to me!” Hill roared. He grabbed the collar of Shane’s shirt and yanked, the fabric tearing. His fingers scrabbled at the side of Shane’s neck, finding the edge of the scent patch. With a vicious rip, he tore it away, then the one on his lower back. Shane’s clean, honeysuckle Omega scent, no longer chemically muted, bloomed faintly in the stale air.

Hill inhaled deeply, a grotesque parody of pleasure. “There it is. Now we can get started for real.”

He moved to a rickety table against the wall where a small, professional-looking medical kit lay open. Shane watched in mounting, paralyzing horror as Hill prepared a syringe, drawing a clear liquid from a vial.

“No... Chris, don’t- ”

“This,” Hill said, turning back, the needle glinting, “is just a little helper. Speeds things up. In a few days, that pretty little body of yours is going to be begging for it. And I’ll be here. I’m going to give you my bite, Shane. I’m going to breed you so full, so deep, that when they finally find you, there’ll be no choice. You’ll be mine. Bonded. Pregnant. Done.”

The clinical, monstrous certainty in his voice broke through Shane’s terror. As Hill approached, needle poised, Shane fought with everything he had. He bucked, he twisted, he screamed, a raw, animal sound of denial.

With a snarl of frustration, Hill dropped the syringe on the bed. He lunged, his hands closing around Shane’s throat. He squeezed, cutting off the scream, cutting off the air. Shane’s vision tunneled, dark spots swimming before his eyes. He clawed at the hands, his bound wrists making the effort pathetic. Hill’s face, contorted with rage, was the last thing he saw before the darkness rushed up again, not with a blow, but with a slow, suffocating swallow.

In the hospital, Ilya jolted awake, his heart slamming against his ribs. A cold, sharp dread, entirely separate from the lingering fog of his medications or his own depression, coiled like

a serpent in his gut. Something was wrong. Deeply, fundamentally wrong. He dismissed it as a side effect, a phantom of his broken mind, and stared at the ceiling until dawn.

The feeling did not leave. It festered.

The next day, he made a concerted effort. To please the stern Russian therapist who spoke of cognitive reframing, he ate three bites of oatmeal. To fulfill the assignment, he picked up the journal the doctor had given him. He stared at the blank page. *Reflect on what is happening.* What was happening was a vast, internal silence. He wrote one sentence: *The world is quieter.*

He almost asked for the TV to be turned on that evening. The Voyaguers were playing. Shane would be there. The want was a physical ache. He ignored it, clinging to the shred of discipline he had left. He was trying to let go. To be what Shane needed: absent.

Two days later, Svetlana visited. Her eyes were red-rimmed, her face pale with a fear that had nothing to do with him.

“Ilya,” she whispered, her voice breaking before she began.

“What is it?” he asked, the dread from days before crystallizing into instant, icy certainty.

“It’s Shane Hollander.” She gripped his hand. “He’s... he’s missing. No one has seen him since he left the hospital here. His car was found in the parking garage. There are... signs of a struggle.”

The world did not go quiet. It shattered.

A sound ripped from Ilya’s chest- not a shout, but a raw, guttural roar of pure, unadulterated panic. He threw off the thin hospital blanket, tubes tearing at his skin. The heart monitor shrieked a frantic alarm as his pulse skyrocketed. He was on his feet, his IV stand crashing to the floor, his mind blank of everything but a single, white-hot imperative: *FIND HIM*

“Ilya, no!” Svetlana cried, trying to hold him back.

Orderlies and nurses rushed in, responding to the alarm. They saw a wild-eyed, powerful man surging toward the door, fueled by a terror that gave him inhuman strength. They grabbed him. He fought like a feral thing, elbows flying, a snarl on his lips. It took four of them to wrestle him back, to force him onto the bed, to strap the restraints over his wrists and ankles as he thrashed and roared, his voice cracking as he screamed a name into the sterile, uncaring air.

“SHANE!”

The surrender was over. The fight was back. And it was a thousand times more terrifying than before.

When Ilya woke up, he reached for Svetlana, telling her he could find out where Shane was. The confession tore from him like a piece of his own flesh. “The tracker,” Ilya gasped, the words raw in the sterile room as Svetlana tried to calm his thrashing. He clawed at the medical restraints. “I need my phone.”

Svetlana froze, her hands on his shoulders going slack. Her face paled, horror and a dawning, sick understanding warring in her eyes. She didn’t ask questions. She just stared at him for one long, terrible second, then turned and fled the room to find a nurse, to demand his personal effects.

Alone, Ilya fought the straps, his muscles screaming, until he managed to wrench one hand free. He fumbled for the remote, stabbing at the power button. The TV flickered to life, tuned to a sports news channel. And there he was.

Shane’s face, his team headshot, smiling and clean-cut, filled the screen beside a stark graphic: MISSING. The ticker below scrolled: Montreal Captain Shane Hollander, 20, missing for 72 hours... Parents offer substantial reward... League issues statement... No leads...

The hollow dread that had been gnawing at him solidified into a block of ice in his gut. Days. He'd been in that hellhole for days.

The door burst open. Svetlana returned, her face ashen, clutching his small personal belongings bag. She threw it to him, the keys to her rental car landing on the bed. "They are coming with a sedative, Ilya. Do not be stupid—"

He was already moving. He ripped the remaining restraint free, the plastic buckle snapping. He lunged for the bag, yanking out his phone and a crumpled handful of his own clothes—jeans, a dark hoodie. "Lock the door," he ordered, his voice a guttural command she hadn't heard in weeks.

She hesitated, then did it, turning the deadbolt as he tore the hospital gown off. He dressed with frantic, clumsy speed, his fingers fumbling on the zipper. The phone in his other hand powered up, the screen blinding in the dim room. He ignored the notifications, going straight to the encrypted app.

The map resolved. A pulsing, frantic red dot in a residential area on the outskirts of a town three hours north. The biometric readouts alongside it were a nightmare: heart rate at a dangerous, sustained 150 bpm. Core body temperature: 101.3°F- three degrees into pre-heat territory. Blood pressure spiking. A warning symbol flashed next to the cardiac rhythm.

He found the number he'd memorized but never dialed -David Hollander's cell, sourced from a background check months ago. His thumbs flew.

Unknown- This is Ilya Rozanov. I have his location. Answer this phone in 3 minutes. Be alone.

He shoved the phone in his pocket and turned to the window. It was a standard hospital sash window, locked. Svetlana saw his look. "Ilya, no! You are sick! Let the police- "

He didn't hear her. He grabbed the small chair by the bed and swung it, not at the glass, but at the wooden frame holding the lock. The impact jarred up his arms, but the wood splintered. Two more blows and the lock mechanism broke free. He shoved the window up, the cold

night air rushing in. It was a second-story drop, but onto a grassy, landscaped slope on the building's quiet side.

"The keys!" he barked, holding out his hand.

Tears streamed down Svetlana's face, but she threw them to him. "You will get yourself killed!"

"Then I am killed," he said, and swung his legs out the window. He dropped, hitting the ground in a rolling tuck that sent a bolt of pain through his still-weak body. He was on his feet and running, a dark streak cutting across the hospital lawn toward the visitor parking lot across the street.

He found her bright yellow Bentley unlocked it, and slid inside. The phone rang exactly three minutes after his text. He answered on the first ring.

"Rozanov?" David Hollander's voice was tight, suspicious, frayed with fear.

"Listen. He is in a house at 1887 Cypress Lane, Saint-Jérôme. His vitals are critical. He is entering pre-heart under duress. You need a doctor you trust, one who understands dynamics and discretion. Get a room at the Hôtel de l'Est, three blocks from that address. Be ready. I am bringing him to you."

"The police-"

"Will take hours he does not have. Do it. Or lose your son." Ilya ended the call, threw the phone on the passenger seat, and started the car.

The three-hour drive was a blur of speed, glaring headlights, and a monomaniacal focus that tunneled his vision to the road and the glowing map on the phone screen. He pushed the small car to its limits, his own heart hammering in time with the frantic pulse on the screen.

He parked two blocks away, in the shadows of a closed auto shop. The neighborhood was quiet, dark. The house at 1887 Cypress was a squat, neglected bungalow, its windows dark save for a faint, dirty glow from a back room.

Ilya moved through backyards like a ghost, his senses screaming. He approached the lit window from the side, peering through a grimy pane.

The scene inside froze the blood in his veins.

Shane was on a bare mattress on the floor, totally naked, his skin gleaming with sweat in the low light. He was writhing, not in passion, but in a weak, trapped struggle, his wrists bound with brutal, thick zip-ties to the bed frame. Over him, Chris Hill, his face a mask of frenzied obsession, was fumbling with his own pants, one hand pinning Shane's hip to the mattress.

A soundless roar filled Ilya's head.

He didn't go for the door. He took two steps back, lowered his shoulder, and charged the window. He crashed through in an explosion of glass, wood, and curtain rod, landing in a roll on the filthy floor.

Hill spun around, shock etching his face. "What the f--"

Ilya was already on him. He didn't throw a punch. He lunged, grabbing Hill by the throat and the back of his head, and with a raw, animalistic surge of strength, he slammed the man's face down into the concrete floor. Once. A sickening crack. Again. A wetter sound. Again. And again. He lost count, driven by a red haze of pure, annihilating fury, until the body beneath him went limp and the only sound was the wet, ragged grate of his own breathing and the wet drip of something onto the concrete.

He shoved off, leaving Hill in a ruined, twitching heap, a threadbare pulse fluttering in his neck. Ilya didn't spare him another glance.

He was at the bed in two strides. “Shane. *Zayka*. Look at me.”

Shane’s eyes were wide open, but they saw nothing. They were glazed, fixed on a point a thousand miles away, pupils blown with terror and the chemical storm raging in his body. He was shaking violently, a fine, constant tremor that rattled the old bed frame. He didn’t react to Ilya’s voice, to the destruction, to anything.

“Shane!” Ilya tried again, his hands hovering, afraid to touch. He saw the raw, bloody rings around his wrists from the zip-ties. He turned, scanning the squalid room. On a rickety table, amid empty cans and the medical kit, he saw a box cutter. He snatched it, sawed through the plastic ties with two sharp motions.

Shane’s arms fell limply to his sides. He didn’t move to cover himself. He just kept shaking, kept staring.

With a ragged sound of pain, Ilya stripped the filthy top sheet from the mattress, the only covering available. He wrapped it around Shane’s trembling body, tucking it tightly, trying to contain the tremors, to give some semblance of shelter. He gathered the bundled, unresponsive form into his arms, Shane’s head lolling against his shoulder.

He didn’t look back at the ruin he’d left of Chris Hill or the dark, bleeding house. He turned and ran into the welcoming, concealing night.

The world narrowed to the smell of gasoline, smoke, and fear-it was radiating off Shane, and the fragile, trembling weight in his arms. Ilya ran, Shane a bundled, shuddering parcel against his chest, his boots crunching on broken glass and dried leaves. Every shadow in the neighboring yards felt like a watching eye. He hit the unlock button on Svetlana’s keys, the sports car’s lights flashing a silent beacon in the dark.

He wrenched the passenger door open and bent, lowering Shane into the bucket seat as gently as he could manage with adrenaline screaming through his veins. The seat was all hard angles and stiff leather, designed for speed, not for broken Omegas. Shane’s head lolled against the headrest, his eyes still wide and unseeing, fixed on some horror only he could witness. The violent, fine tremors that wracked his frame made the whole car seat seem to vibrate.

“Don’t move, baby,” Ilya whispered, the endearment falling from his lips unbidden, raw and desperate. He fumbled with the seatbelt, pulling it across Shane’s chest and clicking it home, the mechanism loud in the quiet. He leaned in, pressing a hard, fleeting kiss to the side of Shane’s sweat-damp head, inhaling the scent of terror and the first, feverish hints of the forced pre-heat. “I will be right back.”

He locked the door, the thunk sounding terrifyingly final. He spared one last glance through the window. Shane hadn’t moved. He was a statue of shock, wrapped in a filthy sheet.

Ilya turned and sprinted back toward the hell-house.

Time was a blur of grim efficiency. He didn’t think. He acted. His lighter flicked to life, a small, defiant flame in the dark room. He touched it to the cheap, dusty curtains. They caught with a hungry whump, the fire climbing fast, painting the walls in dancing, demonic shadows. He threw the lighter onto the mattress where Shane had been bound, then kicked over the rickety table, sending the medical kit and empty cans scattering toward the growing blaze. He didn’t look at Hill’s still form. The fire would have its own justice.

Satisfied the inferno would consume the evidence- the zip ties, the syringe, the monster, he ran back to the car.

Inside, the atmosphere was a claustrophobic mix of cold leather and Shane’s escalating distress. Ilya started the engine, the roar unnaturally loud. He peeled away from the curb, driving fast but controlled, his eyes constantly flicking between the road and the passenger seat.

He called the Hollander’s number. David answered on the first ring. “Room 214. Back stairwell is clear. Is he-”

“Alive,” Ilya cut in, his voice tight. “Not okay. Be ready.” He ended the call.

The ten minute drive was hell. Every few minutes, Shane would make a sound- a faint, wounded whimper that was nothing like his usual voice. His trembling intensified, the seatbelt straining as his body arched subtly, then fell back. Ilya’s hand shot out, gripping

Shane's knee through the sheet. "Hold on," he growled, to the road, to Shane, to himself. "Just hold on."

He saw the hotel sign ahead—a bland, anonymous tower. He swung around to the rear service entrance, killing the lights. An older man, with a similar build to Shane was there, a silhouette in the doorway, face grim. Without a word, Ilya got out, rounded the car, and lifted Shane from the passenger seat. Shane was pliant, but a low, continuous tremor still ran through him like a faulty current.

Up in room 214, the scene was one of silent, strained horror. Yuna let out a choked cry when she saw her son, her hands flying to her mouth. David's face was stone. An older man with a doctor's bag—someone they trusted, stepped forward, his professional demeanor not hiding his shock.

"On the bed, please," the doctor said.

Ilya laid Shane down. The doctor worked quickly, checking pupils, pulse, listening to his heart. He peeled back the sheet just enough to see the bruising on Shane's wrists, the sheen of sick-sweat on his skin. He prepared a light sedative and injected it into Shane's arm. "This should calm the physiological panic, let his body rest," he murmured, more to himself than anyone.

They waited. The minutes stretched into an hour. Then two.

Shane did not wake. He did not stir. The sedative had smoothed the tremors but had done nothing to bring back the light behind his eyes. He was simply... absent. A beautiful, empty vessel.

The doctor finally straightened, his expression grave. "He wasn't raped. But for an Omega... the trauma, the violation of intent, the biochemical forcing... it can sometimes cause a psychic retreat. A shutdown. His mind has left to protect itself." He shook his head. "I'm not equipped for this. He needs a specialized hospital. A psychiatric unit familiar with dynamic-related trauma."

Yuna began to cry softly, her hand clutching Shane's limp one. David looked hollowed out.

The room air grew thick with sterile despair. The doctor's words- not raped, but... Omega shock... unresponsive... real hospital- hung like a verdict. Shane lay motionless on the bed, a beautiful statue carved from trauma, his breathing the only sign he hadn't already left them. The sedative had long since faded, leaving him stranded in some silent, inner space no one could reach.

Yuna Hollander hovered at the bedside, her fingers perpetually smoothing her son's hair, her tears a quiet, constant stream. David stood behind her, a pillar of grim silence, his eyes flicking between his wife's breaking heart and the looming, bloodied figure of Ilya Rozanov by the window.

Ilya had said nothing since carrying Shane in. His knuckles were split, his clothes smeared with soot and worse. He watched the bed, his gaze a physical weight. The doctor packed his bag with an air of professional frustration. "The body has shut down to protect the mind. There's nothing more I can do here without a full hospital suite. You need to decide."

"We're not moving him," Yuna whispered, fierce. "Not again. He's safe here."

"He's not *here*, Mrs. Hollander," the doctor said gently, not unkindly. "And I cannot guarantee how long his system can maintain this state."

He looked at Shane's parents. "You need to leave," he said, his voice low and utterly drained of anything but resolve.

Yuna whirled. "Absolutely not!"

"For five minutes," Ilya said, finally meeting David's eyes. He saw the father's conflict- the distrust, the fury, warring with the dawning, terrible understanding that normal methods had failed. "If he does not respond, you call whoever you want. But you will leave. Now."

David held his gaze for a long, agonizing moment. He saw the blood on Ilya's knuckles, the soot on his clothes, the absolute, terrifying focus in his blue eyes. This was the man who had brought his son back. The calculus was monstrous, but it was the only one left.

He put his arm around Yuna. "Come on," he said, his voice thick.

"David, no--"

"Five minutes," David said to Ilya, then guided his weeping wife from the room. The door clicked shut.

The silence they left behind was absolute. Ilya was alone with the consequence of everything. He walked to the bed, looking down at the ruin of his greatest, most terrible desire. Then he sat, gathered Shane's limp body against his own, and bent his head to the fever-hot skin of Shane's neck.

He had tried to own the air Shane breathed. Now, he would try to force life back into it.

The room felt larger, the quiet deeper. Ilya approached the bed, his boots soundless on the cheap carpet. He looked down at Shane- the pale skin, the dark lashes against too-prominent cheekbones, the terrible, absolute stillness. He had seen this man defy him, challenge him, look at him with fire and fear and reluctant, dazed want. He had never seen him like this. A thing broken.

He sat on the edge of the mattress, the springs groaning softly. Gently, he gathered Shane into his arms, pulling him up so his back rested against Ilya's chest. Shane was a dead weight, limp and unresponsive. Ilya arranged him, one arm supporting his torso, the other hand coming up to cradle his jaw, tipping his head to expose the clean, vulnerable line of his neck.

He bent close, his lips brushing the shell of Shane's ear. "I am so sorry, moy prekrasnyy," he whispered, the Russian endearment a raw ache in the quiet. "So sorry."

Then he lowered his mouth to the junction of Shane's neck and shoulder, to the scent gland that had called to him like a siren since he first found out the truth. He didn't hesitate. He opened his mouth, pressed his teeth against the fever-hot skin, and bit down.

It was not the claiming bite of his fantasies. It was clinical. Purposeful. A calculated override of a crashed system. He felt the skin give, the brief resistance then the pop of penetration, the immediate coppery tang of blood flooding his mouth. Shane's body gave one violent, seismic jerk in his arms, a full-body spasm of shock and instinct. Ilya held him tighter, locking him in place, not letting go, pouring his own will- *live, come back, be here*- through the connection.

He counted. Five seconds. Ten. The jerking subsided into tremors, then into a deep, shuddering sigh that seemed to drain the last of the tension from Shane's frame. Shane went completely, utterly boneless against him.

Ilya released the bite, pulling back. Two precise, bleeding punctures marked the perfect skin. He watched, heart hammering, as the rigid line of Shane's body softened, the awful vacant slackness of his face easing into something merely unconscious. The terrifying silence was replaced by the deep, even rhythm of natural sleep.

For a long moment, Ilya just held him, rocking slightly, his own breath ragged. He had done it. The last resort. The violation to end all violations. He felt no victory, only a vast, hollow dread and a relief so profound it felt like its own kind of pain.

Carefully, he laid Shane back on the pillows. He found a clean corner of the sheet and dabbed gently at the bite marks, then pulled the fabric up to cover Shane's neck just as a knock came at the door.

The five minutes were up.

For a long moment, Ilya just stared, his own breath ragged. He had done it. The last resort, the nuclear option he'd read about in old, texts on Omega shock therapy. A forced, temporary bond-surge to reboot a shattered system. It was a violation stacked upon violation. He felt no triumph, only a hollow, sickening dread. *What have I done?*

A soft knock at the door. Yuna's voice, strained and thin. "Rozanov? Is he...?"

Ilya gently laid Shane back against the pillows, arranging the sheet around him with hands that trembled. He couldn't let them see the bite. Not yet. He pulled the collar of the sheet up, obscuring Shane's neck, before crossing the room and unlocking the door.

Yuna and David rushed in, the doctor behind them. Yuna went straight to the bed, her hands fluttering over her son's face. "He's sleeping? Is he just sleeping?"

The doctor moved in, checking Shane's pulse, his pupils. "Heart rate is down. Respiration is normal. The sedative I gave him was mild, it should have worn off... this is different. This is a natural sleep state." He looked at Ilya, confusion and a dawning, professional curiosity in his eyes. "What did you do?"

The doctor looked skeptical, but Shane's vitals were stable, and his patient was no longer in a state of psychic fracture. He shrugged, packing his bag. "Monitor him. If he doesn't wake naturally in eight hours, or if there's any distress, you must take him to a hospital. The police will need to be involved regardless."

"They will be," David said, his voice firm, his eyes on Ilya. "When Shane is ready."

Once the doctor left, the room thickened with a heavy silence. Yuna sat on the edge of the bed, stroking Shane's hair. David turned to Ilya.

"Explain- how did you know where he was?"

"An old teammate was stalking him. The house was on fire when I left," Ilya said, his voice devoid of emotion. "I do not know if he got out."

Yuna made a small, pained sound. David absorbed this, his jaw tight. The morality of the situation was horrific, and they were all trapped in it.

“You should go,” David said finally. “The police, the league... your being here complicates everything.”

“I am not leaving him,” Ilya said, the words simple and absolute. He didn’t move from his post by the window.

“You don’t have a right- ” Yuna began, her voice rising.

“I know!” Ilya’s control snapped, the word cracking through the room. He took a shuddering breath, forcing himself back to stillness. “I know I have no right. But he is... he is mine to protect. I failed. I will not leave until I know he is safe. You can call security. You can call the police. They will have to drag me out.”

The standoff stretched, taut and painful. Finally, David let out a long, weary sigh. He looked at his son, sleeping peacefully for the first time in days, then back at the shattered, resolute man who had pulled him from hell. “You stay in that chair. You don’t touch him unless we say. You speak to no one.”

Ilya gave another single, sharp nod. Terms of surrender. He could live with them.

The night passed in a slow, silent vigil. Ilya sat rigid in the armchair, his eyes never leaving the bed. Yuna dozed fitfully beside her son. David paced by the door. Just before dawn, Shane stirred.

A soft groan. His eyelids fluttered. His hand twitched on the sheet.

All three of them froze.

Shane’s eyes opened. They were clear, but clouded with confusion and pain. They scanned the unfamiliar ceiling, then found his mother. “Mom...?” His voice was a dry croak.

Yuna burst into tears, clutching his hand. “Shane, baby. Oh, thank god.”

Shane’s gaze drifted past her, landing on Ilya. Recognition flickered, followed by a storm of emotions too fast to parse- fear, relief, shame, a deep, aching vulnerability. His free hand crept up, his fingers brushing unconsciously against the side of his neck, where the bite mark throbbed beneath the sheet.

Ilya held his breath.

Shane’s eyes widened slightly. He knew. He felt it. The phantom claim, the echo of Ilya’s desperation in his veins. He didn’t look away. He just stared, lost and seeking in the early morning light.

Ilya didn’t speak. He didn’t dare. He just looked back, pouring every ounce of his own wreckage, his guilt, his ferocious, unwavering devotion into that silent look. *I am here. I am sorry. I will burn the world for you.*

Shane’s lips parted. No sound came out. A single tear escaped, tracing a path through the grime still on his temple. Then his eyes slowly closed again, not in unconsciousness, but in exhausted overwhelm. His hand, however, remained resting against his neck, over the hidden mark.

It wasn’t forgiveness. It wasn’t acceptance.

But it was a connection. A thread, thin as a spider’s silk and stained with blood and fire, pulled taut once more between them. In the quiet hotel room, with the dawn breaking and the world of consequences waiting outside the door, it was the only thing holding Ilya together. And, perhaps, the only thing allowing Shane to finally, truly, rest.

This chapter was difficult to write.

Not because of the darker scenes, although that certainly didn't help, but because both Shane and Ilya are reaching the point where they can't keep pretending they're unaffected anymore. Shane is exhausted. Ilya is spiraling. Neither of them knows what to do with the fact that the connection between them still exists despite everything that's happened.

Unfortunately, unresolved feelings and terrible coping mechanisms are a dangerous combination.

Thank you for all the comments, theories, and emotional damage reports. I love reading them.

And yes, I know some of you want to put Ilya in a cage. Same

Chapter 20: Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Congratulations to Shane Hollander on surviving kidnapping.

Unfortunately, he now has to survive Ilya Rozanov's confession.

Special guest appearances include:

- The tracker
- The security detail
- The world's worst privacy violations
- Consequences
- More consequences
- Even more consequences

Thank you so much for all the comments and reviews! I read every single one and they genuinely make my day. ❤️

Chapter Notes

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

The silence after David and Yuna stepped out was thick, but it was a different kind of quiet. The frantic, medical emergency had passed, replaced by the grim logistics of the aftermath. Ilya remained by the bed, not willing to let Shane's hand go, while Yuna moved with a mother's haunted purpose.

She returned from the bathroom, her arms laden with soft white towels and a plastic basin filled with warm water. Her eyes were red-rimmed, but her hands were steady. "He hates being dirty," she murmured, more to herself than to Ilya, as she set the basin on the nightstand. She dipped a cloth, wrung it out, and began with heartbreaking tenderness to wipe the grime from her son's forehead, the soot from his temple.

Ilya watched for a moment, the intimacy of the act a private glimpse of a close familial relationship he felt he was trespassing upon. This was the woman Shane had spoken of with such soft fondness the fierce, unwavering center of his world. Seeing her now, in her quiet, practical devastation, he understood the depth of what he had always been threatening to disrupt.

After a minute, he stepped forward. He didn't ask. He simply picked up a fresh cloth from the stack, dipped it, and silently offered it to her. She paused, her gaze flicking from the cloth to his face, seeing the blood still under his fingernails, the ash in the lines of his knuckles. She gave a tiny, almost imperceptible nod.

He took over cleaning Shane's left arm, starting from the shoulder, moving down with a slowness that felt ritualistic. He washed away the dirt and sweat, revealing the pale skin beneath, the faint tracing of veins, the delicate bones of his wrist now circled by angry, abraded lines from the zip-ties. With each pass of the cloth, Ilya committed the details to memory, the scattering of freckles he'd once cataloged through lovesick eyes, the exact curve of Shane's elbow, the way his fingers lay slightly curled even in sleep. He knew, with a cold certainty that settled in his marrow, that this might be the last time. After the police, after the explanations, after Shane woke to the full horror of it all, he would be shut out. This moment of service, of stolen proximity, was his to hoard.

Yuna worked on the other side, her movements a mirror of his own care. The room held only the sound of water being gently wrung and their shared, shallow breathing.

David returned, closing the door softly behind him. His face was etched with new lines of strain. "The doctor will cooperate. For Shane's sake. He'll cite patient confidentiality and the psychological trauma, state that immediate hospitalization was deemed too risky without a secure, private environment." He looked at Ilya. "Your witnesses?"

"They will be credible," Ilya said, his voice low. He didn't look up from his task, his cloth now carefully wiping Shane's collarbone, avoiding the hidden bite mark. "Employees of a security firm. They will state they were hired for protective surveillance of Mr. Hollander due to prior stalker threats, tracked him to the location, and intervened. They found Mr. Hill already deceased in a fire of uncertain origin. They retrieved Mr. Hollander and brought him here, to his family, before dissolving their contract."

It was a clean, cold story. It contained truths, the stalker, the tracking, the retrieval, woven through with lies that protected the monstrous core of it. It would hold up, because the people he would pay to tell it were experts, and because the alternative, the full, unvarnished truth of his obsession, was a nuclear option that would destroy Shane more thoroughly than Hill ever could.

David absorbed this, his jaw working. “And you?”

“I was never here,” Ilya said, finally meeting his gaze. “I am in a Boston hospital, under psychiatric observation. There are records. My friend will attest to it. Your son and I have not spoken since our last... public meeting.”

The finality of it hung in the air. The plan was a life raft built from lies, but it was the only one that kept Shane from drowning in a different kind of scandal.

“When this is all over,” David said, his voice gruff, “I am going to need an explanation of all this, Mr. Rozanov.”

Ilya nodded, his eyes returning to Shane’s peaceful, sleeping face. He ran the damp cloth over the back of Shane’s hand, tracing the knuckles. “I will tell you anything I can,” he said, the words a vow and a surrender. “But Shane is the one who decides how much I can tell.”

He finished his ministrations, laying the cloth aside. Shane was clean now, the physical evidence of his ordeal washed away, leaving only the deeper wounds beneath the skin. Ilya’s hand hovered for a second, then, with a touch so light it was barely there, he brushed a strand of damp hair from Shane’s forehead.

It felt like a goodbye.

He stepped back, ceding the space at the bedside entirely to Yuna and David. The first rays of the true morning sun were cutting through the gap in the curtains, illuminating the dust motes in the air and the pale, vulnerable figure on the bed. Ilya retreated into the shadows by the window, his own form blending into the gloom, becoming the ghost he would soon have to be. He had saved the body. The rest, the mind, the heart, the future, was no longer his to claim. The fight was over, and the silence that followed was the most complete surrender he had ever known.

The next time Shane swam to the surface of consciousness, it was a slower, more deliberate ascent. The heavy blanket of sedation had lifted, leaving behind the gritty, aching reality of his body, the throbbing in his wrists, the deep, sore stiffness in his muscles, and a peculiar,

localized heat on the side of his neck that pulsed in time with his heartbeat. His mind felt scoured, hollowed out, but it was his own again.

He opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was the textured, off-white ceiling of a hotel room. The second was his mother's face, etched with lines of worry and relief, hovering over him. "Shane?" she whispered, her hand cool on his forehead.

He tried to speak. His throat was desert-dry. "Mom," he managed, a cracked syllable.

A wave of emotion broke over her features, and she pressed a kiss to his temple. Behind her, he saw his father's broad shoulders, a rigid silhouette of contained anxiety. And beyond them, by the window where the gray morning light bled around the curtains, stood Ilya.

The sight of him was a jolt to Shane's system, a different kind of electricity than the terror Hill had inspired. This was a deep, resonant shock of recognition and dread. Ilya was still, dressed in dark, rumpled clothes, his face pale and shadowed, his knuckles visibly scraped. He looked like a warrior returned from a lost battle, standing guard over the spoils he no longer had a right to claim. His blue eyes, when they met Shane's, held no triumph, only a devastating, exhausted gravity.

"Hey," Shane breathed out, the word directed at the room.

"How do you feel, son?" David asked, stepping closer, his voice carefully neutral.

"Sore," Shane said, his own voice gaining a little strength. "Confused." His hand lifted, almost of its own volition, and his fingertips found the tender, raised skin on his neck. The memory wasn't visual it was sensory. The pressure, the sharp pain, the overwhelming wave of *something* that had pulled him back from the silent, white nothingness. He looked directly at Ilya.

"We need to talk," Shane said, his voice firmer. He looked at his parents. "Alone. With him."

Yuna's protest was immediate, a sharp inhale, but David placed a restraining hand on her arm. He was watching Shane, seeing the desperate clarity in his son's eyes. This was a mess of unimaginable proportions, and Shane was at the center of it. He had a right to navigate the minefield.

"Are you sure?" David asked.

Shane nodded, a slow, painful dip of his chin. "Yeah. Please."

With obvious, profound reluctance, Yuna leaned down, kissed Shane's forehead again, and allowed David to guide her from the room. The door clicked shut, leaving a silence that was somehow louder, charged with the unsaid.

Ilya didn't move from his post by the window. He seemed to be giving Shane every inch of space he could, as if his very presence was a contaminant.

"You bit me."

It wasn't a question.

Ilya didn't flinch. "Yes."

Shane absorbed the simple admission. The act felt both monumental and inevitable, the logical, brutal conclusion to everything they were. He felt a confusing mix of violation and a shameful, secret gratitude. It worked. He was *here*.

"The bite," Ilya began, his voice low and roughened by smoke and fatigue. "It is not a mating bond. It was a... a - I read about omega's being in shock before and with alpha bite they were better. A shock to your system to bring you back from catatonia. Your autonomy is intact. Your choices remain your own." He delivered the information like a doctor giving a grim prognosis, his eyes fixed on a point on the wall behind Shane. "It will fade. In a few weeks, you will feel nothing of me in it."

Shane listened, his fingers still resting on the mark. It didn't feel like 'nothing'. It felt like a brand, a receipt for a rescue he had started losing hope of. "Okay," he said quietly, because what else was there to say?

Ilya's jaw tightened. He was steeling himself. This was the preamble. "There is more," he said, and finally, his gaze swung to meet Shane's. It was like being stared at by a winter sky. "I have to tell you. All of it. And then you will tell me to leave, and I will go."

A cold dread, separate from the physical aches, began to pool in Shane's stomach. "Tell me."

Ilya took a shallow breath, as if the air itself was toxic. "The tracker. I had a tracker inserted in you, and one on your phone. It is a subdermal implant. In the back of your neck, near the hairline." He watched the color drain from Shane's face, watched his free hand fly to the nape of his neck, probing for a bump he couldn't feel. "I had it inserted while you were sedated, after Boston. It monitors location, vitals. I have watched it for months. I knew your heart rate when you ran. I knew your temperature when you slept. I knew the exact moment your stress levels spiked in that house."

Each sentence was a precise, surgical cut. Shane felt disembodied, listening to a confession about a stranger's body, a body that happened to be his. The violation was so complete, so coldly technological, it made the physical threats of Hill seem almost primitive.

"I have had you followed," Ilya continued, relentless. "By professionals. Since we got together. They reported on your movements, your company. I read reports of you laughing with Hayden. Of you spending hours at Scott Hunter's house. Of your nights with Rose." He didn't say the names with jealousy, but with a flat, factual horror at his own actions.

Shane's breath was coming faster now. The sterile hotel room felt like a panopticon. Every private moment, every attempt at normalcy, had been observed, catalogued, and delivered to this man.

"The cameras," Ilya said, and for the first time, his voice wavered, just a fraction. "In your old apartment in Montreal. In the vents. One in your parents' living room, installed during a security system upgrade I arranged. I have watched you make coffee. Read books. Sit in silence." He closed his eyes for a second, a spasm of pain crossing his features. "I have watched you sleep."

The humiliation was a hot, sick wave. Shane remembered the feeling of being watched in his home, the paranoia he'd dismissed as trauma. It had been real. Every moment of fragile peace, of private grief, had had an audience of one.

"And Chris Hill," Ilya said, the name a snarl he couldn't suppress. "When I found you... when I saw what he was doing... I did not just stop him." He opened his eyes, and they were utterly bleak. "I killed him. I beat his skull against the floor until he stopped moving. Then I set the house on fire. With him in it. I burned the evidence. I burned him."

The final confession hung in the air, the most terrible of all. It wasn't just obsession. It was murder. Arson. Ilya had crossed a line from which there was no societal return, and he had done it for him.

Shane stared at him, his mind reeling. The man who had just confessed to a horrifying litany of crimes- stalking, surveillance, violation of bodily autonomy, murder- was the same man who had just days ago been a hollow shell in a hospital bed, who just months ago had kissed his head and called him 'baby' in a trembling voice, who had, with a single, desperate act, yanked him back from the abyss.

The contradictions were too immense. They shattered something inside Shane. He didn't cry. He didn't scream. He felt a terrible, clear-eyed calm settle over the chaos.

"You're a monster," Shane whispered, the words not angry, but awed and horrified. A statement of fact.

Ilya didn't deny it. He just nodded, once. "Da."

"Why?" The question burst out of him. "Why tell me all of this? You could have lied. You could have just been the hero who found me."

"Because you deserve the truth," Ilya said, his voice finally breaking, raw at the edges. "And because I am so... so tired of hiding what I am from you. You asked me once to earn forgiveness. This is not earning. This is just... the truth of the ledger. This is what you would be forgiving."

He took a step back, toward the door, as if the force of his own confession was physically repelling him. “The police will have a story. Credible witnesses will say hired security found you. I was never here. You and I have not spoken. You are free.”

He meant it. Shane could see it in the absolute surrender in his posture. This was Ilya Rozanov, finally, truly, stopping his fight. Not by giving up on wanting Shane, but by giving up on himself.

The silence stretched, filled with the ghostly echoes of his newfound knowledge Shane looked at the monster who seemed to care about him, who had saved him by becoming irrevocably damned, and felt the world he knew fracture into impossible pieces. There was no map for this. There was only the devastating, undeniable truth lying between them, and the long, uncertain road ahead that they would now have to walk alone.

The silence after Shane’s whispered accusation- *You’re a monster*- wasn’t empty. It was filled with the ghost-images of everything Ilya had just described: the silent, red-lit footage, the pulsing dot on a map, the crunch of bone under his hands, the roar of flame. Ilya absorbed the label, his expression not defiant, but accepting. It was the verdict he’d been waiting for.

“Da,” he agreed, his voice hollow. “I am.”

He took a slow, deliberate step further away from the bed, increasing the distance he knew Shane needed. His gaze, however, remained locked on Shane’s face, memorizing the pale, shocked planes of it one last time.

“I am more sorry than I can say,” Ilya said, the admission dragged from a place of profound shame. “You disappeared, and I... I sat there. Angry. Not because you denied me something. But because you took yourself away. And I had let you become... necessary.”

He shook his head, a short, sharp motion, as if trying to dislodge the feeling. “It is a sickness. I know this. To watch a man build a life and want to burn it down just to be the only light left in the dark. To see you with your friends, with your family, with her... and feel it like a betrayal. That is not love. That is a poison.”

He finally broke eye contact, looking down at his own scarred, bloody hands. “But it is the only thing I have. So I will name it, for you, so you have the truth of that, too.” He lifted his eyes again, and they were blazing with a terrible, clear intensity. “I am in love with you, Shane Hollander. I have been, I think, from the moment you looked at me in that alley and did not look away. And it is the worst thing that has ever happened to either of us.”

The confession landed not as a romance, but as a catastrophe. It explained everything- the obsession, the violence, the utter ruin of boundaries. It was the diagnosis for the disease.

“My love is not gentle,” Ilya continued, his voice dropping to a raw whisper. “It is not safe. It is trackers and cameras and fire. It is a bite to drag you back from a nightmare I helped create. You deserve...” He faltered, a crack in the stone facade. “You deserve gentle. You deserve safe. You deserve to build your house by the lake and never wonder who is watching from the trees.”

He took a final, shuddering breath, his decision solidifying. “So I will do the only good thing I have ever done for you. I will leave. If that is what you wish- and it must be, it is the only sane wish- I will go. The story for the police is set. You will never see me again. You will never hear from me. I will be a ghost. A bad dream. And you... you will live. You will be clear of me.”

He was offering the ultimate surrender. Not just of his presence, but of his all-consuming need. It was the proof Shane had never dared to ask for: that Ilya could choose Shane’s happiness over his own desperate need to possess him. The cost was the obliteration of his own heart.

Ilya waited, standing perfectly still in the sterile light, for Shane to speak the words that would banish him. The silence stretched, as heavy and charged as it had been in the arena rafters, a lifetime ago. In it lay the splintered remains of two lives, and the impossible weight of a love that could only ever be expressed through confession and retreat.

The silence after Ilya’s confession was a living thing, thick with the unspeakable. He had laid his monstrous heart on the sterile hotel bedspread, and now he waited for Shane to decide its fate. The omega was pale, his fingers still absently tracing the bite on his neck, his eyes wide

with a horror too complex for tears. He didn't speak. He just stared, as if Ilya were a equation he could no longer solve.

The need to flee the room, to give Shane space from his contaminating presence, became a physical pressure in Ilya's chest. He gave a stiff, shallow nod, a wordless acknowledgment of the pause, and turned toward the glass door leading to the small, concrete hotel balcony.

The cold air outside was a slap. He welcomed it. He fumbled automatically in his pocket for his cigarettes, his fingers finding the crumpled pack. He pulled one out, placed it between his lips, and then froze. His lighter was gone. Lost in the fight, in the fire. A petty, frustrating detail that somehow encapsulated the entire, spiraling disaster.

Worse than its absence was the thought of the smell. Bringing the stink of smoke back into that room, onto his clothes, near him... it was unthinkable. He removed the cigarette, crushing it in his fist, letting the shredded tobacco fall from his fingers like black snow onto the balcony floor.

That's when he finally registered the persistent, insect-like buzz coming from his other pocket.

He pulled out his phone. The screen was a disaster zone. Dozens of notifications from his encrypted messaging app, all from the security team. Missed calls. Texts marked 'URGENT'.

Status?

Team requesting instructions.

Subject's location static at unknown residential. Proceed?

Client, please advise.

The messages spanned hours. From when he was crashing through the window. From when he was driving, Shane trembling beside him. From when he was holding a flame to a curtain.

Fucking. Idiots.

A cold, clean fury, entirely different from the chaotic self-loathing he'd felt in front of Shane, iced through his veins. This was a professional fury. He had paid for a service- perfection, omniscience, protection- and they had delivered catastrophic failure. His Omega had been taken, had been in that house for days, while they sent polite texts asking for instructions.

His thumb moved with violent precision. He selected the entire team- the lead, the drivers, the cyber specialists, the physical detail that had been meant to watch from a distance.

Ilya: Group call. Five minutes. Be ready to explain your continued existence.

He leaned against the cold railing, staring at the drab hotel parking lot without seeing it. The five minutes passed. He connected the call, putting it on speaker, saying nothing at first. He could hear the faint, digital rustle of several men waiting, the subtle clearing of a throat.

"Report," Ilya said, his voice not loud, but flat and devoid of all humanity. It was the voice of a glacier calving.

"Sir," the lead operative, Kieran, began, his tone cautiously professional. "We lost visual on the subject after he entered the parking structure at the hospital. We had a man en route, but by the time he arrived, the subject's vehicle was gone, and our access to the tracker's GPS was experiencing intermittent lag, which we were diagnosing- "

"You lost him." Ilya interrupted, each word a chip of ice. "You lost him, and you were *diagnosing* lag. While he was being taken. While he was tied to a bed. While a man was injecting him with drugs to force a heat."

A stunned silence crackled through the line. "Sir, we had no indication of a direct threat at that location. The prior pattern indicated a fan, not a violent abduction. Our mandate was observation and discreet intervention if the subject appeared distressed, not a full tactical- "

“Your mandate,” Ilya snarled, the calm shattering, “was to ensure he came to no harm. You failed. Your failure is the only reason I had to look at a screen and see his heart rate at one hundred and fifty. Your failure is the only reason I had to put my teeth in his neck to bring him back from a shock your incompetence allowed to happen.”

He could hear their breathing, tense and careful now. They were hearing it- the barely-leashed violence, the promise of ruin in his tone. It was the same tone he’d used in a dark alley with another man who’d touched what was his, just before the first bone broke.

“This is a breach of contract,” Ilya stated, the legal term sounding like a death sentence. “A total, catastrophic breach. You are all terminated. As of this moment.”

“Mr. Rozanov,” another voice, the legal liaison for the firm, cut in. “There are protocols. An investigation into the lapse. We can provide a full debrief and reassign- ”

“You will provide nothing,” Ilya said, his voice dropping back to that terrifying, calm register. “You will do exactly two things. First, you will handle the police inquiry. You will be the ‘credible witnesses.’ You will say you were hired for protective surveillance, you tracked him, you intervened, you found the assailant deceased in an accidental fire. You will stick to this story, and you will make it hold. This is not a request. This is the price.”

He let that hang, imagining their faces, the calculation going on in their heads- the size of his wallet versus the size of the trouble he represented.

“And the second thing?” Kieran asked, his voice tight.

“The second thing,” Ilya said softly, “is you will forget my name, my face, and his. You will dissolve whatever records you have. You will take the payment for this final job and you will vanish. Because if I ever hear a whisper, a rumor, a single line of data that suggests you have spoken of him, of me, or of this... I will not sue you. I will find you. And I will show you what a real breach looks like.”

The line was dead silent. The threat wasn’t generic. It was specific, personal, and utterly believable. They had seen his file. They knew what he was capable of when focused.

“Do we have understanding?” Ilya asked.

A chorus of tight, affirmative grunts came down the line.

“Good.” He ended the call.

He stood on the balcony for another minute, the cold seeping into his bones. The rage had burned off, leaving behind the familiar, barren wasteland. He had just fired the last system of control he had over Shane’s world. All the cameras, the trackers, the men in shadows- gone. By his own hand.

He had nothing left now. No way to watch. No way to know. Only the memory of a confession, and the crushing weight of a promise to walk away.

He slid the phone back into his pocket. Below, a car pulled in, its headlights sweeping across the asphalt. A normal person, with a normal life. He turned his back on it, and on the shredded cigarette at his feet, and went inside to face the silence he had created.

The door clicked shut behind David and Yuna Hollander, leaving the hotel room submerged in a silence that felt heavier than before. Ilya stood for a moment, his back to the bed, listening to the faint murmur of their voices in the hallway as they spoke with the league representatives. He had given them the bones of the story- the hired security, the tragic fire, the retrieval. He had told them to release a statement asking for privacy, to cite trauma, to build a wall of quiet around their son. They had agreed, their faces aged a decade in a night, because the alternative was unthinkable.

Now, there was only this.

He turned. Shane was awake, propped against the pillows, watching him. The awful, glazed vacancy was gone, replaced by an exhaustion so deep it seemed etched into his bones. His fingers still rested lightly against the bandage on his neck.

Ilya crossed the room slowly, giving Shane every chance to tell him to stop, to leave. Shane said nothing. He just watched, his eyes tracking Ilya's movement with the wary focus of someone observing a predator they're not sure has been fully tranquilized.

Ilya didn't sit on the bed. He pulled the stiff hotel desk chair closer, the legs scraping softly on the carpet. He sat, the distance between them still careful, respectful. Then, slowly, he leaned forward. He didn't reach for Shane's hand, but he bowed his head, letting his forehead come to rest gently on the back of Shane's wrist where it lay on the blanket. It was a gesture of utter defeat. A supplication.

He stayed like that, breathing in the scent of hospital soap and underlying distress, for one long minute. He felt the faint, quick pulse under his skin.

When he finally sat back up, his own mask was gone. He looked stripped bare, all the sharp edges of his arrogance and control sanded down by guilt and grief. "I should go," he said, his voice rough. "I'll make sure you don't have anything to worry about. The story will hold. The people who were supposed to be watching you... they will tell it. And then they will forget you ever existed."

Shane's throat worked. He opened his mouth, but no sound came out. His eyes were a storm of conflict- fear, anger, a residual, humiliating gratitude, and beneath it all, that same confused pull that had haunted him since an elevator in Boston. He looked, Ilya thought with a pang, exactly as he had in the arena rafters: scared, and heartbreakingly young.

Seeing the struggle, Ilya continued, his voice dropping to something barely above a whisper. "The bite... it will fade. In a few weeks, you won't feel it. But for now..." He paused, choosing his words with a painful care he'd never used before. "We're linked, Shane. Biologically. It won't change anything about you. Your will is your own. But it means... if you are ever in real danger, if you are ever terrified like that again... a part of me will know. And I will come."

He wasn't offering it as a threat, or a claim. He was stating it as a bleak, physiological fact. A final, twisted piece of safety net he'd woven from his own violation. "You don't ever have to call. You don't have to think of me. But if you need me... I'll be there."

He stood then, the chair pushing back. This was the hardest thing he had ever done- harder than any check, any fight, any lonely, obsessive night. He was walking away from the only thing that had ever made his chaotic, violent life make sense. He was choosing Shane's peace over his own desperate need, and the cost was a hollowing out of his entire world.

He gave Shane one last, long look, trying to memorize the exact shade of his eyes in the gray morning light, the curve of his jaw, the way his hair fell across his forehead. He didn't say goodbye. He just nodded, a final, silent acknowledgment.

Then he turned and walked to the door. He didn't look back as he opened it and stepped into the hallway, where the muffled sounds of a normal world continued, oblivious to the quiet catastrophe left behind in room 214. The door sighed shut, sealing the silence.

Alone, Shane finally let out a shaky breath. His hand lifted again to his neck. He didn't feel owned. He felt... anchored, by something dark and deep and terrifyingly permanent. The monster was gone, leaving behind only the echo of a promise and the ghost of a touch on his wrist. The fight was over. And for the first time, the silence that followed was entirely his own.

The detective's visit the next morning was a blur of muted voices and sterile questions, conducted in the quiet sitting area of his parents' living room. Two officers in plain clothes, a man and a woman, their expressions professionally sympathetic but their eyes missing nothing. Shane sat wrapped in one of his mother's softest blankets, his father a solid, silent presence beside him on the couch.

They spoke of "credible witnesses" and "protective surveillance." They mentioned a fire, an "unfortunate demise" of the suspect, and a swift extraction. They used phrases like "trauma-informed approach" and "respect for privacy." They did not ask Shane to recount what happened in the house. They said the physical evidence and the witnesses' statements were clear. They were there, they said, primarily to assure him the case was being handled with discretion and to see if he could confirm or add to the timeline they had.

Shane answered in monosyllables. Yes, he'd been in the parking structure. No, he didn't remember the attack. Yes, he remembered waking up in the... the place. He stopped there, his throat closing. The female detective gently steered away, saying it was enough. They left their cards, urged him to contact a victim's advocate, and departed with solemn nods. The whole encounter felt like a play performed for an audience of one, where everyone knew their lines except him. He was just a prop.

Back in the car to his parents' house, the numbness that had protected him began to crack at the edges. The world outside the window was too bright, too sharp. Every pedestrian was a potential threat; every slowing car made his breath hitch. He kept his hand in his pocket, fingers clenched around his new, sterile phone.

At the house, the dam broke in the form of his old smartphone, now plugged in on the kitchen counter. It lit up like a strobe light, buzzing incessantly with a backlog of frantic notifications. Missed calls. Texts. Dozens of them. From the team group chat, from individual numbers, a torrent of Where are you? and Saw the news, call me and Holy shit, Shane.

He stared at it, paralyzed. His mother, seeing his face, silently unplugged it and took it away. "Later," she said softly.

But his new phone started next. Rose's name flashed on the screen. He answered, his "hello" a dry croak.

The sound on the other end was immediate, wrenching sobs. "Shane. Oh my god, Shane. Your dad just texted me. I've been out of my mind. The news... they said 'missing' and then they said 'found' but they wouldn't say anything else and I thought- " She broke off, crying too hard to speak.

The raw sound of her fear was a spike through his numbness. "I'm okay, Rose," he said, the automatic lie. "I'm at my parents'. I'm safe."

"I'm coming over," she said, her voice firming through the tears. "I'm getting on a plane. I don't care about the shoot."

“No,” he said, too quickly, then softened it. “Not... not yet. Please. I just... I need a minute. It’s a lot.” The thought of her seeing him like this, of having to perform any version of himself, was exhausting.

She heard the absolute truth in his fatigue. “Okay,” she whispered, her voice small. “Okay. But you call me. Any time. Promise me.”

“I promise.”

He spent the next hour doing the same with others. Jackie, her voice uncharacteristically solemn. JJ, awkward and sincere. Teammate after teammate, their concern a well-meaning wave that threatened to pull him under. He begged off visits, citing doctor’s orders for rest, the need for quiet. He could hear their confusion, their worry, but he couldn’t muster the energy to soothe them.

Finally, his phone buzzed with a call from Hayden. He answered, bracing for more emotion.

“Hollander.” Hayden’s voice was its usual flat, familiar bark, but there was an unfamiliar tension underneath. No hysterics. No tears. Just a heavy pause. “You alive?”

“Unfortunately,” Shane murmured, the old, dark joke falling from his lips automatically. He stared at the ceiling of his childhood bedroom.

Hayden let out a short, sharp breath that wasn’t quite a laugh. “Okay.” Another pause. “You don’t want us there.”

“I can’t... I just can’t right now, Hay.”

“I know.” Hayden’s acceptance was a relief. “But I’m not ‘us’. I’m me. And I’m coming over tomorrow. I’m not asking. I’m bringing shitty pizza and we’re not talking about any of it unless you want to. But I’m coming.”

Shane closed his eyes. He wanted to refuse. To build the wall higher. But the simple, stubborn declaration was a tether to a life that existed before the darkness, a life that felt a million miles away. Hayden wouldn't tiptoe. He wouldn't make him relive it. He'd just... be there.

"Okay," Shane whispered, the fight draining out of him.

"Okay," Hayden echoed. "Tomorrow. Don't do anything stupid before then."

The call ended. Shane let the phone drop to the bedspread. The silence in the room was different now. Not just the silence of shock, but the quiet before a connection. He brought his hand up, his fingertips finding the raised, tender skin beneath the bandage on his neck. The phantom echo of the bite seemed to pulse in time with his heartbeat, a dark anchor in the turbulent sea of his thoughts. It was a violation, a claim, a medical intervention, and the only reason he was here to feel the sun through his bedroom window. The confusion of it was a weight he couldn't begin to lift.

He was home. He was safe. And he had never felt more completely, and utterly, alone.

The week that followed was a study in quiet, desperate normalcy. Shane moved through his parents' house like a careful ghost, trying to inhabit the spaces of his old life. Rose flew in for two days, a whirlwind of gentle concern and determined distraction. They watched bad movies, she told him outrageous stories from her set, and she held him when he woke gasping from nightmares that featured not Hill's face, but the feel of zip-ties and the smell of smoke. She was a balm, but even in the middle of her laughter, Shane would catch himself staring into the middle distance, his mind drifting down a dark corridor to a sterile hotel room and a confession spoken in a shattered voice.

Hayden came, as promised, with truly terrible pizza. He didn't ask questions. He talked about line combinations, complained about the coach's new drills, and argued passionately about whether a certain teammate's new dog was ugly or "artistically challenged." His normalcy was a different kind of anchor- heavy, uncomplicated, and real. But when he left, the silence he left behind seemed to ring with everything unsaid, and Shane's thoughts, like water finding the lowest point, always seeped back to Ilya.

It was a constant, low-grade hum beneath everything. In the shower, he'd trace the fading mark on his neck- the skin still slightly raised, tender, a physical monument to his rescue and his violation. *We're linked, Shane.* The words replayed in his head, not as a threat, but as a terrifying, undeniable fact. He'd feel a phantom warmth there sometimes, a faint, cellular-level awareness that had nothing to do with his own body. It was maddening.

He told himself his curiosity was clinical. Practical. Ilya had said the bite wasn't a bond, that it would fade. Shane needed to verify that, to understand the mechanism, to reclaim some sense of agency over the strange, new quietude in his own biology. The heat that Hill's drugs had tried to force had receded, leaving a strange, hollow calm in its wake. It didn't feel natural. It felt like the stillness after a battle, and he was terrified of what might emerge from the smoke.

So, one afternoon when his mother was heading to the bookstore, he asked her, his voice deliberately casual, "Could you pick up a couple of books for me? About Omega biology. The advanced stuff, not the basic health pamphlets."

Yuna had paused, her keys in hand, her eyes searching his face with a mother's painful acuity. She saw the request for what it was: not just curiosity, but a need for weapons in a war he didn't fully understand. She nodded, squeezing his shoulder. "Of course, sweetie."

The books arrived, dense academic texts with titles like *Endocrinological Pathways in Omega Presentation* and *The Neurochemical Basis of Dynamic Bonds*. He hid them in his bedroom, and when the house was quiet, he would pore over them, his finger tracing complex diagrams of hormone cascades and receptor sites. He read about temporary bio-chemical links formed under extreme duress, sometimes used in historical medical contexts to treat severe psychic shock. He read about how they mimicked, for a short time, the channels of a true bond, allowing for a stabilizing transfer of neurological calm from an Alpha to an Omega in crisis. He read that they faded as the exogenous hormones metabolized, leaving no permanent structural change.

Ilya had told him the truth.

The relief that came with the confirmation was profound, and immediately followed by a deeper, more confusing ache. It meant the tether would dissolve. The faint, warm awareness on his neck would vanish. He would be truly, completely alone again. The part of him that

had been secretly soothed by that invisible thread- the part that had, in the darkest hours, clung to the promise if you ever need me... I'll be there - felt suddenly bereft.

One night, near dawn, he found himself holding his phone, Ilya's number pulled up on the screen. His thumb hovered over the call button. He didn't want to confess anything. He didn't want to rehash the horror. He just... wanted to hear his voice. He wanted to know if Ilya was eating, if he was sleeping, if the hollow look in his eyes had changed. He wanted to tell him about the stupid pizza, about Rose's terrible impression of her director, about the fact that he now understood the difference between a kappa-opioid receptor and a delta-opioid receptor.

The impulse was so strong it was a physical pull, a low, warm shudder in his chest, frighteningly similar to the feeling described in his own past- his body and mind settled when Rozanov reached for him. He hated it. He hated how the silence now felt like a punishment of his own making.

But he thought of the cameras, the tracker, the fire. He thought of the monster who loved him. He thought of the man who had walked away to give him peace.

His thumb trembled.

He locked the phone, placed it face down on the nightstand, and rolled over, staring at the wall. The ghost of the bite pulsed on his neck, a fading star in his personal darkness. He had his answers. He had his safety. He had a life to rebuild, free of obsession.

And the hollow space inside him, where the chaos had been, now echoed with a new, more terrifying silence: the sound of his own choice, and the profound, lonely cost of the peace he had demanded.

The quiet in the new house had become a physical presence. It wasn't the peaceful quiet Shane had imagined when he'd pored over the blueprints. It was a heavy, waiting silence, and in it, every thought he'd been running from finally caught up to him.

He missed hockey. The brutal, simple clarity of the ice was a language he understood, and its absence left him adrift. But that wasn't the core of the hollow feeling.

He missed Ilya.

The admission, when it finally broke through the wall of denial he'd been maintaining, was so simple it was devastating. He missed the intensity, the unnerving focus, the way his own chaotic mind would settle into a single, resonant frequency when Ilya was near. He missed the conflict, the electricity, the terrible, beautiful sense of being seen in a way that was as frightening as it was addictive. Ilya had done the one thing he'd promised: he'd left him alone. The silence was absolute. And it was unbearable.

He couldn't carry it by himself anymore. The secret of what he was, and the darker, tangled secret of what had happened, was a weight threatening to crack his spine. He needed his people. Not to fix it- no one could- but to simply know .

He called them. Scott and Kip, steady and reliable. Hayden and Jackie, loud and fiercely loyal. JJ, kind-hearted and solid. And Rose, who flew back in the moment he asked, no questions. He didn't give details over the phone. Just, "I need to tell you all something. Can you come?"

They gathered in the great room of the new house, the space still echoing and sparse, the lake a gray mirror through the oversized windows. Shane sat on the large, low sofa, Rose immediately taking a seat beside him and threading her fingers through his, a silent anchor.

He looked at their faces- concerned, curious, patient. His team. His family.

"I'm an Omega."

The words left his mouth, plain and unadorned. For a second, there was only the sound of the wind outside.

Then, reactions rippled through the room.

Hayden's eyebrows shot up, his mouth falling open slightly. "No shit," he breathed, not in disgust, but in pure, stunned surprise. He blinked, then gave a sharp, accepting nod. "Okay. Okay, yeah. That... actually explains some things."

JJ looked shocked, his kind eyes wide, but he recovered quickly, his expression softening into one of unwavering support. "However you are, man, you're our captain. That doesn't change anything."

Kip, ever pragmatic, leaned forward, his mind already working. "The suppressants? The patches? "

"Kip," Scott Hunter said, his voice calm, cutting through the practical spiral. He hadn't looked surprised at all. His gaze on Shane was steady, understanding. "Let him talk."

Shane's eyes met Scott's, and he saw it there- the quiet suspicion, now confirmed. Jackie, perched on the arm of an armchair, nodded slowly. "I had a feeling," she said softly, her usual dramatics absent, replaced by a deep empathy. "The way you'd sometimes get... quiet in a different way. The carefulness. It makes sense."

The relief that washed over Shane was so potent it made his eyes burn. There was no horror. No rejection. Just a reshuffling of their understanding of him, an adjustment made with love.

"There's more," Shane said, his voice thickening. Rose squeezed his hand. He didn't give them the graphic details of the kidnapping- that was a darkness he couldn't relive yet. But he told them about the stalker, the threat, the reason for his sudden "injury" and withdrawal. He told them he'd been found, that it was over, but that the aftermath... was complicated.

They listened, a protective circle of silence around his halting words. When he finished, no one demanded the parts he'd left out. No one asked for the name of who'd found him. They simply absorbed the truth of his trauma.

The rest of the day was spent in a gentle, supportive orbit around him. Hayden and JJ commandeered the kitchen, arguing amiably over how to make a grilled cheese. Kip and Scott studied the cabin's unfinished deck, talking in low tones about structural supports,

giving him space. Jackie and Rose flanked him on the couch, their presence a warm, wordless comfort.

They could all see it- the other thing haunting him, the shadow behind his eyes that had nothing to do with Hill and everything to do with a choice he'd made in a hotel room. They gave him the grace not to push. They surrounded him with a normalcy that felt, for the first time in weeks, not like a performance, but like a possible future.

As the afternoon light faded, painting the lake in shades of gold and violet, Shane sat amidst his friends, the secret no longer a stone in his throat. The deeper truth, the one about the missing piece, the one named Ilya, remained unspoken. But it was held now, in the quiet understanding of the people who loved him. He was not alone. And for now, that was enough to make the waiting silence in the beautiful, empty house feel a little less vast.

The morning after the gathering dawned gray and quiet. The good energy from his friends had lingered, a warm echo in the empty rooms, but as the hours ticked by, the silence seeped back in, colder and more personal. Shane was mechanically wiping down the already-clean kitchen counter when the doorbell rang.

It was Scott. Alone. He held a paper bag from a local salad place and lifted it in a silent offering. "Figured you could use something that isn't grilled cheese," he said, his voice its usual steady rumble.

Shane let him in, the scent of roast chicken cutting through the sterile new-house smell. They settled in the great room, the vast windows framing the moody, cloud-swept lake. For a while, they just sat, eating, the comfortable silence between them more soothing than any conversation could have been.

Finally, Scott brushed crumbs from his hands and leaned back, his gaze thoughtful as he watched Shane. "You held it together yesterday. For them."

Shane shrugged, looking out at the water. "They needed to know."

“They did. And you told them what they needed. Now,” Scott said, his tone shifting into something quieter, more deliberate. “What do *you* need?”

It was the same tone Shane remembered from his old apartment, months ago, when Scott had seen a deleted number and chosen not to push because something in Shane had looked too fragile. Shane. Not ‘kiddo,’ not teasing. Just his name, a hand gently preventing a door from slamming shut.

Shane’s throat tightened. He focused on a sailboat in the distance, a tiny speck of white against the iron-gray water. “I don’t know,” he admitted, the truth feeling both terrifying and relieving. “I feel... untethered. The game’s gone. The routine. And the quiet...” He trailed off, unable to articulate the shape of the Ilya-shaped silence that filled it.

Scott nodded, as if he’d expected this. “When Kip first presented,” he began, his voice soft, “he was a mess. Not scared, exactly. Just... lost. The world suddenly had a new set of rules for him he hadn’t agreed to. He’d lock himself in his art studio for days, not talking, just painting things. Drove me crazy with worry.”

Shane glanced at him. Scott rarely spoke this personally.

“I learned I couldn’t pull him out. I just had to make sure he knew I was outside the door. That when he was ready, I’d be there with terrible coffee and a worse joke.” Scott met his eyes. “So that’s what I’m doing. I’m outside the door, Shane. Whatever that door is for you right now. You don’t have to tell me what’s on the other side. But I’m here. For anything. A bad coffee. A distraction. Someone to sit in the quiet with you.”

The offer was so vast, so unconditional, it was almost overwhelming. “Why?” Shane heard himself ask, the word raw. “You have your own team, your family...”

A shadow passed over Scott’s face, deep and old. He looked down at his hands, calloused and capable, for a long moment. When he spoke again, his voice was thicker.

“You remind me of my brother. My little brother, Eli.”

Shane went completely still. Scott had never mentioned a brother.

“He was an Omega too,” Scott continued, the words clearly costing him. “Brilliant, funny. Quiet, like you. Felt everything too deeply. The world was... a lot for him. We lost him a long time ago. Illness.” He cleared his throat, mastering the emotion back into its usual steady container. “When I first met you, saw that same quiet intensity, that same stubborn way of trying to handle everything yourself... it hit a nerve. A good one. So, yeah. I’m here. Partly for you, because you’re my friend. And partly,” he said, looking up with a sad, honest smile, “because I didn’t get to be there enough for him. Let me be here for you.”

Tears pricked hotly behind Shane’s eyes. He looked away, blinking rapidly at the lake. The confession wasn’t a burden; it was a key, explaining the depth of Scott’s unwavering, paternal protectiveness. It wasn’t pity. It was kinship.

“I don’t know how to fix it,” Shane whispered, confessing to the window, to the memory of a bite mark, to the haunting absence of a certain chaotic presence.

“You don’t have to fix it today,” Scott said, his voice firm again, grounding. “You just have to get through today. And I’ll be here for that. And tomorrow, if you need it, I’ll be here for that too.”

The simple, monumental promise settled in the room, warmer than the sunlight that finally broke through the clouds, streaking the lake with gold. Shane didn’t have the words. He just gave a slow, shaky nod.

Scott leaned forward, clapping him once, firmly, on the knee- a touch that was solid and comforting, not an intrusion. “Good. Now, I saw the deck out there. The deck out there,” Scott finished, nodding toward the window. “The supports look solid, but the railing spacing’s off code. Could be a hazard. You want a second pair of eyes on it?”

It was such a Scott offer. Not “let me fix it for you” or “you should deal with this.” Just a simple, practical observation and the offer of company. A problem they could solve together, with their hands, in the clear, cold air. No talking required, unless Shane wanted to.

Shane looked from the sprawling, half-finished deck to Scott's calm, expectant face. The tightness in his chest, the one that had been there since he woke up in the hotel room, eased a fraction. It wasn't gone. The silence still had a name, and the ghost of a bite still pulsed on his neck. But for the first time, the silence around him wasn't empty. It was held by someone who asked for nothing in return but the chance to stand beside him.

"Yeah," Shane said, his voice rough. "Yeah, I'd like that."

Scott just nodded, as if it was settled. He finished his coffee in one last swallow and stood, gathering their plates. "Grab your coat. It's colder than it looks."

As Shane moved to get his jacket, the memory from the reference file flickered through his mind- missed the attention, missed being noticed. Missed the strange certainty of someone remembering small things about him without being asked. That was Ilya's terrifying, all-consuming brand of attention.

This was different. This was Scott noticing the deck railing. Not because he was cataloging Shane's vulnerabilities, but because he cared about his safety. It was attention without possession. Care without a price tag.

Outside, the lake air was bracing, sharp with the scent of pine and wet earth. Scott fetched a tape measure and level from his truck, and they walked the perimeter of the deck in comfortable silence, Scott pointing out where the balusters were too far apart, where a post needed shimming.

"See here?" Scott said, crouching down to point at a joint. "The beam's strong, but the fastener's already working loose. It's a small thing now. Leave it, it becomes a big thing later."

Shane crouched beside him, the cold of the wood seeping through his jeans. He understood Scott wasn't just talking about the deck. He was talking about the quiet, about the things Shane was locking away. The small, working-loose fasteners of trauma and confusion.

"I don't know how to tighten it," Shane admitted quietly, staring at the offending bolt.

They worked for an hour, Scott making adjustments, Shane following his instructions, holding boards steady, fetching tools. The physical labor was a relief- a clear, finite task with a visible result. As they secured the last section of railing, Scott leaned back, surveying their work.

"Solid," he pronounced. "Won't give way on you now."

They stood side by side, looking out at the darkening lake. The wind had picked up, chopping the water into little gray peaks.

"Thanks, Scott," Shane said. The words felt inadequate for the gift of the afternoon- the normalcy, the lack of pressure, the simple, sturdy presence.

Scott clapped a heavy, warm hand on his shoulder and left it there. "Anytime, kid. I mean it." He squeezed once, then let go, turning to pack his tools. "You're not alone in this. However it looks. However messy it gets. You've got people. You just have to let us stand on the deck with you."

Shane watched him go, tail lights disappearing down the long driveway. The house was still quiet. The silence still had its contours, its shadows. But the deck under his feet felt steady. And for the first time, standing on it didn't feel like standing on the edge of an abyss. It felt like standing on something that had just been reinforced, something that could bear the weight of whatever came next.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you too all who've stuck with this story. Seriously. Every comment, review, theory, keyboard smash, threat against Ilya, and emotional breakdown has been greatly appreciated.

I know this chapter answers a lot of questions/raise more. Shane finally has the full picture now. No missing pieces. No misunderstandings. No excuses.

The hardest part is that the truth doesn't make anything simpler.

For everyone who has been asking how Shane could ever forgive Ilya, or whether he even should: we're finally entering the part of the story where those questions matter.

And for everyone currently staring at this chapter thinking "Jesus Christ, Ilya."

...same.

See you in Chapter 21. ❤️😬

Chapter 21: Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Quick one before a really really really good chapter lol.
Thank you to my beta reader-you're a doll.

As always, thank you for the comments, reviews, emotional support, emotional damage, and for collectively deciding that these two need approximately seventeen therapists between them. ❤️

Chapter Notes

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

The scar on Shane's neck had faded to a faint pale line.

Most days he forgot it was there, almost most days. The police investigation had ended exactly the way everyone promised it would. Two detectives had sat across from him in his parents' living room for less than ten minutes. They'd asked gentle questions. They'd confirmed timelines. They'd assured him that Hill was dead, that the case was closed, and that victim services remained available should he need them.

Then they had left, just like that. No lengthy testimony, no court appearances.

No reporters waiting outside. No public disclosure that Shane Hollander was an Omega. That he had been kidnapped by an old teammate.

The story released to the media had been simple enough. A stalker. An abduction. A private security team locating him before local authorities arrived. The suspect dead in a house fire before police could take him into custody.

The league had responded exactly as expected.

Statements. Offers of support, condolences. Every team in the NHL seemed to release some variation of wishing him a speedy recovery.

The attention had lasted for weeks.

Then the season continued, because it always did. The world never stopped turning for long. Shane had taken a month away from hockey.

The coaches hated it. Management hated it. The fans definitely hated it.

He didn't care.

For the first time in his life, hockey hadn't been the most important thing happening to him. His therapist had called it recovery. Shane privately called it trying not to lose his fucking mind.

He spent time at the cabin when it was done.

Time with his parents. Time with his friends. Time pretending everything was normal.

Some days it almost worked. Other days he woke up convinced he could still smell smoke.

Montreal had been a disaster without him. The first week he watched from home. The second week he stopped watching entirely. The third week the head coach called. The fourth week the assistant coach called. By the sixth week, management had started calling personally.

The message remained the same: When are you coming back? When are you ready? How much longer? Shane had ignored most of them.

Eventually he would return. Because despite everything, hockey was still his passion. The ice still made sense. The puck still obeyed physics. The boards still hurt when you hit them.

Simple, predictable.

Unlike the rest of his life.

Rose had become something else entirely during those months.

A bodyguard. A public relations manager. A defense attorney. Occasionally a criminal defendant waiting to happen.

The photographer incident had become infamous among everyone who knew them.

They'd been leaving a restaurant in Vancouver after lunch. A quiet, private place. At least it had been until a photographer exploded out of a parked car and sprinted toward them. The flash went off directly in Shane's face. After everything that happened, the sudden movement triggered pure instinct.

He stumbled backwards. His heart immediately trying to climb into his throat.

Rose had absolutely lost her mind. Shane still remembered it perfectly. "YOU SON OF A BITCH! WHO THE FUCK DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?!"

The photographer had actually taken a step backwards. Unfortunately for him, Rose kept advancing. "YOU ASSHOLE." By that point Shane was pretty sure she intended actual bodily harm.

Two production assistants and a very confused waiter had physically grabbed her before she could make good on the threat.

The photographer fled. Rose spent the next twenty minutes inventing creative new swear words. Shane laughed so hard he nearly cried. It had been the first genuine laugh since the

kidnapping.

The memory still made him smile. His phone buzzed. A text from Rose.

Rose Landry- Director is being dramatic again. Send help.

Shane snorted.

Then typed.

Shane- Thoughts and prayers.

Rose Landry- You're dead to me.

His smile lingered for several seconds after the conversation ended. Then slowly faded. Because the quiet always came back eventually.

His eyes drifted toward the television mounted across the room.

SportsCenter.

A NHL highlight package. Boston versus New York.

Shane should have changed the channel.

Instead he watched. Ilya appeared on screen.

The reaction was immediate. Four months later and it still happened. That awful tightening in his chest. The commentators were talking about Boston's recent slump- moreso Ilya Rozanov's slump. About scoring. Their standing in the season, about playoff projections.

But Shane barely heard any of it. He was watching Ilya. Watching the way he moved. The way he skated. The way he carried himself.

Nobody else would have noticed, but Shane did.

He wasn't playing well, not badly when compared to other players, but Rozanov wasn't just another player.

Rozanov was still one of the best players in the world.

But Shane knew what Ilya looked like when he was fully engaged, and this wasn't it.

The fire was missing. The sharpness. The reckless confidence.

The *joy*.

The screen flashed to another highlight.

Another shift. Another goal that should have happened but didn't.

Shane looked away. His stomach twisted.

For four months, Ilya had kept his promise- no texts, calls, emails.

No surprise appearances.

Nothing. Absolute silence.

Exactly what Shane asked for. Exactly what he deserved. Exactly what he *wanted*.

So why did it feel so terrible?

His gaze dropped to the phone still resting in his hand. One call.

That was all it would take. Just one call.

How are you?

Are you eating?

Are you sleeping?

Are you okay?

Simple, normal questions.

Questions people asked when they were acquaintances.

Then the memories returned.

The tracker. The cameras. The reports.

The fire. The confession.

The monster.

Shane closed his eyes. The urge disappeared beneath a familiar wave of guilt and confusion.

No. He couldn't. Not yet, maybe not ever. But when he thought of not ever speaking with Rozanov again, his heart broke a little.

Across the television, the game ended.

Boston lost.

Ilya disappeared from the screen.

The silence returned.

A week later, Shane found himself spending more and more time at the Hunters' house.

At first it had been practical. He had been in Boston and Montreal had a few extra days off.

Kip would send him articles about Omega biology, general self help he'd stumbled across while researching his own pregnancy. Occasionally Hayden would appear uninvited and eat all the food in their refrigerator.

The arrangement somehow evolved into a standing invitation. The Hunters had always been welcoming. Now they practically treated him like family, which Shane thrived on.

The house felt... peaceful.

Not quiet - never quiet.

There was always something happening. Scott cooking. Kip painting. The television running somewhere. The dog demanding attention.

Life, actual life.

Not reporters. Not kidnappings. Not hockey.

Just life. It was strangely comforting.

Particularly because Shane had become completely fascinated by Kip. Which was admittedly a weird thing to admit.

But he couldn't help it. The pregnancy fascinated him.

They had just announced it to their group of friends. Everything about it fascinated him.

One afternoon he found himself sitting cross-legged on the couch while Kip worked on sketches for an upcoming project.

The Omega was three months pregnant now.

Far enough along that the changes were starting to be obvious.

Shane watched him absently rub a hand across his stomach while reading something on his tablet.

"You do that a lot."

Kip looked up. "What?"

"The stomach thing."

Kip laughed. "I think I feel flutters, could be gas or something Scott says, but I choose to say flutters."

Shane immediately sat up straighter.

"Seriously?"

"Very seriously." Kip grinned.

Shane stared.

Scott walked into the room carrying coffee. One look at Shane's expression and he started laughing.

"No."

Shane immediately pointed.

"He's being fluttering."

"Yes." Scott snorted.

"That's generally how pregnancy works."

Shane ignored him. His attention remained fixed on Kip.

"Can I-"

He stopped.

Suddenly unsure.

Kip immediately understood. "Oh." A smile spread across his face.

"Yeah. Come here." Shane moved closer, slowly.

As though approaching a wild animal.

Kip was openly laughing now. "You're such a nerd."

"I know." The answer came automatically.

Carefully, Shane placed a hand against the side of Kip's stomach.

Nothing happened.

Then suddenly something shifted beneath his palm.

A distinct movement.

Strong enough to feel.

Shane physically jerked.

"Oh my God."

Scott immediately lost whatever composure he still possessed.

Kip doubled over laughing.

Shane looked genuinely shocked.

"There's actually a baby in there."

The statement only made them laugh harder.

"Shane."

"I know how pregnancy works."

"Clearly."

"I just never...I didn't think you could feel them yet."

He trailed off.

Because the truth was he'd never known any pregnant Omegas personally. "We're men. Our pregnancies usually 'pop out' earlier."

To see the tiny adjustments. The extra pillows. The way Scott automatically moved things out of Kip's path without thinking about it. The way Kip unconsciously leaned into him whenever they stood together. The way Scott's hand always found the small of Kip's back.

Tiny, constant things. The sort of things Shane only noticed because nobody seemed aware they were doing them. That was what fascinated him most.

Not just the pregnancy, but the relationship itself.

The ease of it. The safety.

A few days later he was sitting at their kitchen island while Scott cooked dinner.

Kip was sorting through paint samples nearby.

Neither seemed aware they were having three separate conversations simultaneously.

"...the blue one."

"The blue one is hideous."

"It isn't hideous."

"It looks like a dentist office."

Scott looked over his shoulder.

"It does look like a dentist office."

"You're both wrong."

"We're not."

"You are."

The argument continued for another ten minutes.

Nobody got upset, nobody raised their voice.

Nobody tried to win.

Eventually Kip rolled his eyes.

"Fine. I'll choose something else."

Scott immediately kissed the top of his head.

"Thank you."

Kip swatted him.

Scott looked entirely too pleased about it. Shane watched the interaction quietly. Something uncomfortable settled in his chest.

Not jealousy, exactly. More like grief, because he'd never seen this before. Not growing up. His parents tried their very best, but they were both beta's. It was *so* different.

Here were an Alpha and an Omega who genuinely liked each other, who respected each other.

Who argued about paint colors and grocery lists and what movie to watch. Who didn't seem trapped by expectations. Scott never tried to control Kip. Kip never seemed afraid of Scott.

The relationship wasn't perfect. But it was healthy. And the realization felt surprisingly painful.

Because every time he watched them together, another thought inevitably followed.

A dangerous one. A stupid one. One he tried very hard not to think. What would Ilya have been like if things had worked out?

The thought appeared more often than Shane wanted. Particularly after being around two healthy, loving alpha and omega relationships.

It didn't excuse anything. Nothing ever would. The tracker had still existed. The cameras still had been there. The lies had been told.

But sometimes Shane would watch Scott quietly helping Kip stand up from the couch.

Or see Kip steal food directly off Scott's plate. Or listen to them bicker about baby names.

And he'd wonder. Not what Ilya had done.

He already knew that.

He wondered who Ilya might have become if someone had taught him love wasn't supposed to feel like possession.

The thought lingered long after he left the Hunters' house.

And later that night, alone in the cabin with rain tapping softly against the windows, Shane found himself staring at his phone again.

Not calling.

Not texting.

Just staring.

Because four months later, he still didn't know which part hurt more.

Everything Ilya had done.

Or the fact that Shane missed him anyway.

Montreal had lost four straight games.

The coaches had stopped pretending they weren't desperate. The media had spent the better part of a month speculating about his return date. Fans had apparently turned his absence into some kind of national emergency.

The pressure should have annoyed him. Instead it mostly made him tired.

He stood in the locker room staring at his stall while his teammates moved around him. The familiar sounds should have felt comforting. Equipment bags hitting the floor. Sticks rattling against lockers. The smell of tape and sweat and sharpened steel.

Home. For most of his life, hockey arenas had felt more like home than actual houses. Today felt different. His equipment sat exactly where he'd left it. His nameplate still hung above the stall. Everything looked normal.

Everything except him. The scar at the back of his neck was hidden beneath his hair now.

The tracker had been removed almost two months ago by a private surgeon. No questions asked.

The procedure itself had been simple. The recovery hadn't been. Every time he touched the small scar he remembered exactly why it had been there.

Exactly who had put it there. "Stop staring at your locker." Hayden dropped onto the bench beside him.

"I wasn't."

"You were."

"I was thinking."

"That's worse."

Shane rolled his eyes. Hayden looked annoyingly pleased with himself.

Across the room JJ appeared carrying two sports drinks.

Without a word he handed one to Shane.

The behavior had become increasingly common.

The kidnapping had apparently activated something in both of them, some deeply buried protective instinct.

For two months neither had allowed Shane to exist unsupervised for very long. It was absurd.

And strangely comforting.

"Do you both have a schedule or something?" Shane asked.

JJ blinked. "What?"

"For watching me."

Hayden immediately pointed. "I have Tuesdays and Thursdays."

JJ nodded. "I've got weekends."

"You're both idiots."

"Correct."

"Very true." Neither looked remotely embarrassed.

Shane found himself smiling despite everything.

The coaches gathered everyone together.

Final instructions.

Last-minute adjustments. Motivational speeches, Shane barely heard any of it.

His pulse was beginning to pick up.

Not panic. Not fear. Something else- anticipation.

He hadn't stepped onto NHL ice in months.

Now here he was, with twenty thousand people watching. The tunnel felt longer than he remembered.

The arena louder. The music bass vibrating throughout his body. The were lights brighter.

As they lined up for introductions, Shane became acutely aware of the neck guard beneath his jersey.

The material rubbed lightly against the healing scar at the back of his neck.

A small irritation, a tiny reminder. The tracker was gone.

But not completely. The scar remained. A permanent reminder hidden beneath his hair.

His hand twitched toward it automatically.

Then stopped.

The arena lights dimmed.

The introductions began.

One player. Then another. Then another. The crowd roared appropriately.

The volume rising and falling. Familiar, predictable.

Then his name was announced last.

For a moment Shane expected the usual reaction.

Applause. Cheering. Nothing unusual.

Instead the entire arena exploded. The sound hit him like a physical force. People were standing. Rows and rows of them. Then entire sections. Then seemingly everyone.

The roar became deafening. Not hockey deafening. Different, warmer. More emotional.

The kind of sound people made when they were genuinely happy someone was alive.

Shane froze. For one stupid second he forgot to skate forward.

The ovation continued. His chest tightened unexpectedly.

The crowd knew. Not everything, of course.

Not the details. Not the Omega secret. Not about Ilya. Not any of it.

But they knew enough. They knew he'd disappeared.

They knew something terrible had happened.

And somehow twenty thousand strangers had decided they were glad he was back.

The realization hit harder than he expected.

Shane lifted a hand.

A small wave.

The crowd somehow got louder.

"Oh, wow."

His voice cracked slightly.

Hayden immediately appeared beside him. "You crying?"

"No."

"You are."

"I'm not."

JJ skated over too. "He definitely is."

"Traitors."

Both looked entirely unapologetic. The ovation finally began to fade.

Slowly.

Reluctantly.

As the game preparations continued.

But the feeling lingered.

A warmth in his chest. A reminder that people cared. Not because he scored goals, Not because he won games.

Because he was Shane. Because he came back. The game itself started normally enough. Montreal looked terrible. They'd made most of their plays off him since his first year and now they would need to find that rhythm again.

Which wasn't surprising.

By the second period Shane had already assisted on one goal and nearly scored another.

The crowd energy had shifted. Hope replacing desperation.

For the first time since returning, hockey felt simple again.

Then during third period, he sat out and his eyes drifted toward the scoreboard.

A standings graphic flashed briefly.

Eastern Conference. Team rankings. Upcoming schedules.

His stomach immediately dropped.

Boston.

The realization hit him before he could stop it. Soon. Very soon. He hadn't looked at the schedule.

Not once, deliberately. Avoidance had seemed easier.

But eventually the season would force the issue.

Sooner or later he would walk into an arena and see Ilya again.

The thought settled heavily in his chest.

Four months.

No calls or texts.

No surprise appearances.

Nothing.

Absolute silence. Exactly what Shane had demanded. Exactly what Ilya had promised.

And now, for the first time, Shane wasn't sure how he felt about it.

"Hey." JJ bumped his shoulder.

"You okay?"

Shane blinked.

The scoreboard had already changed.

The moment passed.

"Yeah." It wasn't entirely a lie.

Hayden appeared on his other side. Neither teammate moved away. Neither questioned him further. They simply remained there, close enough to reach if he needed to. Close enough that if something happened, they would be there immediately.

Protecting him without making a big deal out of it. For the first time since the kidnapping, Shane realized something surprising.

He felt safe.

Not because the danger was gone. Not because the nightmares had stopped. Not because he'd fully healed.

But because he wasn't carrying everything alone anymore.

As play resumed, Hayden shoved him lightly.

"Try not to make us lose five straight."

Shane snorted.

"No promises."

The puck dropped.

The crowd roared.

And for the first time in months, Shane Hollander skated forward instead of looking back.

The win ended a lot of things.

The losing streak.

The endless questions about when Shane was coming back. The tension that had settled over the locker room for weeks. The mood afterward felt lighter than anything Shane had experienced in months.

For the first time since returning, everyone seemed relaxed. Laughing, teasing each other. Actually enjoying themselves. Which was how he found himself cornered by half the team before he'd even finished showering. He'd never been more thankful then now for having Hayden and JJ on his side to give him a warning to cover up.

"We're going out."

Shane immediately shook his head. "No."

"That wasn't a question."

"It should be."

"It wasn't."

Hayden appeared from seemingly nowhere.

"We already decided."

"You decided."

"We decided for you."

"That's worse."

JJ looked entirely too pleased with himself. "Correct."

Shane groaned. The argument continued all the way through getting dressed.

Eventually Jackie arrived, waiting for them while they all finished up getting dressed.

The moment Shane heard she was coming, his resistance weakened considerably.

By the time six more teammates had agreed to join them, the battle was lost.

"Fine." The locker room immediately erupted in cheers.

"Saint Hollander is actually going out with us?"

The silence that followed was immediate.

Shane closed his eyes. "Jesus Christ."

Hayden nearly threw his helmet at Micheals for saying that. "That was unbelievable."

"I hate all of you."

"You're buying appetizers."

"Absolutely not."

They chose a restaurant everyone liked. Nothing fancy. Somewhere they could rent a private room and avoid most of the attention that came with professional hockey players existing in public.

The moment Shane walked inside he realized his teammates had already planned everything.

His chest warmed immediately.

Because his seat was already chosen.

JJ on one side.

Jackie on the other.

Not obvious enough to draw attention. Just close enough, protective. The realization made something ache pleasantly inside his chest. Nobody mentioned it, nobody needed to.

Shane sat down and immediately found himself staring at a phone shoved directly in front of his face.

"Look." Jackie was practically vibrating.

"What am I looking at?"

"Emma."

Shane obediently examined the picture. His favorite tiny human stared back at him. His entire face softened.

"Oh my God."

"I know."

"She's adorable."

"I know."

Shane swiped to the next picture. Then another, and another. By the fifth picture he was smiling so hard his cheeks hurt. The baby was bundled in different outfits. Sleeping. Yawning.

Making strange expressions. Being held by various family members. The photos continued for several minutes. Shane didn't complain once. By the time Jackie finally reclaimed her phone, he immediately demanded more.

Across the table Hayden looked horrified.

"How are you encouraging this?"

"She's adorable."

"She looks exactly the same in every picture."

Jackie gasped.

JJ immediately covered his mouth.

"Careful."

"Thank you," Jackie said.

Hayden looked betrayed.

The conversation dissolved into chaos after that. Menus appeared, food was ordered. Half the table immediately began arguing about appetizers.

Shane focused on reading the menu carefully. It was an old habit. One he'd developed when he decided to seriously go for hockey. Long before suppressants. Long before Ilya.

Making sure there would be something he could actually eat. Counting macros and portion control, clean ingredients. Making sure he wouldn't accidentally spend an evening hungry because everyone else chose differently. The behavior was so automatic he barely noticed himself doing it anymore.

Eventually he settled on something simple.

Easy.

The drinks arrived shortly afterward. Beer for most of the table.

Ginger ale for Shane.

Nobody commented at first. Then Hayden raised an eyebrow.

"That's depressing."

"It's delicious."

"It's soda."

"It is an elite soda."

"Children drink it and we're at a bar."

JJ immediately raised his glass. "To children's soda."

Several players joined in. The toast was ridiculous, Shane laughed anyway.

His ginger ale clinked against their beer bottles.

For a little while he forgot, forgot about the scar. Forgot about therapy appointments and nightmares and police reports. Forgot about everything except the people sitting around him.

His friends, his teammates. His family, in all the ways that mattered.

The realization settled warmly inside his chest.

Then the conversation shifted. Somebody started telling an embarrassing story about a road trip. Someone else brought up an old prank. Laughter erupted around the table.

Shane smiled, listened.

Participated when necessary. But eventually his attention drifted. His phone sat beside his plate. Face up. Screen dark. Every few minutes his eyes found it automatically.

An old habit. One he hadn't quite broken. He wasn't expecting anything, at least that was what he told himself.

Still. His gaze kept returning. The screen remained blank. No texts, no missed calls. No notifications.

Nothing. The emptiness felt strangely loud. Because once upon a time his phone had never stayed quiet for very long. Not when Ilya was involved.

There had always been something. A stupid meme. A picture of curious looking Russian food.

An article neither of them would actually read.

A complaint about a referee, or a teammate. A complaint about a coach.

Mostly complaints, honestly.

The quick phone calls were what Shane missed most.

Five minutes between practices, three minutes walking to a bus, Seven minutes sitting in airports before boarding a flight.

Nothing important, nothing life-changing.

Just...

Hi.

What are you doing?

You're boring.

You're calling me next time.

And somehow an hour would disappear. The realization hit unexpectedly, he missed that.

Not the obsession, or the tracker. Definitely not the surveillance.

Not any of the terrible things that followed.

But he missed Ilya, the actual person. The one he had been getting to know. The laughing, the teasing. The terrible jokes. The way Ilya always sounded pleased simply because Shane answered the phone. The way the larger man would hold him as he tried to catch his breath.

A painful knot settled in his chest. Across the table, laughter erupted again.

Someone had spilled a drink. JJ was being blamed.

Life continued- normal, happy.

Safe.

Shane forced himself back into the conversation. Forced himself to laugh when appropriate. Forced himself to focus on the people actually sitting beside him.

Because Ilya wasn't here. And that wasn't an accident. It was a choice.

A promise, one Ilya had kept for four straight months.

The screen of his phone remained dark.

Shane looked away first. For some reason, that hurt more than he expected.

Game day arrived far too quickly.

For fourteen weeks Shane had known this day was coming. For fourteen weeks he'd successfully avoided thinking about it.

Unfortunately, reality had a way of catching up.

He woke before dawn, before the alarm.

No text message waiting for him. No nightmare. His eyes simply opened and refused to close again.

The hotel room remained dark and silent around him. The digital clock on the bedside table glowed faintly in the darkness.

5:11 AM.

Shane stared at the ceiling for several minutes. Then gave up.

He got up and changed into gym clothes and went for a run before the sun came up.

The run helped, at least a little.

The cold morning air bit at his lungs as he moved through nearly empty streets. His feet pounded against the pavement in a steady rhythm, his breath fogging in front of him. Usually running cleared his head.

Today it didn't.

Every thought somehow circled back to the same place.

Tonight. Tonight he would see Ilya.

Not on television, or in interviews.

Not in highlight reels. In person.

The realization sat heavily in his stomach. By the time he returned to the hotel, sweat soaked through his shirt and his legs felt pleasantly tired.

The team breakfast was waiting downstairs.

Shane made a respectable attempt.

A piece of toast.

Half a banana.

A few bites of eggs.

The food may as well have been cardboard.

Every swallow felt forced.

Eventually Hayden appeared carrying a plate piled high with enough food to feed a small village.

He looked down at Shane's untouched breakfast.

Then looked back up.

"That's pathetic."

"I'm eating."

"You're looking at food."

"I'm trying."

"It isn't."

Hayden immediately stole the rest of Shane's toast.

Shane was too tired to argue.

Which apparently concerned Hayden more than the lack of eating.

The older Alpha narrowed his eyes.

"You okay?"

"Fine."

"Uh huh."

Shane looked away.

Hayden sighed. "Jesus Christ."

"What?"

"You look like you're about to throw up."

"I'm not."

"You absolutely are."

The worst part was that he wasn't entirely wrong. Shane's stomach felt twisted into knots.

Not in fear, not exactly.

Something more complicated. Something worse, because fear would have been easier to understand.

Back in his hotel room he found himself doing something he'd promised not to do.

Searching.

Just a little, just once.

The first interview appeared immediately.

Boston's morning skate.

Ilya standing in front of reporters.

Shane clicked it before he could stop himself.

The video lasted less than three minutes.

That was all it took. His stomach sank, the changes were subtle for anyone who didn't really know the man. Most people wouldn't notice, but Shane did.

Of course he did.

The Ilya on screen looked thinner, paler. The sharp angles of his face more pronounced than before. There were shadows beneath his eyes.

The reporters asked questions.

Ilya answered them. Politely, professionally.

And that alone felt wrong.

Because Ilya hated being polite with reporters.

He was usually sarcastic.

Annoying. Occasionally a complete menace but to gain a laugh.

Half the league's journalists seemed to genuinely enjoy interviewing him because they never knew what would come out of his mouth.

This version didn't joke at all.

Question, answer. No teasing, smirking, rolling his eyes or winking.

Nothing.

Just empty efficiency. Shane clicked another interview.

Then another.

The result remained the same.

The comments underneath were worse, some fans had noticed.

Rozanov seems off this season.

Anyone else think he's lost weight?

Dude looks exhausted.

What happened to his personality?

He's still putting up points but something is wrong.

The old Rozanov would've made fun of that reporter.

Hope he's okay.

Shane closed the video. Then immediately opened another.

Then another. He knew he should be getting his head into tonight's game, but he couldn't stop.

Ninety-five days.

That was how long it had been. Ninety-five days without a text, without a phone call.

Without hearing his voice.

Without seeing him.

Without anything.

Ilya had kept his promise.

Perfectly.

Painfully.

Exactly.

At the time Shane had wanted that. Everything had become too much, he needed distance, the room to think.

So Ilya had given it to him.

Completely. Without complaint or negotiation. Without trying to convince him otherwise. The memory made something ache inside his chest.

Because for years Shane had begged Ilya to respect boundaries.

To listen, to stop pushing. And now that he finally had... Shane hated it.

The realization was deeply unfair. His phone sat on the edge of the desk. Silent, the same way it had been for months. How many times had he picked it up?

How many times had he almost called? Almost texted? Almost done *something*?

He'd lost count somewhere around week six.

His thumb hovered briefly over the screen.

Then stopped.

No.

Not yet. Maybe not ever. The thought hurt.

Outside his hotel window the city had begun waking up. Cars moving through the streets, people heading to work. A perfectly ordinary day.

For everyone except Shane. Because in less than twelve hours he would walk into an arena. Step onto the ice.

And see Ilya Rozanov for the first time in ninety-five days.

Ninety-five days. Long enough to heal, to recover. Long enough to move on.

Except Shane wasn't entirely sure he'd done any of those things. The thought lingered as he finally stood and headed toward the door.

Game day had arrived.

And whether he was ready or not, so had the rest of his life.

At some point over the past few weeks, Shane became convinced he had Stockholm syndrome.

There was no other explanation to know how much he missed the Alpha.

At least, that was what he told himself as he sat on the edge of the hotel bed scrolling through increasingly questionable articles on his phone.

The search history was embarrassing.

Can victims miss kidnappers?

Can trauma cause attachment?

Stockholm syndrome symptoms.

Can you miss someone who hurt you?

The internet was deeply unhelpful.

One article insisted victims developed positive feelings toward their captors as a survival mechanism. Another argued the entire concept was largely misunderstood and often exaggerated by the media. A third claimed it wasn't even a legitimate diagnosis.

Shane spent twenty minutes reading conflicting opinions before dropping his head back against the wall.

"This is useless." He already knew it was useless. Because none of the articles actually fit.

Chris wasn't the person he missed. Chris made his skin crawl. The room still appeared in his nightmares. The smell of stale air still occasionally made him anxious. That wasn't affection. That was trauma.

The problem was Ilya. And Ilya wasn't the one who kidnapped him. The thought immediately made him groan. Because that wasn't exactly helping his case either. The tracker, the cameras, the surveillance, the lies and manipulation- that was what Ilya had done.

Normal people weren't supposed to miss someone after learning all of that. His therapist would probably have interesting opinions. Shane wasn't interested in hearing them. Instead he found himself staring at another article. Trauma bonding. He clicked it, read half and then closed it.

Opened another. Closed that one too.

None of them felt right.

Because the more he read, the more one uncomfortable truth kept resurfacing. He didn't miss Ilya because of the tracker. He missed him despite the tracker.

Despite everything.

That was the problem. Not the obsession, but the person underneath it.

The idiot who sent him terrible memes at three in the morning. The asshole who called him from airports because he was bored. The jerk who somehow managed to spend thirty minutes complaining about referees without repeating himself, saying that was practicing his English.

The idiot who had made him laugh so hard during one road trip that he'd nearly choked on a carrot. The realization sat heavily in his chest.

God. He missed talking to him. The simple, stupid conversations.

The daily check-ins. The familiarity.

Ninety-five days.

The number felt absurd.

Long enough that Shane should have adjusted, enough that missing him should have faded. Instead it seemed to have gotten worse.

With an annoyed sigh he tossed the phone onto the bed.

"Not Stockholm syndrome."

The words sounded ridiculous spoken aloud.

He wasn't sure whether that made him feel better or worse.

Eventually he forced himself to get ready. The game wasn't going to wait. The first problem appeared almost immediately.

His hair. Shane stared at his reflection in the hotel bathroom mirror. Then frowned, he wet it again. Then frowned harder.

Something about it looked wrong.

He couldn't identify what.

Only that it was wrong.

Five minutes later he was still trying. Ten minutes later he hated everything. By fifteen minutes he was actively considering shaving his head.

His phone buzzed.

JJ: We're about to leave.

Shane froze.

Shane: I need five more minutes?

JJ: Why? You're never late.

A second text followed.

JJ: Are you messing with your hair? Hayden bet me twenty dollars.

Shane: I'm blocking both of you.

JJ: Too late. We're downstairs.

True to their word, neither allowed him to travel alone.

When Shane reached the lobby, Hayden was already waiting beside the entrance.

Coffee in one hand.

Utterly smug expression on his face.

"Hair still fighting back?"

Shane considered violence.

Instead he grabbed his bag.

The ride to the arena felt strangely familiar.

The closer they got, the tighter his stomach became. By the time they arrived, the familiar crowd had already gathered outside.

Reporters. Photographers. Social media teams. Fans.

The usual circus. Camera flashes immediately erupted the moment the players started arriving.

Normally Shane would stop.

Smile.

Answer a few questions. Today he kept walking. Nobody tried to stop him.

A few reporters called his name, but he ignored them.

The arena swallowed him up a few moments later. Inside the locker room he immediately retreated into routine.

Routine was good.

Routine made sense.

Equipment, tape, pads.

Lacing up his skates.

In the same order he had been doing since he was 6 years old.

Structure.

His headphones went in before anyone could interrupt him.

A recorded architecture lecture filled his ears. Something about adaptive reuse of historical buildings. Normally he would have been completely absorbed. Today he retained none of it.

The professor might as well have been speaking another language. Still, the familiar voice helped, grounded him.

The ritual of getting dressed helped even more.

Piece by piece. Everything exactly where it belonged.

Eventually warmups arrived. Shane followed the team onto the ice.

The familiar roar of the crowd washed over him.

His pulse immediately accelerated.

Not because of the game. Because he was in Boston.

Because somewhere out here...His eyes moved automatically.

Casually, hopefully.

He scanned the opposite end of the rink.

Black jerseys.

Black helmets.

Players stretching.

Skating.

Passing pucks.

No Ilya.

Shane frowned. He looked again, still nothing. The absence felt oddly disappointing.

Which was ridiculous.

The entire point of the morning had been anxiety about seeing him.

Now he was disappointed not to.

His brain had officially stopped making sense.

Warmups ended.

Players disappeared back into their respective locker rooms.

The final minutes before puck drop passed in a blur. They were all gathered around the bench and Coach was explaining line adjustments. Special teams, matchups.

Something about Boston's defensive pairings.

Shane was listening for the most part.

Then suddenly he wasn't. A strange sensation crawled down his spine. The feeling of being watched.

The feeling of someone entering a room.

The feeling of awareness.

His attention shifted before he could stop it.

The tunnel entrance.

The opposing bench.

And there.

Ilya.

For one suspended moment everything seemed to stop. The crowd disappeared. The coaches disappeared.

All the noise disappeared. *It had been ninety-five days.*

Ninety-five days since Shane had last seen him.

The difference was immediately obvious.

The interviews hadn't lied.

Ilya looked unlike himself.

As if four months had aged him years.

At the exact same moment, Ilya looked up. Their eyes met. Neither moved. Neither smiled.

Just looked.

Then someone said something to Ilya. The moment shattered.

Both turned away. The game began. The opening faceoff felt strange.

Because Ilya stood directly across from him. For years that had felt normal. Now it felt impossible. The referee dropped the puck. Shane won it cleanly.

Muscle memory, instinct. The game exploded into motion. For the first several shifts Shane kept waiting. Waiting for the intensity. The aggression. The familiar pressure.

Whenever they played, Ilya usually made his presence known- its what made Shane better himself, having someone matching his skill level. But now he kept waiting.

For a hit. A chirp. A shove into the boards.

Something, *anything*.

It never came. The realization unsettled him more than he expected.

They crossed paths repeatedly.

Faceoffs.

Defensive coverage.

Line changes.

Ilya remained professional. Focused. Distant.

Once, midway through the first period, Shane carried the puck through center ice expecting the usual challenge.

Instead Ilya peeled away and picked up gave his left wing a chance to get the puck.

The space felt wrong.

The absence felt wrong. Four minutes into the game, Shane scored.

The crowd erupted.

Instinct took over. He celebrated with his teammates. The arena shook beneath the roar.

And before he could stop himself, his eyes found Boston's bench. Found Ilya. For years Shane had always known exactly what expression would be waiting.

Annoyance.

Mock outrage.

Some dramatic eye roll.

A sarcastic gesture.

Something. Anything.

Instead there was nothing. Ilya simply sat there. Expression unreadable. Eyes fixed on the ice. As if the goal hadn't mattered at all. As if Shane hadn't mattered at all. The realization hit far harder than being checked into the boards ever could.

And for the first time all game, Shane wished Ilya would just get angry. The rest of the game only got worse. Not because Boston was winning. Not because Montreal was struggling. Because Shane couldn't stop noticing everything Ilya wasn't doing.

For years, playing against Ilya had been predictable in all the most frustrating ways. If Shane touched the puck, Ilya would somehow appear. If Shane scored, Ilya would have something smart to say about it. If Shane got hit too hard, there would be a retaliatory collision somewhere within the next two shifts. If Shane got pinned against the boards, there was a good chance it was Ilya doing it.

The attention had always been relentless. Exhausting. Annoying.

Comforting, but tonight, it was gone.

Eight minutes into the game Shane scored again.

The away section of the crowd erupted. His teammates nearly tackled him against the glass.

Instinctively, automatically, his eyes found Boston's bench.

Found Ilya.

Nothing.

No eye roll.

No dramatic sigh.

No sarcastic clap.

No exaggerated expression about how lucky Shane had gotten.

Just a blank expression.

The same expression he wore for every other player in the league.

Shane hated it.

The realization unsettled him enough that he missed half of what Hayden was yelling during the celebration.

The game continued.

Shift after shift.

The pattern repeated.

Whenever they shared the ice, Shane found himself waiting.

Waiting for a chirp.

Waiting for a shove.

Waiting for some indication that things between them had ever been different.

Nothing came.

Late in the second period another Boston player drove him hard into the boards.

The hit wasn't dirty.

Just heavy.

The impact rattled through his shoulder and sent a flash of pain up his neck.

The fresh scar where the tracker had been removed burned beneath the collar of his equipment.

Instantly Hayden was there.

JJ appeared immediately afterward.

Several players crowded together.

The usual post-whistle shoving began.

The sort of thing that happened a dozen times every game.

Shane barely noticed.

Because twenty feet away, Ilya had frozen.

For one brief second Shane saw it.

Saw the instinct.

Saw the concern.

Saw Ilya take a half step forward.

Then stop.

The expression vanished.

The moment disappeared.

Ilya turned away.

Skating back toward his position.

Not intervening.

Not checking on him.

Not doing anything.

The realization sat heavily in Shane's stomach for the rest of the game.

This wasn't indifference.

That somehow would have been easier.

This was restraint.

This was Ilya deliberately choosing not to act.

Choosing not to cross boundaries.

Choosing not to give Shane a reason to be angry.

Everything Shane had spent years asking for.

Everything he should have wanted.

Everything he suddenly hated.

By the third period, Montreal was up by two.

The crowd had fully come alive.

Every shift felt faster.

Every hit harder.

The game finally ended with a deafening blast of the horn.

Montreal won.

The arena erupted.

Players poured over the boards.

The crowd stood.

Shane was immediately swallowed by teammates.

Helmets.

Gloves.

Arms around his shoulders.

Celebration.

The sort of victory that felt bigger than the standings.

His first game back.

A win.

A statement.

Eventually the chaos settled.

Players separated.

Equipment was adjusted.

And the handshake line began to form.

Shane's stomach immediately twisted.

He hadn't thought about this part.

Or maybe he'd deliberately avoided thinking about it.

The line moved slowly.

One player at a time.

Good game.

Good game.

Hell of a game.

See you next time.

The usual script repeated over and over.

Shane barely registered any of it.

His attention remained fixed farther down the line.

Waiting.

Watching.

The closer Ilya got, the harder it became to focus.

Three players away.

Two.

One.

Then suddenly Ilya was standing in front of him. Up close the difference was impossible to ignore. The interviews hadn't captured it properly. He looked exhausted.

Not physically. Something deeper. The shadows beneath his eyes seemed permanent now.

His face was thinner. His shoulders slightly more slumped than Shane remembered.

For a moment neither of them moved. The noise of the arena seemed strangely distant.

Then Ilya extended his hand. "Good game."

Professional. Polite. Distant.

The exact sort of thing he would say to any opponent in the league. Not to Shane.

Never Shane.

Shane stared at him for half a second too long.

Then reached out automatically.

The moment their hands touched, something inside his chest tightened painfully.

God.

He'd forgotten.

Forgotten how familiar Ilya felt.

How easy it had always been.

"You too."

The words sounded wrong.

Too formal.

Too small.

Ilya nodded once.

Already beginning to move away. Already preparing to continue down the line. Panic flared unexpectedly.

Sharp and immediate.

Shane didn't think. He simply acted.

"Rozanov." The name escaped before he could stop it. For the first time all night, Ilya hesitated.

Only slightly, but enough. Those blue eyes lifted back to his.

The line continued moving around them. Players brushing past on both sides. Nobody was paying attention. Shane's pulse hammered in his ears.

"Can we talk?"

For a second he wasn't sure Ilya had heard him. Then he saw something flicker across the Alpha's face. Hope, fear.

Disbelief.

Gone so quickly Shane almost thought he'd imagined it.

Ilya remained completely still.

Shane swallowed. "Room three twenty-nine." His voice dropped lower. "Later?"

Neither of them moved. The arena seemed impossibly loud.

The moment stretched. Then Ilya gave the smallest nod.

Barely noticeable, but unmistakable.

"Okay."

Just one word. Quiet. Careful.

As though speaking too loudly might break something. The player behind Ilya bumped his shoulder impatiently.

The line continued moving. The moment ended. Ilya released his hand and stepped away.

Shane watched him go.

Watched him disappear farther down the line. Watched him become another player again.

His pulse refused to slow.

Because for the first time in ninety-five days, there would be no silence tonight.

And that realization terrified him almost as much as it relieved him.

Ninety-five days.

Ilya knew the exact number because he counted them. At first it had been hours. He'd found himself checking the time obsessively, calculating how long it had been since he'd left the hotel room, since Shane had last looked at him, since he'd heard his voice. Then the hours became days. The days became weeks. Now they had somehow become months. Ninety-five days without a text message. Ninety-five days without a phone call. Ninety-five days of honoring the one request Shane had made of him. It was the longest promise Ilya had ever kept and by far the hardest. There were days when he genuinely thought it would have been easier to quit hockey entirely than continue living like this.

The medication helped.

Not enough. Just enough to function in day to day life.

Enough to get out of bed in the morning without staring at the ceiling for two hours first. Enough to sit through team meetings and practices without his thoughts constantly spiraling back toward Vancouver. Enough to sleep for more than a handful of hours most nights. His doctor seemed pleased with the progress. His therapist seemed cautiously optimistic. Svetlana outright threatened him when he missed appointments. Everyone around him seemed relieved that he was functioning again.

The problem was that functioning and living were not the same thing.

Every part of his routine reminded him of Shane. The realization had become almost laughable. A stupid meme appears online and his first instinct is to send it. Something ridiculous happens during practice and his hand immediately reaches for his phone. He sees a referee make an especially terrible call and already knows exactly what joke Shane would make about it. Every airport reminded him of long phone calls. Every hotel reminded him of road trips. Every architecture article he stumbled across made him wonder whether Shane would find it interesting. It happened dozens of times every day. Hundreds, probably. By now the habit was so deeply ingrained that it occurred before conscious thought. Reach for phone. Remember. Stop.

The worst part was that the realization never became easier.

The silence inside his apartment had become something alive. At first he'd tried distracting himself. Television. Music. Podcasts. Anything to fill the space. Nothing worked. Eventually he gave up. Now the apartment remained mostly quiet. Some nights he sat on the couch for hours without turning anything on, staring out the windows at the city below. The place felt far too large for one person. He found himself avoiding entire rooms because they reminded him of conversations that had happened there. Even the kitchen annoyed him. Shane had once spent twenty minutes arguing that ketchup belonged on scrambled eggs. The memory still surfaced every single time Ilya opened the refrigerator.

Boston noticed.

Of course they noticed.

The coaching staff noticed first. Then the players. Eventually the reporters began asking questions, though never directly. Nobody wanted to risk offending one of the league's biggest stars. Instead they danced around the subject. Are you feeling okay? Have you been sleeping? Is something bothering you this season? He answered every question the same way. Fine. Tired. Long season. Nothing interesting. The lies came automatically now.

The fans noticed too.

That was almost worse.

He stopped reading comments months ago but occasionally something slipped through anyway. Someone would show him a post. A teammate would mention it. A headline would appear while scrolling. What happened to Rozanov? He never smiles anymore. Is he injured? Dude looks miserable. Somebody help this man. The funny thing was that most of them were wrong. Miserable implied drama. Misery implied some grand emotional collapse. The truth was far simpler than that. He was lonely. Endlessly, hopelessly lonely. There was no tragedy to analyze and no mystery to solve. He missed Shane. That was it.

Then game day arrived.

The entire league seemed excited about Shane's return. Every sports network ran some variation of the same story. Shane Hollander returns after missing a month. Montreal gets their star back. Huge matchup tonight. Ilya stopped paying attention after a while because every mention of Shane produced the same uncomfortable reaction in his chest. By warmups he felt physically ill. Not nervous. He didn't get nervous before games anymore. It was something worse. Anticipation. Awareness. The knowledge that after ninety-five days he would finally see him again.

The first glimpse nearly undid him.

Shane was laughing at something Hayden said. The sound didn't reach him across the ice, but the expression did. His cheeks looked healthier. The dark circles beneath his eyes had mostly disappeared. He looked stronger. More rested. More like himself. For one horrifying second relief hit Ilya so hard he forgot how to breathe. Alive. Healthy. Safe. The knowledge should have comforted him. Instead it only made him ache.

When Shane finally looked up and their eyes met, the entire arena seemed to disappear.

Ninety-five days vanished instantly.

For one terrible moment every instinct he possessed screamed at him to cross the ice. To talk to him. To ask how he was sleeping. Whether he was eating properly. Whether the nightmares had stopped. Whether therapy was helping. Whether he was happy. Whether he hated him. Whether he missed him.

Instead Ilya turned away.

Because that was the promise.

That was the deal.

Shane had asked for space and Ilya had given it to him. Every miserable, suffocating, lonely day had been built around that promise. Breaking it now would make all of it meaningless.

The game itself became an exercise in restraint. Every shift required conscious effort. Every instinct had to be suppressed. When another Boston player drove Shane into the boards during the second period, Ilya actually started moving before realizing what he was doing. The reaction had been immediate. Pure instinct. Shane gets hurt. Go. Protect. Check on him. The same impulse that had existed for years. He stopped himself only because he caught Hayden and JJ already moving in. The realization left him feeling vaguely sick for the rest of the period.

By the time the final horn sounded, he was exhausted.

Not physically.

Emotionally.

Because it turned out ignoring Shane required far more energy than obsessing over him ever had.

The handshake line should have been simple. Shake hands. Say good game. Keep moving. Professional. Polite. Distant. He repeated the script in his head while the line advanced, convincing himself that if he treated Shane exactly like everyone else, he could survive it.

Then he reached him.

Up close, the differences were impossible to ignore. Shane looked better. Not completely healed, because some things didn't heal that quickly, but better. Alive. Healthy. Real. Standing directly in front of him after ninety-five days of silence.

Ilya extended his hand.

"Good game."

The words sounded hollow even to his own ears.

Then Shane said his name.

Everything stopped.

Not the arena.

Not the crowd.

Not the players continuing down the line around them.

Just him.

For one impossible second, hope returned.

And after ninety-five days of teaching himself how to live without it, hope was far more frightening than despair had ever been.

By the time Ilya made it back to his house, he was beginning to regret agreeing.

Not because he didn't want to see Shane.

That had never been the problem.

The problem was that he wanted it too much.

The drive home passed in a blur. He barely remembered leaving the arena. One moment he had been standing in the handshake line trying not to stare at Shane, trying not to memorize every detail all over again, and the next he was standing alone in the middle of his living room. His suit jacket had been discarded somewhere near the front door. His tie was hanging loose around his neck. The television remained dark. The apartment was silent except for the distant hum of city traffic filtering through the windows.

For a long moment he simply stood there.

Then he started pacing.

The habit had become increasingly common over the last few months. His therapist had several professional explanations for it. Excess nervous energy. Anxiety regulation. Obsessive tendencies seeking an outlet. Svetlana had a much simpler description. She called it "wearing a hole through the floor like an idiot."

Tonight it felt impossible to stop.

He moved from the living room to the kitchen and back again. Past the dining table. Around the couch. Back toward the windows. His thoughts refused to settle on any one thing for more than a few seconds before racing off in another direction. What did Shane want to talk about? Had he changed his mind after the handshake line? Was he going to ask for answers? Was he going to ask for closure? Was he going to tell Ilya that this was the last conversation they would ever have? Every possibility seemed equally likely and somehow each one felt worse than the last.

His eyes drifted toward the clock.

11:08 PM.

Too early.

The meeting wasn't until later.

At least that was what he told himself.

He checked his phone.

Nothing.

Of course there was nothing.

Shane had already given him the room number. There was no reason for further communication. No reason for a text. No reason for a call.

Five minutes later he checked again anyway.

The silence inside the apartment seemed louder than usual. For months he had forced himself to adapt to it. No random phone calls. No text messages waiting when he woke up. No photographs of architecture projects. No complaints about teammates. No arguments over absolutely nothing. The silence had become familiar. It had become routine. Tonight it felt unbearable.

Eventually he wandered into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator despite having no intention of eating. The cold air spilled out around him. He stared blankly at the contents for nearly thirty seconds before realizing he hadn't actually looked at anything. The door closed again.

His appetite had never fully returned.

Neither had his sleep.

Neither had a lot of things.

The clock continued ticking.

11:21 PM.

His therapist had warned him about nights like this. Anticipation was dangerous. Anticipation allowed his thoughts to spiral. It encouraged catastrophizing and obsession and all the unhealthy behaviors they had spent months trying to manage. Under normal circumstances he could recognize when it was happening.

Tonight he didn't particularly care.

Because Shane had asked him to come.

The thought alone sent another wave of nervous energy through him.

Ninety-five days.

Ninety-five days without hearing his voice.

Ninety-five days without seeing him in person.

Ninety-five days of forcing himself not to call.

Not to text.

Not to check in.

Not to drive past places Shane might be.

Not to ask mutual friends how he was doing.

Every single day had been a conscious decision.

Every single day had hurt.

And now Shane wanted to see him.

A bitter laugh escaped him.

The sound echoed strangely through the empty apartment.

This was ridiculous.

He was a grown man.

A professional athlete.

One of the most feared players in the league.

And he was pacing around his house like a teenager before a first date.

Eventually he crossed the room and opened the cabinet where he kept his medications.

The extra dose had been prescribed months earlier.

Emergency situations.

Moments where everything became overwhelming.

Moments where he could feel himself losing control of his thoughts.

Seeing Shane for the first time in three months and then being invited to his hotel room at midnight seemed close enough to an emergency for his liking.

At least that was the justification he settled on.

The pills disappeared with a mouthful of water.

For a while he remained standing there, gripping the edge of the counter and staring at nothing.

Slowly his pulse began to settle. Not completely. Nothing was fixing this.

But enough to think, to breathe, to function.

The clock read 11:37 PM.

The hotel was less than ten minutes away.

He'd spent nearly an hour pacing around his apartment accomplishing absolutely nothing.

Enough.

Before he could change his mind again, he called for a car.

The ride felt simultaneously endless and far too short. The city drifted past outside the windows, illuminated by streetlights and neon signs. People moved along sidewalks. Restaurants closed for the evening. Life continued exactly as it always had. Ilya sat in the back seat watching it all and felt strangely disconnected from it. His stomach twisted harder with every passing minute.

By the time the hotel came into view, his hands had started shaking.

Not badly.

Just enough that he noticed.

The driver pulled to the curb.

For several seconds Ilya simply stared through the windshield at the entrance.

Then he forced himself to move.

Inside, the lobby was quiet. A few guests lingered near the seating area. The receptionist glanced up and immediately recognized him before politely pretending she hadn't. He appreciated that. The last thing he needed tonight was conversation.

The elevator was worse.

Far worse.

Every floor seemed to take forever. The enclosed space left him alone with his thoughts again. By the time the doors finally opened, his pulse had climbed right back to where it had started.

The hallway stretched ahead of him, lined with identical doors and soft lighting. The carpet muted his footsteps as he walked. Room 329 sat near the end.

Each step felt heavier than the last.

Because every step brought him closer to Shane.

Closer to answers.

Closer to whatever happened next.

Closer to the possibility that none of this would end the way he wanted.

When he finally reached the door, he stopped.

For several long seconds he simply stared at the brass numbers.

329

Ninety-five days.

Everything had led here.

Slowly he lifted his hand.

Knocked once.

Then again.

The sound echoed softly through the hallway.

Silence followed.

A heartbeat.

Two.

Three.

Then the lock clicked.

The door opened almost immediately.

As though Shane had been standing there waiting.

For a moment neither of them spoke.

Neither moved.

The warm light from inside the room spilled into the hallway, casting soft shadows across Shane's face. He stood barefoot in sweatpants and an oversized Canadiens hoodie, his hair still damp from a shower. There were faint shadows beneath his eyes. His expression was a complicated mixture of nerves, relief, uncertainty, and something else Ilya couldn't quite identify.

He looked real.

Not a photograph.

Not a television screen.

Not a memory.

Real.

Alive.

Standing less than three feet away.

And suddenly all the words Ilya had rehearsed over the last three months disappeared completely.

Because for the first time in ninety-five days, there was nothing separating them anymore.

No hospital room.

No reporters.

No hockey rink.

No crowd.

Just the two of them.

Standing in a hotel doorway.

Looking at each other.

Neither entirely sure where to begin.

Chapter End Notes

Well.

They're finally talking.

First of all, thank you all so much for the incredible response to little idea I had in my head. I genuinely read every comment, every theory, every keyboard smash, every threat directed at Ilya, and every plea for therapy.

A special shoutout to everyone who collectively decided that the solution to this story is professional counseling. Honestly? You're probably right.

Healing isn't the same thing as forgiveness. Shane missing Ilya doesn't magically erase what happened. Missing someone, loving someone, trusting someone, forgiving someone, and choosing someone are all different things.

Unfortunately for Shane, he is slowly discovering that those distinctions are incredibly annoying.

For everyone wondering whether Ilya has been suffering during the time skip:

Yes.

Very much yes.

The man has had approximately ninety-five consecutive bad days.

For everyone wondering if Shane is suffering:

Also yes.

He's just better at pretending otherwise.

And for everyone screaming at them to kiss already:

Respectfully, have you met these idiots?

Thank you again for reading, commenting, and sticking with this story. Every comment genuinely makes my day and helps motivate me to keep writing.

Currently getting ready to write the heck out of chapter 22 but I need a big glass of wine and my gay bestie for the good parts 😊

See you in Chapter 22. ❤️

Chapter 22: Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

To everyone commenting:

"They need to talk."

"They need therapy."

"They need boundaries."

"They need healthier communication."

Good news.

This chapter contains all four.

Bad news-

They're still Shane and Ilya. ❤️🔪

Chapter Notes

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

The door clicked shut, a sound as final as a verdict. The room was standard for a team hotel: two queen beds with stiff floral spreads, a dark wood desk littered with Shane's playbook and a half-empty water bottle, the faint, clean scent of industrial carpet cleaner undercut by the familiar, aching trace of Shane- sun-warmed cotton and honeysuckle, but dampened by his suppressants.

Ilya had mapped the escape routes the moment he crossed the threshold. He stood now with his spine pressed against the wall adjacent to the bathroom door, as far from the bed where Shane perched as the geometry of the room would allow. Twelve feet of beige carpet stretched between them, a minefield.

He looked wrecked. The exhaustion wasn't just in the shadows bruising the skin beneath his eyes; it was in the slump of his broad shoulders under his simple black sweater, in the way his large hands hung limp at his sides, fingers slightly curled as if around a phantom stick. His blond hair, usually styled with careless precision, was pushed back from his forehead in messy waves, like he'd been running his hands through it for hours. Which he had. He'd

paced his own room until the pattern was worn into the carpet, until the four walls felt like they were breathing in sync with his panic, until he'd dry-swallowed the bitter, emergency benzo his therapist had prescribed for 'acute emotional episodes'. It had sanded the sharp edges off the panic, leaving behind this hollow, resonant numbness. He felt like a glass vase, thin and fragile, vibrating with a silent, sustaining note.

Shane, in contrast, was sitting perfectly still on the edge of the nearest bed, his hands folded in his lap. He wore soft grey sweatpants and a faded Montreal hoodie, the uniform of private sanctuary. His dark eyes tracked Ilya's position, the calculation clear in his gaze. He looked healthier than he had four months ago- the sharp, haunted planes of his face had softened slightly, the perpetual tension in his jaw had eased a fraction. But the calm was a practiced one, the stillness of a deep lake over cold, dark depths.

"You can sit, you know," Shane said finally, his voice quiet in the insulated room. He nodded to the desk chair, then to the other bed. "Anywhere."

Ilya's head moved in a tight, single shake. "No."

"Why?"

The word hung there. Ilya's throat worked. He looked at the chair, then at the empty space on the bed beside Shane, a distance of maybe two feet. It might as well have been two miles. "The promise," he said, the words scraping out. "I said I would keep my distance. This is... the distance this room allows." He gestured vaguely with one hand, a stiff, abortive motion. "If I sit, the distance becomes... negotiable. It becomes choice. My control is... it is not good, Shane. You know this. The control is a thin wire. If I choose to sit three feet from you instead of twelve, the next choice is to move to two feet. Then one. Then..." He trailed off, his gaze dropping to the carpet. "The promise was distance. This is the distance."

Shane absorbed that, his fingers lacing tighter together. He didn't look hurt, just... weary. Weary of the algebra of trauma, the constant calculus of safety and threat. "So you're just going to stand against the wall like you're waiting for a firing squad?"

A ghost of something- humor, despair- flickered over Ilya's face. "*Da*. If that is what it looks like."

Silence expanded again, filled with the hum of the mini-fridge and the distant, muffled sound of a elevator chime in the hall. Shane took a slow, deliberate breath, the one his therapist had taught him. Four counts in, seven counts hold, eight counts out.

“You look like shit,” Shane said, not unkindly.

Ilya let out a short, sharp breath that wasn’t a laugh. “This is accurate.”

“Are you sleeping?”

“Intermittently.”

“Eating?”

“Food is... functional.” He hadn’t tasted a meal in months. He consumed calories like fuel, nothing more.

“Therapy?”

“Twice a week. Dr. Kostova. She is... very direct. It is unpleasant sometimes but-” He said it with a sort of grim respect, shrugging his shoulders.

“Medication?”

Ilya’s eyes flicked up, meeting Shane’s for the first time since entering the room. The contact was a physical jolt, a live wire connecting the twelve-foot gap. “Yes. Pills.” He said with a grimace. “For anxiety. For the... obsessive thoughts.” He paused, the confession clawing its way up. “I took an extra one tonight. Before I came. So I would not... spiral apart.”

Shane's lips pressed into a thin line. He'd wondered about the unnatural calm, the flatness of Ilya's tone. It wasn't peace. It was chemical restraint. "Okay," he whispered. Another silence, Shane could see the tight way Ilya was holding himself.

"Why did you invite me here, Shane?" Ilya asked, his voice low. He kept his gaze fixed on a point just over Shane's shoulder, on the generic landscape painting of a birch forest. It was easier than looking at him. "You have your space. You are healing. I see this. You are with your team, you smile sometimes in the interviews. You are... living. Why bring the complication back into your life?"

Shane didn't answer immediately. He unfolded his hands and placed them palm-down on the bedspread on either side of him, grounding himself in the texture of the fabric. "I missed you," he said, the simplicity of it devastating.

Ilya flinched as if struck. His hands clenched into fists at his sides, the knuckles bleaching white.

"Not... not just the way it was. Not the... the obsession, or the intensity, or the way what you told me...after. You'd look at me like I was the only thing in the universe." Shane's words were careful, each one selected and placed like a piece of delicate machinery. "I missed the stupid texts about your terrible coffee. The jokes you'd make that only I understood. The way you'd dissect a game play by play for an hour on the phone. I miss you as my friend." His voice cracked on the last word, a tiny fracture in his controlled facade. "And I saw you tonight, on the ice, and then after... and you look empty, Ilya. You look like you're just... waiting to stop. And I realized... my healing shouldn't have to look like your destruction. That's not... that's not what I wanted."

Ilya's breath hitched. He leaned his head back against the wall, staring at the ceiling. The acoustic tiles were stained with an old water mark, shaped vaguely like a continent. "What do you want?" he asked, the question directed at the ceiling.

"I want to understand," Shane said, his own voice gaining strength. "I want one conversation where nothing is hidden. No trackers, no lies, or half-truths. I need to know what was real. I need to know if the man who lo- cared about, the one who made me laugh, who learned about

my routines, who held me when the world was too loud, I need to know if he was real, or if he was just... set dressing for the craziness.”

That finally broke Ilya’s paralysis. His head snapped down, eyes blazing with a sudden, wounded fury. “You think it was *fake*?” The numbness was burning away, the medication overwhelmed by a surge of raw emotion. “You think, what- that I *studied* you to mimic my feelings? That I calculated everything to get you to laugh or something?” He pushed off the wall, taking one involuntary step forward before freezing, his entire body trembling with the effort to root himself to the spot. “The obsession is *because* it was real! I’ve been obsessed with you from the first second I saw you, Hollander. It was quiet, and it was stupid, and it was watching you adjust your tie before a press conference and feeling my heart stop. It was the friendship! Then... then the fear came. The fear of you being hurt, of you being taken, of you waking up and realizing you could do better than a damaged, possessive good for nothing Russian with a father’s ghost in his mouth. The obsession... it was the security system my broken brain built *around* my feelings. To protect it. To keep it safe. It was a cage I built around something beautiful, and then I... I locked you inside with it. I know this. Dr. Kostova has made me say it until I want to vomit. It was all real, Hollander. The good and the bad. The cage was my sickness. If I could rip out my own heart and give it to you to make up for my mistakes, I would do it instantly. So tell me what to do?”

He was breathing heavily now, his chest rising and falling in ragged bursts. A sheen of sweat glistened at his temples. The confession had cost him, tearing out of him in a raw, bloody heap.

Shane stared at him, his own heart hammering against his ribs. He saw it now, the man beneath the hollowed-out shell. The pain, the furious, desperate truth of him. He saw the man he’d missed, screaming from behind the bars of his own making.

“Tell me about Chris,” Shane said, his voice barely audible.

Ilya went very, very still. All the color drained from his face. “Shane...”

“No. You want to be honest? That’s the heart of it. You killed him. You burned him alive. You told me that. Now tell me *why*. Not the reason you gave me then. Not the ‘he took you’ reason. Tell me the reason in your head, in that moment, when you struck the match.”

The air left the room. Ilya's knees felt weak. He wanted to slide down the wall, to disappear into the carpet fibers. He forced himself to stand.

"He touched you." The words came out barely above a whisper. Ilya stared somewhere past Shane's shoulder, his eyes fixed on something only he could see. "He put hands on you. He drugged you. He frightened you, I saw your face. You were terrified." Each sentence sounded rougher than the last. "He made you small." His jaw tightened, for several seconds he said nothing. When he spoke again, his voice had gone strangely flat. "And in my head... it stopped being only him."

A humorless laugh escaped him. "That is problem, Hollander. It was never only him." His gaze dropped briefly to the floor. "It was every threat. Every alpha who looked at you and thought he had right. Every reporter who asked questions because he wanted piece of you. Every person who looked at you and saw something to take." He swallowed. "Every memory of my father."

The words came quieter. "Every time I watched him put hands on my mother. Every time I watched her become smaller." His shoulders rose and fell in a slow breath. "It all became same thing." The silence stretched. "And Hill..." His mouth twisted. "Hill became face of it."

For the first time he looked directly at Shane. There was no pride in his expression. No satisfaction, only horror.

"I did not think this is justice." The confession came immediately. "I did not think I am saving world. I did not do it because I am good man." His fingers curled into fists. "I thought this ends here."

A pause. "I thought if he disappeared, if he was gone forever, then this one thing could never happen again." His voice dropped lower. "No second victim. No next omega." The words sounded practiced. Thought about too many times. "It was not punishment."

He laughed again. Short, ugly. "It was prevention." The hotel room felt suddenly very quiet. "I wanted final answer." His eyes glistened. "I wanted lock on door. I wanted certainty."

His gaze drifted away. "When I watched fire take him..." The sentence broke. For a moment Shane wasn't sure he would continue. "When I watched him die, my head became quiet."

Ilya closed his eyes. The shame on his face was immediate. "That is the truth." His voice was barely audible now. "For first time in years, everything became quiet."

He opened his eyes again. "I felt relief." The admission seemed to physically hurt. "I felt peace."

Another pause. Then: "And that is why I am afraid of myself." His stare never left Shane's.

"I am not hero." The next words sounded almost exhausted. "I am man who enjoyed watching another man die." He swallowed hard. "I did it for you. That is true."

He reached up and closed his fist over his cross pendant. "But I also did it for myself."

The silence that followed felt endless. "I wanted him gone." His voice cracked. "And when he was... I was happy." For the first time since entering the room, Ilya looked genuinely vulnerable.

Not dangerous, not obsessive.

Not possessive. Just broken. "That is part I cannot forgive."

A beat.

A single, hot tear traced a path down Shane's cheek. He didn't wipe it away.

Ilya saw it, and it shattered him. "I am sorry," he breathed, the words breaking into fragments. "I am so sorry that my love is a monstrous thing. I am sorry I cannot... un-build the cage. I am sorry the friend you miss is the architect of your prison. I am just... sorry."

He expected Shane to recoil. To tell him to leave. To finally, rightfully, seal him out forever.

Shane slowly stood up from the bed.

Ilya stiffened, his muscles coiling to flee, to press himself through the wall.

But Shane didn't approach him. He walked to the desk, picked up the water bottle, and took a slow drink. He was giving them both space, time. He turned, leaning back against the desk, facing Ilya from across the room. The twelve feet remained.

"I'm not asking you to be a hero," Shane said, his voice thick but clear. "I'm asking you to be a patient. I'm asking you to keep seeing Dr. Kostova. To take your medication. To fight the obsession for you, not for me. Because you want a mind that isn't a prison for either of us."

Ilya stared, uncomprehending. "You are not... afraid?"

“I’m terrified,” Shane admitted softly. “But I’m not afraid of *you*. I know I should be, but only I’m afraid of what you’re capable of. And I see you fighting it. Standing against that wall right now is you fighting it. That’s... that’s something.”

He took another breath. “I don’t know if we can be what we were. That’s probably gone. It was built on secrets and dependency. But I missed my friend. And I think... maybe we can try to build an acquaintance. A very careful, distant, texting-about-coffee acquaintance. With a lot of walls. And rules. And both of us in therapy.”

A fragile, impossible hope, thin as a glass thread, began to tremble in the hollow of Ilya’s chest. It was agony. It was everything.

“What are the rules?” Ilya asked, his voice raw.

“Rule one,” Shane said, holding up a finger. “You keep going to therapy. For a long time. Rule two: no more secrets. If you feel yourself... spiraling, about me, about anything, you tell your therapist. You don’t let it fester. Rule three: this goes at my pace. Glacier pace. And if I say stop, we stop. No negotiation.”

Ilya nodded, a sharp, jerky motion. “Da. Yes. I can... I can follow rules.”

“I know you can,” Shane said, and there was the faintest, most fragile hint of the old warmth in his eyes. “I’m proud of you for getting help.”

A shudder ran through Ilya. “It was like death.”

“I know.” They looked at each other then, across the minefield of carpet, across the wreckage of love and obsession and fire. The distance was still there, vast and necessary. But for the first time, it didn’t feel like an ending. It felt like a grueling, painful starting line.

“The coffee at the new place near my apartment is still terrible,” Ilya offered, a tentative, shaky offering. A piece of their old friendship held out across the no-man’s land.

A small, real smile touched Shane's lips. "Text me about it tomorrow afternoon. I have a therapy session in the morning."

"I will," Ilya whispered, the promise like a vow.

He didn't move from the wall. Shane didn't move from the desk. They remained in their designated spaces, the boundaries clear and hard. But the room no longer vibrated with the static of impending collapse. It hummed with the exhausting, precarious effort of two shattered men, learning how to build something new from the rubble, one careful, distant text message at a time.

The silence in the room after Ilya left was different. It wasn't the oppressive, charged silence of before. It was a spent silence, like the air after a storm has passed through, clean and bruised but breathable. Shane stood by the desk for a long time, his palms flat on the cool wood, feeling the residual tremor in his own hands.

He had looked like a ghost pressed against that wall. A beautiful, shattered ghost. The confession about Chris... Shane had needed to hear it, but the raw, ugly truth of it sat in his gut like a stone. *I felt peace*. That was the part that would haunt him. Not the violence itself—he'd made a certain, grim peace with that necessity, but the satisfaction Ilya had taken from it. The monster and the man were not separate; they were the same entity, one fueled by a love so twisted it found solace in annihilation. But was what they had love? Or was it lust, biology? Curiosity? Shane didn't want to analyze that too much.

Shane believed him. That was the terrible, anchoring truth. He believed the friendship had been real. The obsession was the disease that had infected it. Ilya was sick. He was admitting it, treating it, fighting it. Standing against that wall had been an act of agonizing willpower. Shane had seen the tremor in his muscles, the desperate clench of his jaw.

He finally moved, methodically preparing for bed. Brush teeth. Floss. Wash face. The routine was a balm. He slid under the stiff hotel sheets and stared at the dark ceiling. His therapist would have questions about this. *Was it healthy? Was it safe?* He could hear her calm, probing voice. *What is your goal here, Shane? What are you trying to accomplish?*

An acquaintance. A careful, texting-about-coffee acquaintance. It sounded so pathetic when spoken aloud in his head. But it also felt like the only possible first step on a very long, very fragile bridge. He fell asleep with the image of Rozanov's wide, horrified eyes burned into his mind, and the sound of his own rules, *Glacier pace*, echoing like a mantra.

The first text came three days later, in the afternoon. Shane had just finished a light workout and was sitting in his living room, going through his weekly calendar. He picked up his phone repeatedly until he gave up and sent a quick 'hi'.

Shane- The coffee at the new place in town is still terrible. It tastes like they filter it through an old hockey sock.

He stared at the message. It was mundane. It was safe. It was a direct response to Ilya's last offering in the hotel room. He hit send before he could overthink it.

The response was not immediate. A full twenty-three minutes passed. Shane had almost given up, had gone to make himself tea, when his phone buzzed again on the counter.

IGR- This is a specific and vivid description. I am impressed. My own coffee today was brewed from what I believe are the ground-up remains of a Soviet-era propaganda pamphlet. Very bitter. Many lies.

A startled laugh burst out of Shane. It was short, but it was real. He could hear Ilya's dry, deadpan delivery in his head. That was the friend. That was the man who could make him laugh with a perfectly absurd turn of phrase.

Shane- Sounds treasonous. Be careful.

IGR- The state security does not monitor my coffee choices. Yet. I will be vigilant.

And that was it. Shane didn't reply further. Ilya didn't send anything else. The conversation had a clear beginning and end. It was a block of text, exchanged, and then released. It felt... manageable.

It became a pattern. Every few days, Shane would initiate. He followed his own rule, glacier pace. The topics were deliberately superficial, orbiting the safe, shared gravity of their lives.

Shane- Hayden tried to cook for the team. Fire department came. It was not a drill.

IGR- This does not surprise me. His hands are terrible holding sticks, now knives. Was the meal salvageable? Worst player in the league.

Shane- He was full of hope and ambitions. We ordered from a pizzeria.

IGR- A wise choice. Tell him for me, his next contract should include a personal chef. It is a safety issue.

Shane- They're repaving the road outside my building. The noise starts at 7 AM. My schedule is is trashed.

IGR- This is an outrage. Have you considered filing a formal complaint with the city? I can draft a strongly worded letter in Russian. It will confuse them and may delay the work.

Shane- Tempting. But I think my therapist would call that an 'avoidance behavior.' I'm trying earplugs.

IGR- Earplugs are a surrender. The letter is a strategic offensive. But I defer to your therapist. How are the earplugs?

The texts were never long. Never probing. Ilya never asked how he was *feeling*, never referenced the past, never mentioned therapy or medication unless Shane brought it up first. He was scrupulously, almost painfully, adherent to the boundaries. He always waited for Shane. The silence between exchanges sometimes stretched to four or five days. Shane found himself noticing the gaps, wondering if Ilya was staring at his phone, willing it to light up. The thought sent a complicated pang through him- part guilt, part a strange, aching validation.

He mentioned it to his therapist Myra, during one of their weekly video sessions. Her face, framed by her tidy, grey-blond bob, was thoughtfully neutral.

“And how does it feel, when you send a text?” she asked.

Shane considered, picking at a thread on his sweatpants. “It feels... like I’m throwing a rope across a gap. A very thin rope. And I’m not sure if the other side is still there.”

“But you keep throwing it.”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“Because...” He struggled for the words. “Because when he texts back, it’s... normal. It’s funny. It’s about casual things. Like we’re getting to know each other all over again. It feels like I’m getting a piece of something back. A piece I actually liked.”

Myra nodded. “And the distance? The fact that he never initiates?”

“It’s what I asked for. It’s good. It makes me feel... safe. In control.” He paused. “But it also feels a little like I’m holding a remote control to a person. And that feels wrong, too.”

“That’s an insightful observation,” Myra said, making a note. “The goal of boundaries isn’t to control another person. It’s to define your own space. His choice to respect them is his responsibility. Your choice to relax them, if you ever do, will be yours.”

The season wound down. Montreal made the playoffs but were knocked out in the second round in a hard-fought, seven-game series. The final buzzer felt less like an ending and more like a exhaustion. Shane’s body was tired, but his mind, for the first time in years, wasn’t screaming. The suppressants were steady. His public persona remained intact- he reliable, beta center for the Montreal Voyageurs. The facade was becoming more comfortable, less like a cage and more like a well-fitted suit of armor. He could live inside it.

The texts with Ilya continued through the playoff stress, a low-frequency hum in the background of the chaos.

Shane- Long flight to Tampa. JJ brought his ukulele. Some of us might kill him.

IGR- I have alerted The Hague. Stay strong. Noise-cancelling headphones are a legitimate survival tool.

After their elimination, the silence felt heavier. The structure of the season was gone, replaced by the vast, unstructured expanse of summer. Shane planned to stay in Montreal. He had a routine: therapy, training, classes, volunteering with a youth hockey camp for neurodivergent kids, quiet dinners with his parents where they talked about everything except the thing that had almost broken him. It was a good plan. A *healing* plan.

He didn’t expect the text that came on a humid Tuesday in early June.

Shane- Summer plans finally sorted. I’m partnering with a hockey youth camp, trying to remember how to relax. You?

The response took longer than usual. Almost an hour. When it came, Shane was in the middle of chopping vegetables for a stir-fry, his phone propped on the kitchen counter.

IGR- My plans have solidified. I am going back to Russia for the summer. I leave in two weeks.

The knife slipped. It nicked the side of his thumb, a bright, stinging line of pain. He cursed, dropping the knife into the sink with a clatter. He grabbed a paper towel, wrapping it tightly around the cut, his eyes locked on the screen. A cold, dense feeling spread from his chest outwards.

Russia.

The word was a tripwire in his mind, detonating a cascade of images: news articles about restrictive new laws, protests met with harsh crackdowns, omegas being stripped of professional licenses, forced into state-registered bonds. A cold, bureaucratic kind of violence. Ilya was an alpha, a famous one. He would be fine. More than fine. He'd be celebrated.

But the thought of him there, in that atmosphere, breathing that air... it made Shane's skin prickle with a deep, instinctive dread. It felt like watching someone walk back into a burning building they'd just escaped.

His hands were trembling. He wiped one on his jeans and picked up the phone. The response he typed was impulsive, unfiltered.

Shane- Russia? Why?

It broke their unspoken rule. It was a direct, emotional probe. He sent it before he could stop himself.

This time, the reply was faster. As if Ilya had been waiting for the question.

IGR- I have endorsement contract commitments there that require my physical presence for photo shoots and appearances. The penalties for non-compliance are... significant.

IGR- Also, Svetlana. She is... not well. Her father is sick and she is not taking it well. She will not admit it, but she needs help. I am the only one she will allow to help her. And... it is my home. For better or worse. There are things I need to see. To understand.

Shane read the messages, each one landing like a weight. The endorsement deals- practical, financial. Unarguable. Svetlana. That hit differently. Shane remembered seeing her on Ilya's arm a few times when they were photographed for events, her unwavering loyalty, the way she'd been the only one to ever truly challenge Ilya. If she needed him... that was a call Ilya would never ignore.

The cut on his thumb throbbed. He typed, deleted, typed again. He couldn't voice the chaotic fear. He had to stick to the facts. The political reality.

Shane- The political climate there right now... it's not good for people like me. The new registry laws. It's dangerous.

IGR- I know. I follow the news very closely. This is part of what I need to see. And to ensure my own legal protections, as an alpha with international status, are in absolute order. I will be safe, I am not... unaware. I am going with eyes open.

But it wasn't enough. The fear was a physical thing now, a knot in his throat. He was pacing his kitchen, the bloody paper towel still clutched in one hand.

Shane- It feels like a step backwards. After everything.

IGR- It is not a step. It is a... reconnaissance. A necessary one. The battlefield is not only here, in your living room or my therapist's office. It is also there, in the laws and the streets. I need to see it to know how to fight it. For myself. My face is being used as if I'm promoting

this. This does not change our agreement. The texts. The distance. I will have a VPN. The time difference is a challenge, but not an impossibility. I will still wait.

Our agreement. The phrase was so formal, so contractual. Yet it was also an anchor. He was promising continuity. The glacier pace would continue, just over a much greater, more terrifying distance.

Shane stopped pacing. He leaned against the cool refrigerator door, closing his eyes. He was overreacting. Ilya was a grown man, a wealthy, famous alpha returning to his homeland to fulfill contracts and care for his sick friend. It was rational. It was his right.

So why did it feel like a betrayal?

Because, a small, honest voice inside him whispered, you have started to rely on the idea of him being here. While not in the same country, in the same time zone. A manageable crisis. You've started to rebuild the idea of 'us' as two people on the same soil, and now he's ripping that soil away.

He wasn't. He was just going to Russia. For the summer.

Shane took a deep, shuddering breath. Four in. Seven hold. Eight out. He walked to the sink, ran his thumb under cold water, watching the pink swirl down the drain. He bandaged it carefully. Then he picked up his phone.

He couldn't forbid it. He wouldn't. That was the old dynamic. That was control. He had to accept Ilya's autonomy, even when it scared him. Especially when it scared him.

Shane- Okay. Svetlana comes first. Look after her. And be careful. Not just with the politics. With yourself.

The response was almost instantaneous.

IGR- I will. I have my medication. I have scheduled calls with Dr. Kostova. I have rules. Thank you, Hollander.

The conversation ended there. Shane finished making his stir-fry, ate it tasting nothing, and cleaned the kitchen with mechanical precision. The fear didn't leave. It settled into a low-grade hum of anxiety in his bones. Russia was no longer an abstract concept in the news; it was a place where Ilya would be, walking streets Shane could not picture, under a sky he would not see.

That night, for the first time in months, he dreamed of concrete rooms and the smell of gasoline. But in the dream, when he turned, it wasn't Chris he saw in the shadows. It was a faceless, uniformed official, holding a registry with Shane's name on it. And Ilya was standing between them, his back to Shane, his posture not of a protector, but of a negotiator. When Shane woke, his heart was pounding, and the first grey light of dawn was seeping around his blinds.

The texts in the following two weeks were strained. The easy rhythm was gone. Shane's messages were shorter, more factual.

Shane- Camp starts next week. Twenty kids. Should be chaotic.

IGR- You will be excellent with them. Chaos requires structure. You are the master of structure.

The day before Ilya's flight, Shane broke. He was sitting in his quiet, sunlit living room, and the silence felt accusing.

Shane- What's your flight number?

A long pause.

IGR- Aeroflot 315. Departing at 21:15. Why?

Shane- So I know when you're in the air.

Another pause, longer this time.

IGR- I will text you when I land in Moscow. If you want me to.

Shane- Okay.

And that was it. The next evening, at 9:15 PM Eastern time, Shane didn't turn on the TV. He didn't try to read. He sat on his couch, his knees drawn up, and imagined a heavy bird of metal and light lifting off from a New York runway, turning its nose east, carrying its complicated cargo into the night. The distance, which had felt so carefully measured in feet and text messages, suddenly expanded to its true, terrifying scale: continents, oceans, ideologies.

The glacier was moving. But now, it was cleaving in two, with a vast, dark sea rushing in between.

The Aeroflot cabin was a study in controlled atmosphere, but the silence in Ilya's head was louder. It was the chemical calm, the benzo haze, turning the world into a series of muffled, procedural steps: fasten seatbelt, tray table up, prepare for landing. He stared out the window as the lights of Moscow resolved from a scattered galaxy into grim, familiar grids. *Motherland*. The word tasted of diesel exhaust and old snow.

He did not go to see his family. The thought of his father's apartment- the lingering ghost of cheap vodka and impotent rage in the walls- was a physical revulsion. He had a driver take

him directly to the sleek, sterile luxury apartment his agent maintained for him in the Patriarch Ponds district. It was all cold marble and floor-to-ceiling windows, a display case for a trophy. He stood at the window that first night, looking out at the city that had built him and broken him in equal measure, and felt nothing. The medication saw to that. It was a relief.

The obligations began immediately. They were a gauntlet of performance.

There was the shoot for the premium vodka brand, where he was instructed to look “powerfully contemplative” while holding a crystal glass against a backdrop of fake birch trees. He did it. His smile for the sports drink commercial was practiced, reaching only his teeth, never his eyes. He did the talk show, deflecting questions about his “quiet season” and “rumored personal struggles” with the glib, charming evasion he’d perfected over the years. He was Ilya Rozanov - the Star, the export. The product.

And then came the other obligations. The ones not listed on any contract.

It was a dinner, ostensibly to discuss his “philanthropic potential” as a national sports icon. The restaurant was private, opulent, all dark wood and heavy velvet. The man across from him, Vitaly, had the polished, quiet menace of a senior bureaucrat. He spoke of national pride, of legacy, of the importance of strong alpha role models.

“A man of your standing, Ilya,” Vitaly said, sipping his Armenian brandy, “should be thinking of the future. Stability. A family line.”

Ilya kept his expression neutral, his fingers loose around his own untouched glass. “My future is on the ice. For now.”

Vitaly waved a dismissive hand. “The ice is temporary. Blood is permanent. The state has excellent programs. The registry is now fully digitized. So many worthy omegas from good families, reaching marrying age.” He leaned forward slightly, his voice dropping into a confiding tone. “The age has been standardized to twenty-one. A perfect time. Healthy, fertile, properly educated in their duties. We could arrange introductions. You could have your pick. A beautiful companion. Children who would carry your name and your talent.”

The air in the room thickened. Ilya could smell the alcohol, the man's expensive cologne, and beneath it, the sterile, metallic scent of state controlled suppressants. He saw, for a dizzying second, not an anonymous omega, but Shane. Shane at twenty-one, terrified and brilliant, injecting illegal suppressants in a bathroom stall before a major game. Shane, whose entire life was a masterpiece of clandestine control, of hiding what this man was offering up like a cut of prime meat.

A cold, slick nausea rose in his throat. It was the obsession, but inverted- not a desire to possess, but a violent, clawing need to protect what was his from this. To build a wall around Shane so high that this man's gaze could never touch him. But of course he couldn't do that now. They had 'boundaries'.

He manufactured a smile. It felt like cracking ice on his face. "That is a generous offer. And under other circumstances, I would be deeply grateful." He paused, letting the silence build. He channeled every ounce of his media training, his innate charisma, layering it over the lie. "But, unfortunately, my attention is... elsewhere. There is an omega. In Boston. The negotiations are... delicate. International complications. But we have an understanding. A marriage will likely follow shortly."

The lie was so specific, so blandly plausible, it hung in the air with the weight of truth. He saw the calculation in Vitaly's eyes- the slight disappointment, but also a recognition of a different kind of prize: an international union, a bridging of worlds, still a victory for the narrative.

"Boston," Vitaly repeated, nodding slowly. "An American omega. That has its own... strategic benefits. My congratulations, then. We will speak of this again after the wedding."

"Of course," Ilya said, his smile still fixed. He took a sip of the vodka then, letting the fire of it burn away the taste of the lie.

He left the dinner feeling more hollowed out than after any game. He sat in the back of the Mercedes, watching the neon of Tverskaya Street blur past, and for the first time since landing, he craved the sharp, clarifying agony of feeling something. The medication made everything feel padded, distant. The lie had been too easy. It was the kind of lie his father would have told, smooth and self-serving.

He didn't go back to the sterile apartment. He told the driver to take him to the oncology hospital in the southwest district.

The smell of the hospital was universal: antiseptic, despair, and stubborn hope. Svetlana was in the family lounge on the fourth floor, a small room with plastic chairs and a perpetually bubbling aquarium. She looked smaller, her fierce energy banked to a low, burning coal. She saw him and didn't smile, just nodded.

"He's sleeping. The treatment is... hard," she said, her voice rough. "But he is tough. So they are matched."

Ilya sat beside her, not touching. "What can I do?"

"You are here. That is doing something."

They sat in silence for a while, watching the garishly colored fish drift through their synthetic world.

"How is your therapist?" she asked, not looking at him.

"Direct. She asks questions I do not want to answer. So she is probably good."

A faint snort. "And the medication?"

"It makes the world... quiet. It is useful."

She turned her head then, her dark eyes scanning his face with the precision of an MRI. “And Shane?”

The name was a needle slipped between his ribs. He kept his gaze on the fish. “There is no Shane. There is an agreement. There are rules. There are text messages about nothing really. We are trying to be friends.”

“That is not an answer.”

“It is the only answer I have.”

Svetlana studied him for a long moment. “You look like a man who has placed his own heart in a locked box and is now sitting on the lid.”

“It is safer there,” he said, his voice flat.

“For who?”

He didn’t answer. He couldn’t. The truth was a tangled knot: safer for Shane, yes. But also, selfishly, safer for him. The box kept the obsession contained. It also kept the love, the terrible, genuine love, from tearing him open in this hospital lounge.

He came back the next day. And the next. He brought Svetlana proper food when she refused to leave her father’s side. He sat with Viktor while he slept, the old man’s breathing a ragged, rhythmic struggle. He remembered Viktor from his childhood- a bear of a man who was the best goaltender of the soviet era, whose presence had always been a solid, quiet contrast to the volatile chaos of Ilya’s own father. Seeing him reduced, frail, was a different kind of reality.

One afternoon, while Viktor slept, Svetlana cornered him by the coffee vending machine.

“The texts,” she said, her arms crossed. “Are they helping? Or are they just another way to torture yourself?”

Ilya leaned against the wall, the hum of the machine vibrating through his spine. “They are a thread,” he said quietly. “A very thin thread. If I pull on it, I fear it will snap. If I let it go, I fear I will float away. So I just... look at it.”

“And he knows you are here?” She gestured vaguely, encompassing the hospital, the city, the country.

“He knows. He was... upset.”

“Good,” Svetlana said fiercely. “He should be. It is upsetting.” She sighed, the anger bleeding out into exhaustion. “You told him about the offer? The ‘pick of the registry’?”

Ilya shook his head. “No. I told the man a lie. I said I had an omega in Boston. That we would marry.”

Svetlana’s eyebrows shot up. Then, a slow, grim smile touched her lips. “A good lie. A protective lie.”

“I’m getting better at it,” he muttered, looking at his shoes.

“It was,” she said, not unkindly. “But you told it to keep a Hollander safe. That makes it a new kind of lie. Maybe a better one.”

He didn’t know what to say to that. The morality of his actions was a maze he no longer trusted himself to navigate.

Days bled into weeks. The endorsement commitments were completed. The campaigns of him with the vodka appeared on massive billboards. He avoided all further government

overtures. His world shrank to the hospital, the gym where he maintained his training in grim, solitary sessions, and the silent apartment.

He waited for Shane's texts. They came less frequently now, the time zone and the unspoken weight of his location creating a new distance. They were still surface-level, achingly mundane.

Shane- One of the kids at camp today called a slapshot a 'swissy-boom.' I think I like that better.

IGR- The terminology committee at the NHL will be horrified. I support this rebellion.

He would stare at the message, at the faint echo of Shane's smile in the words, and feel the lock on the box in his chest strain. He never initiated. The discipline was a brutal, daily exercise. It was the only form of penance he had left.

One evening, leaving the hospital, the summer twilight still clinging to the sky, his phone buzzed. Not a text. An email alert from a secure, encrypted service. The investigator he had retained- the only one from the old apparatus he kept on a retainer, with strictly defined, legal parameters- had completed his background check. The subject: all known associates of the late Chris. A final, obsessive sweep for any lingering threats.

Ilya stood on the sidewalk, the traffic noise fading to a hum. He opened the report, scanning it. Mostly dead ends, former associates in prison or abroad. Then, a single note, buried:
Financial records indicate a series of large, untraceable payments made to Chris in the six months preceding the kidnapping. Source appears to be a shell corporation with nominal ties to several Russian oligarchs. No direct link to subject Rozanov established. Motive unclear.

He was stopped from replying when a picture came through from Shane. He was surrounded by a group of 15 children all in hockey gear. His heart melted a little. Hollander would make such an amazing parent.

He tried to think of what to reply that didn't push the established lines. He settled on a smiley face, commenting that some of the little girls looked like better players than Pike.

The world did not tilt. The medication held. But the quiet in his mind became a different kind of quiet- the quiet of deep, dark water where something immense had just glided past, unseen.

He closed the email. He deleted it. He looked up at the Moscow sky, no longer familiar, just a canopy of gathering dark.

He had come to see, to understand, to fulfill obligations. He was seeing things now he did not want to understand. The battlefield, he realized, was not just in laws or in therapist's offices. It was here, in the ghost of a dead man's finances, in the polite offers in private restaurants, in the space between a text message sent and a reply received. It was everywhere.

He put the phone away. He walked to his car, alone. The box in his chest was no longer locked. It was simply too heavy to open.

Shane was in his Montreal kitchen, sunlight dappling the clean countertops. He was measuring coffee beans, the ritual calm and precise. But the scent was wrong. Instead of dark roast, the air was thick with the green, crisp bite of alpha- Ilya's scent, but not from a memory. It was present, immediate, as if he were standing right behind him.

Shane turned, and the kitchen melted away like paint in rain. The tiles under his feet became the coarse, industrial carpet of the hotel room. But it was different. Warmer. The light was golden and low, like perpetual sunset, casting long shadows that seemed to breathe. Ilya wasn't by the door. He was in the center of the room, standing perfectly still, watching him.

He was shirtless, wearing only a pair of soft, grey sweatpants that hung extremely low on his hips. The defined muscles of his chest and abdomen were not the sculpted perfection of an athlete in a photoshoot, but the powerful, living architecture of the man Shane had known- a map of birthmarks, of tension, of contained strength. His eyes held none of the hollowed-out exhaustion from their real meeting. They were dark, focused, blazing with an intelligence that saw through skin and bone straight to the omega core of him.

No words were spoken. The twelve feet between them didn't vanish; it became a tangible space charged with potential, like the air before a lightning strike. Shane felt his own body responding before his mind could protest. A deep, internal flutter, a cascade of warmth that started in his belly and spilled downward, a slick, undeniable gathering of heat between his legs. His suppressants weren't just failing; in the dream, they had never existed. His biology awoke, not with a shock, but with a profound, sighing relief, as if coming home after a long, arduous journey.

Ilya took one step forward. Then another. Each footfall was silent, but Shane felt it in his bones. He was powerless to move, rooted not by fear, but by a yearning so acute it was a physical ache. When Ilya finally stood before him, the heat radiating from his alpha body was like standing near a furnace.

A large, calloused hand rose, not to his face, but to the column of his throat. Ilya's thumb rested against his pulse point, feeling the frantic rhythm there. His gaze was possessive, awed.

"There you are," Ilya murmured, his voice a low rumble that vibrated through Shane's skin. "I have missed this. The truth of you. It has been like living in a world without scent, without color."

His other hand came up to the hem of Shane's t-shirt. With a deliberate, slow pull, he drew it up and over his head, discarding it without a glance. The cool air on his skin was a shock, followed immediately by the searing heat of Ilya's palms smoothing over his shoulders, down his arms. His touch was worship and conquest intertwined.

Ilya's mouth found the junction of his neck and shoulder, and he didn't just kiss it. He inhaled, a deep, shuddering breath that made his whole body tense. "Sweet," he growled against the damp skin. "So sweet and all mine."

The claim, spoken into his flesh, unraveled the last of Shane's resistance. A soft, broken sound escaped him, and he leaned into the mouth working its way down his chest. Ilya took a nipple into his mouth, sucking and laving it with his tongue until it was a hard, aching peak, then biting down with just enough pressure to make Shane cry out, his hands flying into Ilya's hair, not to push away, but to hold on.

Ilya guided him backward until his knees hit the edge of the bed. He laid Shane down with a reverence that contradicted the hunger in his eyes, arranging him on the striped bedspread as if he were something precious. Then, he knelt on the floor between Shane's legs, his hands pushing his thighs apart with an unyielding gentleness.

The first touch of Ilya's tongue, there, at the slick, heated heart of him, was an electric shock. Shane arched off the bed, a gasp torn from his lungs. It wasn't just the sensation- incredible and dizzying- it was the intimacy of it. The absolute, carnal submission of this powerful, dangerous alpha on his knees, tasting him, learning him. Ilya feasted on him with a single-minded intensity, his tongue delving deep into his cunt, then circling the tight furl of his ass, making Shane writhe and clutch at the bedding. The dual attention was maddening, a preview of what was to come.

"Ilya... God..."

"You taste like heaven," Ilya rasped, lifting his head, his chin glistening. His eyes were wild. "Like home. I need to be inside. Now."

He rose, shedding his sweatpants. His cock, fully erect, was a formidable sight- thick, veined, the head flushed a deep red and already leaking. He stroked himself slowly, his gaze locked on Shane's spread body. "Look at you. Open for me. Wet for me. Your body knows its alpha."

He didn't ask. He guided himself to Shane's entrance, the blunt head pressing against the incredible, yielding heat. He pushed in, not in one swift motion, but with a slow, relentless penetration that stole the breath from Shane's lungs. He felt every inch, the stretch, the burn, the profound rightness of it. Ilya sank to the hilt, burying himself fully, and they both groaned, a harmony of raw need.

For a moment, he just stayed there, embedded, his body trembling with the effort of holding still. He lowered himself, covering Shane completely, and kissed him, deep and filthy, letting him taste himself on Ilya's tongue.

“You feel that?” Ilya whispered against his lips, giving a shallow, grinding thrust. “That is where I belong. Deep in your cunt. Filling the space made for me.”

He began to move, setting a deep, rhythmic pace that was pure claiming. Each thrust was a deliberate conquest, hitting a spot inside that made Shane see stars. But Ilya wasn't satisfied. His hand slid down, over Shane's trembling belly, through the wetness, until his thumb found his other entrance.

“This too,” Ilya breathed, his voice thick with lust. “Every part. I want you so full of me you can't tell where you end and I begin.”

He pressed his thumb in, just past the tight ring of muscle, alongside the relentless glide of his cock in Shane's cunt. The double sensation was overwhelming, a flood of pleasure so intense it bordered on pain. Shane sobbed, his body bowing, completely impaled, completely owned.

Ilya's pace became more urgent, his thrusts harder, his thumb working in time. He was everywhere, overwhelming all of Shane's senses- the smell of their coupling, the sound of skin slapping and ragged breaths, the sight of Ilya's face, clenched in ecstatic agony above him, the taste of sweat and salt, and the all-consuming feeling of being *taken*.

“I'm going to breed you, Shane,” Ilya chanted, his rhythm becoming erratic, primal. “Right here. Right now. I'm going to pump my seed so deep into your womb it takes root. I want to see your belly swell with my baby. I want everyone who looks at you to know you are *mine*. That I filled you, claimed you, *bred* you.”

The words, dark and possessive, lit a fire in Shane's blood, it was a biological truth roaring to the surface. The idea of it, of being so thoroughly claimed, of having Ilya's child growing inside him- unlocked a deep, submissive well of desire. It was the ultimate surrender, the ultimate connection.

“Yes,” Shane gasped, his own voice unrecognizable. “Do it. Breed me. I want it, I want your baby-”

His permission shattered Ilya's control. With a guttural roar, Ilya drove into him one final, devastating time, his thumb pressing deep, and Shane felt him swell, then pulse, a hot, torrential flood releasing deep into his cunt. The sensation of being filled, claimed, *seeded*, triggered his own climax. It ripped through him, a cataclysm of pleasure that clenched around Ilya's cock and thumb, milking him, as his own release striped his stomach. The orgasm seemed endless, a fusion of physical ecstasy and profound, psychic completion.

The violence of the climax- the dual, full-body convulsion in the dream perfectly synced with the wrenching, real orgasm in his sleeping body, was a seismic shock too great.

Shane woke with a strangled cry, his back arching off the mattress in the dark of his bedroom.

The phantom sensations were horrifically vivid: the stretch, the heat, the flooding release. The real ones were a mortifying confirmation: the slick wetness soaking his thighs, the sticky mess on his abdomen, the rich, sweet, unmasked scent of omega in pure heat and satisfaction hanging thick in the air.

He had come. Spectacularly. In his sleep. At the exact moment of the dream's violent, breeding fantasy.

"Oh, god. No."

He scrambled from the bed, his heart a frantic bird trapped in his ribs. The scent was everywhere, cloying, damning. He didn't turn on the light. He couldn't face the evidence. He stumbled to the bathroom, legs like water, and fumbled for the shower. He didn't wait. He stepped under a blast of icy water, pajamas and all, gasping as it shocked his feverish skin.

He scrubbed until his skin was raw, trying to erase the ghost of Ilya's hands, his mouth, his claim. He stood under the freezing spray until he shivered uncontrollably, the dream's heat finally scoured away.

Afterward, in the dark, he changed the sheets with robotic efficiency, bundling the soiled evidence away. Only then, standing in the center of his pristine, scentless room, wrapped in a towel, did the full weight of it crash down.

It wasn't just a sex dream. It was a full-blown, detailed fantasy of complete surrender and primal breeding. His body, his omega nature, hadn't just mutinied. It had drafted a blueprint for its own colonization and begged for it.

He sat on the edge of the clean bed, head in his hands, the echo of Ilya's voice a brand on his soul: *I want to see your belly swell with my baby.*

And the most terrifying part? In the depths of the dream, he had wanted it, too.

The silence of his phone felt accusatory. It sat on his kitchen counter, a black rectangle of unfulfilled obligation, while Shane meticulously scrambled egg whites. He'd missed the morning check-in. For over two months, like clockwork, he had initiated their glacial-paced text exchange every few days. It was a rule, a structure, and Shane lived by structure.

Today, the thought of typing out some inane comment about the weather or his training regimen made his skin crawl. It felt like a lie. How could he send 'The humidity is brutal today. How's friendly Russian?' when his body still hummed with the phantom echo of being filled, claimed, bred? It would be a desecration of their careful, sterile agreement. It would be an admission that Ilya, even an ocean away, still lived in his synapses, in his biology, in his dreams.

He ate without tasting, cleaned the plate with robotic efficiency, and stared at the phone. Ilya wouldn't text. He was scrupulous about that rule. The silence would stretch, and Ilya would interpret it correctly- as a withdrawal, a step back on the glacier. That's what Shane wanted, wasn't it? More distance.

A cold, hollow anxiety pooled in his stomach. He wasn't built for this kind of ambiguity. He needed to talk to someone who wouldn't therapize him, but who also knew the whole, ugly story. He picked up the phone and scrolled past Ilya's name, his thumb hovering over his mother's contact before moving on. She'd be loving but terrified. He needed bluntness. Plus

he'd been avoiding the long overdue conversation of what was going on between him and Ilya.

He called Rose.

She answered on the third ring, her voice bright and slightly breathless. "Shane! Hey, I'm just between takes, you have perfect timing. What's up honey?"

Just hearing her voice, so normal, so anchored in his *real* life, made his throat tighten. "Can you talk? I mean, really talk?"

The background noise on her end faded, replaced by the sound of a door closing. "Okay, I'm in my trailer. You sound weird. What's wrong? Is it..." She lowered her voice.

"It's me," Shane said, sinking onto his couch. He pulled a cushion into his lap, gripping it tightly. "I had a dream. A really... graphic dream. About him."

He told her. Not in the visceral, anatomical detail he'd experienced, but in blunt, clinical terms that still made his face heat. "It was about sex. Possessive sex. And it... woke me up. Physically. I haven't been able to think straight since."

Rose was silent for a long moment. He could practically hear her thinking, parsing the information through her fiercely protective lens. "Okay," she said finally, her voice carefully neutral. "First, it's just a dream. Your brain processing shit. You've been under insane stress for over a year, you're on a chemical cocktail to suppress your entire secondary gender, and your ex-boyfriend-thing, who is also your obsessive, possessive, maybe-still-in-love-with-you alpha rival- just went back to a country that's basically an omega dystopia. It's not surprising your subconscious is throwing a rave."

"A rave where I get knotted and bred," Shane said flatly.

“A *metaphorical* rave,” Rose insisted, though her tone was gentler. “Shane, your body has needs you’ve been medically silencing for years. The mind finds a way to express that. It doesn’t mean you want *him* back, necessarily. It might just mean you’re... lonely. Or horny. Or both. Like you’ve only had sex with one person. You’re too hot to keep all that to yourself.”

“It didn’t feel metaphorical. It felt like a memory.” He pressed the heel of his hand against his forehead. “And now I can’t bring myself to text him. It feels like he’d know. Like he’d smell it on the words.”

“Good,” Rose said, her protectiveness surfacing. “Maybe you shouldn’t text him. Maybe this is your brain’s way of telling you to cut the thread. He’s in Russia, Shane. He’s doing god-knows-what, meeting with government creeps who probably offer him omegas like canapés. Why are you keeping this line open?”

“Because he’s trying,” Shane whispered, the truth of it aching. “He’s sick, and he’s trying. He gives me the space I asked for. He follows the rules.”

“He also burned a man alive and enjoyed it,” Rose shot back, not unkindly, but with the brutal honesty only a best friend could wield. “Trying is the bare minimum. It doesn’t entitle him to a piece of you. Not even a ‘casual text buddy’ piece.”

He had no argument. She was right. Everything she said was logically, defensibly right.

“So what do I do?” The question was barely audible.

Rose sighed. “I have to get back to set in five. Let’s have dinner. My place. That new Lebanese place near me. We’ll talk properly. No phones, no distractions. Just us.”

“Okay.”

“And Shane? Breathe. It was a dream. You’re safe. He’s thousands of miles away. You’re in control.”

He hung up, clinging to her words. You’re in control. He repeated it like a mantra as he changed into his workout gear and drove to the team’s private training facility.

The controlled environment of the gym usually centered him. The predictable whir of treadmills, the clank of weights, the smell of rubber and sweat. Today, the sounds were too sharp, the lights too bright. He flinched when Hayden dropped a 45-pound plate onto the floor with a resonant clang.

“Whoa, Holzy, you okay?” Hayden asked, wiping his brow with his forearm. He was doing deadlifts, his face flushed with effort.

“Fine,” Shane said, too quickly. He moved to a cable machine, focusing on the precise, repetitive motion of a lat pulldown. Control the movement. Control the breath.

JJ wandered over from the leg press, his usual easy-going expression tempered with concern. “You’re looking a little... twitchy, cap. Everything cool with the fam?”

“Family’s fine,” Shane said, avoiding eye contact, counting his reps in his head. Eleven... Twelve...

Hayden and JJ shared a glance over his head, a whole silent conversation passing between them. They’d been his shields, his unknowing guardians during the worst of it. They didn’t know the details- they thought it was a standard, messy breakup with a rival player- but they knew it had broken something in him. They’d learned to read his moods.

“Okay,” Hayden said, his voice deliberately casual. “Well, if you wanna hit the heavy bag later, I’m down. Good for working out the weirdness.”

“Or we could just order a truly irresponsible amount of pizza and watch bad action movies,” JJ offered. “No talking required.”

The offers, so simple and full of uncomplicated, brotherly care, almost undid him. This was his life. His team. His friends. A world away from golden-lit hotel rooms and Russian whispers.

“Maybe tomorrow,” Shane managed, offering a weak smile. “Just... off day. Thanks, guys.”

They nodded, leaving him to his workout, but he felt their watchful attention for the rest of the session. He was jumpy, and they’d noticed. The facade was cracking.

The restaurant was cozy, all warm wood and the scent of garlic and roasting meat. Rose had secured a booth in the back, partially shielded by a decorative screen. She’d already ordered a plate of hummus and fresh, warm pita.

“Okay,” she said, after they’d ordered. “Start from the beginning. Don’t clinicalize it. Just tell me.”

So he did. Haltingly, his face burning, he gave her more of the dream’s texture. The way the distance dissolved. The feeling of his suppressants simply not existing. The shocking, vivid clarity of Ilya’s possession, the words he’d used, the dual penetration, the overwhelming focus on breeding.

Rose listened, her expression serious, her food forgotten. When he finished, she took a long drink of water.

“Wow,” she said softly. “That’s... intense.”

“It felt more real than any other dream I’ve ever had.”

“I believe you.” She tore a piece of pita, swirling it in the hummus without eating it. “So, your subconscious isn’t just suggesting a quick hookup. It’s suggesting full-bonding, baby-making, forever-claiming with the one person who is categorically the worst choice for that.”

“Thanks, that’s helpful,” Shane said drily.

“I’m just naming the monster.” She finally ate the pita, thinking. “Here’s my take, for what it’s worth. You’ve been in survival mode for so long. First, hiding your gender. Then, managing Ilya’s obsession. Then, recovering from the kidnapping. Your entire sexual, romantic, biological identity has been tied to trauma, secrecy, and crisis. You haven’t had a single normal, healthy, *fun* sexual experience as your full self. Ever.”

The truth of it landed, heavy and sad.

“Your body is rebelling,” Rose continued. “It’s screaming for an outlet. But your mind, understandably, associates ‘outlet’ with ‘Ilya,’ because he’s the only one who’s ever seen that part of you, even if he twisted it. So your brain serves up Ilya as the vehicle for the release you need.”

“So what’s the solution? More therapy?”

“Therapy for the trauma, absolutely. But for the... physiological frustration?” Rose leaned forward. “Maybe you need to reprogram the association. Find a new outlet. A safe one.”

Shane blinked. “What, like... date?”

“God, no. Dating is a minefield.” Rose shook her head. “But you’re a young, incredibly fit guy. You have needs. What if you found a... friend. A discreet, understanding friend.

Someone you trust, where there's zero romantic expectation. A friends-with-benefits situation. No strings, no obsession, just... mutual release. You get to experience physical intimacy on your terms, in a controlled setting, without all the apocalyptic baggage."

The idea was so foreign, so utterly outside the binary he'd lived in- complete celibacy vs. all-consuming entanglement with Ilya- that he couldn't process it. "Who? How? I can't just... I'm not like that."

"You could be," Rose said gently. "If it was safe. It's about taking that power back. Your body, your choice, your rules. No one monitoring you, no one claiming you, no one breeding you. Just pleasure. To remind you that it can exist separately from him."

Before he could formulate a response, a flash went off near the entrance. Then another. A paparazzo, lens pointed directly at their booth. Rose groaned. "Ugh, perfect. Tomorrow's headline: 'Shane Hollander and Rose Labelle Spark Dating Rumors Again Over Cozy Dinner.' Sorry."

Shane shrugged, used to it. But as the waiter delivered their mains, the idea Rose had planted took root. A friends-with-benefits situation. A safe, controlled experiment in reclaiming his own sexuality. It sounded terrifying. It sounded impossible.

But as he picked at his lamb kofta, the ghost of the dream still clinging to him, the alternative- continuing to be haunted by a phantom Ilya in his sleep while maintaining a sterile text-based purgatory with the real one- sounded like a slower, more exquisite kind of torture.

He looked at Rose, who was glaring in the direction of the departed photographer. "How," he asked quietly, "does one even find a 'discreet, understanding friend' for that?"

Rose turned back to him, a slow, sympathetic smile on her face. "We start," she said, "by figuring out what you actually want. What feels safe. We make a list. Like you do with everything else."

A list. Rules. Structure. Shane felt the first faint stirring of something that wasn't dread or desire, but possibility. It was a terrifying possibility, but it was his.

The "Get Shane Laid" list as Rose called it, was a disaster.

It lived on his Notes app, a sterile bullet-point manifesto of *What Feels Safe*. Rose had helped him draft it over coffee the morning after their dinner, her phone buzzing constantly with messages from her publicist about the "dating rumors" photos.

"Okay, rule one," she'd said, tapping her screen. "No alphas."

Shane had nodded immediately. The idea of an alpha's natural dominance, the biological push-and-pull, the potential for a claim... it was the core of the Ilya-shaped trauma. "Agreed. Betas only."

"Rule two: Must have zero connection to professional hockey. No players, no coaches, no staff, no reporters."

Another check, not as easy. Hockey was the arena of their rivalry, their friendship, their love. It was contaminated ground.

"Rule three: Discretion is non-negotiable. They sign an NDA if it gets to that point. Your privacy is everything."

"Rule four: No romantic expectations. This is physical. Transactional, almost."

“Rule five,” Shane had added, his voice quiet. “They have to be... calm. Steady. Not intense.”

Rose had looked at him then, her expression softening. “You’re describing the opposite of him.”

“That’s the point.”

For a week, Rose operated as a reluctant, fiercely protective matchmaker. She had connections- friends of friends, a guy from her yoga class, a respectful beta cinematographer she’d worked with. She’d send Shane photos and bios, pared down to the relevant list criteria.

And every single one gave him the ick.

Mark, the yoga guy, was calm and steady. He was also passionately into crystal healing and talked about “energy alignment” in a way that made Shane’s skin crawl. His lack of intensity felt not like safety, but like a profound absence of *passion*. Shane found himself missing the electric, all-consuming focus Ilya could bring to a simple conversation about airport food.

Ben, the cinematographer, was discreet, professional, and happily polyamorous. He explained his boundaries with elegant clarity. It was all perfectly reasonable, and Shane felt nothing but a cold, polite detachment. The man’s emotional landscape was so maturely mapped, so *unmessy*. Shane realized, with a sinking heart, that he associated care with a certain kind of beautiful, destructive messiness. With someone memorizing his coffee order not because it was polite, but because knowing his preferences felt like a vital piece of intelligence.

The final straw was Derek, a beta graphic designer who was funny, kind, and loved hockey as a fan. He was the closest fit. They met for a strictly platonic coffee. Derek was great. He was fine. He made Shane laugh once with a story about a disastrous client.

And when Derek casually touched his arm to emphasize a point, Shane had to suppress a full-body flinch. Not out of fear, but out of a profound, wrong sense of *disloyalty*. His skin, traitorously, remembered a different, calloused touch. The quiet, steady beta touch felt like a cheap imitation.

He texted Rose that night.

Shane- It's not going to work.

Rose Landry- Which one?

Shane- Any of them. All of them. It's me. I'm broken.

Rose Landry- You're not broken. You're hung up. There's a difference.

Shane- It feels the same.

He lay in bed, the structured list feeling like a taunt. He mentally ran through the criteria. Calm. Steady. Beta. Non-hockey. Discreet. He imagined a person who embodied them perfectly.

Then he imagined that person trying to make him laugh after a brutal loss. He imagined them understanding the specific, grinding pressure of a playoff streak. He imagined them knowing, without being told, that he needed the blankets arranged a certain way, that overhead lighting after 7 PM gave him a headache.

Every point on the list, every trait he'd identified as "safe," was just a negative-space silhouette of Ilya Rozanov. The intensity, the hockey obsession, the alpha possessiveness- he had tried to carve those out. But what was left wasn't a person he could want. It was a cardboard cutout. The very architecture of his attraction, it seemed, had been built around a single, flawed, dangerous blueprint.

The realization was a quiet devastation. He wasn't looking for a safe alternative. He was looking for Ilya, with the dangerous parts removed. And that man didn't exist.

Three days later, watching a group of kids at his summer camp utterly fail to execute a simple passing drill in a delightful, chaotic mess, he did something impulsive. He took a picture. Jackie, who was hanging around as the camp mom, had captured him in the middle of it, his stick held out as a gentle guide for a tiny, determined seven-year-old who was swinging at the puck like it had insulted her family. Shane's face was relaxed, a real smile touching his eyes, the summer sun bright on his hair.

He looked at the photo. It was a slice of his real life, his healing life. Without overthinking, he opened his text thread with Ilya. The last message was from over a week ago, his own unanswered text about the humidity. He attached the photo and typed.

Shane- My legacy. Teaching the next generation to whiff on wide-open nets.

The reply came later that evening, as he was sorting gear.

IGR- This is a good picture. You look happy. The child looks... fiercely committed to missing. The form is terrible. I love it.

It was a standard, friendly reply. Perfectly within the bounds of their "acquaintance" agreement. It was exactly what he should have wanted.

It felt like ash in his mouth. He wanted more. He wanted Ilya to say, 'You are beautiful in the sun.' He wanted him to ask, 'Do you think about teaching our own child that one day?' He wanted the possessive, obsessive, all-consuming attention that had once suffocated him. The neutrality was a new kind of torture. He refused to overthink it- it was the definition of crazy but right then, he didn't care.

So he began to share more. Carefully curated pieces of his life, trying to feed a hunger he couldn't name. A picture of the whole camp group, arms slung around each other, faces sweaty and grinning. A shot of him and Hayden and JJ collapsed on the bench after playing with the kids, red-faced and laughing.

IGR- Team Pike-Hollander-JJ remains undefeated against minors. A proud day.

The replies were always there. Always friendly. Always neutral. A chasm of polite distance yawned beneath every exchanged photo and quip. Shane found himself scrutinizing each message, looking for a crack, a hint of the old, hungry Ilya. There was none. The medication, the therapy, the rules- they were working. Ilya was being good. And it was driving Shane quietly mad.

The ragebait was not a conscious decision. It was a desperate, spiraling impulse.

It started with Scott. He was at a team barbecue at Kip and Scott's house, with some of the Voyaguers invited along with some of the New Jersey rookies. The first truly relaxed gathering since the season ended. Kip, heavily pregnant now, glowed with a serene, healthy happiness that made something in Shane's chest ache. Scott was attentive, grounding, his alpha presence so gentle and supportive it was like a masterclass in everything Ilya was not. Jackie took a picture of them by the grill, Shane smiling as Scott demonstrated a flipping technique. The alpha's arm was loosely around Shane's shoulders, a gesture of pure, platonic camaraderie.

Shane sent it.

Shane- Learning the secrets of the perfect burger. Scott is a grill-master.

He waited, his heart a hard, anxious knot in his chest. This would do it. The sight of another alpha, a good one, touching him. The domestic setting. The smile.

The reply came an hour later.

IGR- I hope you and the team are having a good evening.

It was so bland, so utterly devoid of the jealous, possessive fire Shane had been braced for, that he actually laughed, a sharp, hollow sound. He'd thrown a lit match into what he thought was a powder keg, and it had landed in a bucket of water.

He escalated. He sent a photo of him and a young, handsome beta intern from his father's department at work, who'd joined them for lunch. He sent a goofy, arms-around-each-other shot with three of his single beta teammates after a pickup game. Each time, he crafted a caption that hinted at casual, easy companionship.

Each time, Ilya's response was a variation on a theme: polite, slightly humorous, completely detached. A sports commentary on the pickup game. A question about the architecture firm's projects. It was like texting a particularly friendly, knowledgeable chatbot.

The final attempt was the most blatant. It was a selfie, taken in his own kitchen, sent late at night. He was wearing a soft, old t-shirt, his hair damp from a shower, a faint, tired smile on his face. The setting was intimate. The message was just the photo. No caption.

He stared at the sent image, his pulse thrumming. This was the dream-Shane, the one accessible and unguarded. If anything could pierce the chemical calm and the therapist-mandated rules...

His phone buzzed.

IGR- You look tired. The camp is draining but good, I hope. Sleep well, Hollander.

Sleep well.

Two words of such profound, infuriating neutrality that something in Shane finally snapped. Not into anger, but into a cold, clear despair. He had been trying to provoke a monster back to the surface, and the monster was gone. In its place was a polite, medicated stranger who wished him pleasant dreams.

He put his phone down on the counter. The silence of his apartment pressed in, heavier than ever. The ragebait had failed because there was no rage left to bait. Ilya had successfully walled himself off, becoming the careful, distant acquaintance Shane had demanded.

He had gotten exactly what he asked for. And it felt like losing him all over again.

He didn't text again after that. The glacier pace ground to a complete halt. He had given up.

The first photo was a knife, expertly slipped between his ribs.

Ilya was in the sterile Moscow apartment, staring at the screen of his phone, the chemical calm from his evening dose of lorazepam creating a muffled, padded distance from the world. Then Shane's message came through. The picture of him and Scott Hunter by a grill, Scott's arm a casual, possessive bar across Shane's shoulders. They were both laughing. Scott looked like a fucking poster boy for wholesome alpha partnership- steady, kind, *safe*. The kind of alpha who grilled burgers and supported his pregnant omega husband and didn't hire private investigators to track the object of his affection.

The rage was instantaneous, a white-hot geyser that erupted through the pharmaceutical fog. His vision tunneled, the edges going dark and sparking with static. His hand clenched around the phone, the case groaning in protest. He saw himself hurling it against the marble wall, watching the screen explode into a spiderweb of cracks, destroying the image, destroying the proof that Shane could smile like that- sun-drenched and easy, under someone else's touch.

Scott Fucking Hunter. The man had everything Ilya had been taught was weak: patience, gentle dominance, open affection. And he had access to Shane, was treated like family. Ilya's breath came in short, sharp gusts. The obsession, that great wounded beast he kept chained and sedated in the dark of his psyche, roared to life. It wanted coordinates. It wanted a threat assessment. It wanted to know Scott Hunter's schedule, his weaknesses, the precise pressure needed to make him remove his arm and never, ever put it back.

Then, the next photo. Shane with JJ, with other teammates, faces flushed with laughter after a game. JJ, the loyal, simple-hearted beta who had been there, in Shane's hotel room, who had seen Shane broken and had helped pick up the pieces Ilya had shattered. The jealousy here was different, colder. It wasn't about rivalry; it was about replacement. JJ offered the uncomplicated friendship Ilya had poisoned. He was the friend Ilya could no longer be.

Ilya stood up, pacing the length of the cold, empty living room. The urge to smash something, to act, was a physical tremor in his hands. He could text back something cutting. He could ignore it. He could, God help him, ask a question. You and Hunter seem close.

But Dr. Kostova's voice was in his head, a drill sergeant in the silence. "The obsession is a security system you built. It is malfunctioning. Your task is not to obey its alarms, but to stand still and let them ring until they stop."

This was a test. Not from Shane- Shane was just living his life, rebuilding it, exactly as he should, but from the universe. Or from his own therapy. A test of his new, fragile control.

He stopped pacing, forcing his hand to relax. The phone remained intact.

Of course Shane wouldn't be alone. The idea was absurd. He was beautiful, brilliant, and kind. He was healing. The world was full of Scotts and JJs and countless other men, betas, alphas, good men who would see that and want to be near it. Who would deserve to be near it. Ilya's claim was forfeit. He had burned it in a gasoline-fed fire. All he had left was the privilege of these text messages, this distant, sterile window into Shane's happiness.

If he wanted to keep that window open, even a crack, he would have to learn to watch. To see Shane smiling in other people's arms, laughing at other people's jokes, building a life with other people's support. He would have to accept it. Even if the acceptance felt like swallowing ground glass. Even if it killed him slowly, cell by cell.

He typed his reply, his fingers stiff. It was bland. Neutral. The kind of thing a casual acquaintance would say. He sent it and put the phone face down on the table, as if it were radioactive.

The subsequent photos were a special kind of torture. Each one was a lesson in a life he was not part of. The group shots, the easy camaraderie, the beta intern from David Hollander's firm - a clean, safe, *appropriate* connection. Ilya dissected each image with a forensic, agonizing eye, noting the ease in Shane's posture, the lack of tension around his eyes. He was thriving. Away from him.

And then, the final one. The selfie. Shane, soft and tired and freshly showered in his own kitchen. It was an intimacy so casual it stole the air from Ilya's lungs. This wasn't for public consumption. This was a glimpse of a private Shane, a Shane at rest. And he had sent it to Ilya.

The beast in his chest howled, begging him to respond in kind. To say something that would claw back a piece of that intimacy. *You look beautiful. I miss you.*

He picked up the phone. His thumb hovered. He thought of the government man, Vitaly, offering him his "pick" of faceless, registered omegas. He thought of Svetlana's father, wasting away in a hospital bed, his daughter's loyalty the only thing easing his pain. He thought of Shane, standing in a hotel room, telling him his healing shouldn't have to look like Ilya's destruction.

He typed the only thing he could allow himself. The only thing that was both true and safe. *You look tired. The camp is draining but good, I hope. Sleep well, Hollander.*

It was a surrender. A white flag waved from the deepest trenches of his own sickness.

The texts from Shane stopped after that. The silence was worse. Ilya knew why. His neutral, friendly replies had achieved their intended effect. They had built the very distance Shane had asked for. He had passed the test by failing it in the only way that mattered.

The decision to return to the US for early training camp was an escape. Moscow's atmosphere, the oppressive political climate, the ghost of his father in every shadow, the

memory of Vitaly's offer- was a poison he could no longer breathe. He needed the structure of hockey. The mindless, physical punishment of the ice.

He packed his bag in the silent apartment. As he folded his training gear, a stupid, stubborn hope took root, a weed in the cracks of his resolve. He was flying into New York, but his team's first preseason game was in Toronto. A back-to-back, in fact. He would be in the city for forty-eight hours.

He finished packing and zipped the bag closed. The hope was a live wire in his chest, painful and bright. He knew, with a certainty that felt like fate, that the text would not come. Shane was done testing him. Shane was moving on.

He was leaving Russia. He was returning to the same continent, the same league, the same orbit as Shane Hollander. But the distance between them, he understood now, had nothing to do with geography. It was measured in the space between a genuine smile in a photo and the bland, acceptable reply it received. It was a chasm he had helped dig, and he would have to learn to live on his side of it.

At the airport, waiting for his flight to be called, he received a single message. Not from Shane.

Sveta- Do not do anything stupid in America. Remember the rules. Remember the box you are sitting on. Do not lift the lid.

IGR- I remember.

Sveta- Good. Then go play hockey. It is the only thing you have ever done simply because you love it. Try to remember that feeling. I love you, Ilyaуска.

He boarded the plane, the ghost of a hope for a Montreal invitation still flickering faintly in the dark hold of his heart, already braced for it to be extinguished.

Chapter End Notes

I'd like to formally apologize to everyone who celebrated the healthy communication and emotional growth in the first half of this chapter.

You should have known better. 🤦

Next chapter will be up Tuesday-maybe lol. I might be convinced to post earlier.

Please remember that canon Shane is a freaky deaky boy and we'll get to see that because yum. Thoughts and prayers for our boys. They're going to need them. ❤️

Chapter 23: Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

First of all, thank you for all the comments on the last chapter and for the new reviewers catching up. Special thanks to my beta reader-you're a gem and to my bestie Alex-you're a freaky deaky but that's why I adore you. ❤️

I was planning to take a little longer with this one, but then you all started making me blush, theorizing, and all that, and generally enabling me.

So naturally I locked myself in a room with snacks, caffeine, and emotional support bestie and somehow finished this chapter early.

As always, I take no responsibility for the actions of Shane Hollander, Ilya Rozanov, or Shane Hollander's increasingly questionable decision-making skills.

Enjoy. 😊

Chapter Notes

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

The silence in his apartment had become a physical presence. It had weight, texture- a thick, humming stillness that seemed to press against Shane's eardrums. For days, the only sounds had been the methodical scrape of his knife on the cutting board, the hum of the dishwasher, the soft tap of his fingers on his therapy journal. The text thread with Ilya was a frozen wasteland, a monument to his own failed provocations and Ilya's impeccable, devastating control.

He couldn't stand it.

Sitting rigidly at his kitchen island, he stared at his phone. The logical part of his brain, the part that built schedules and followed rules, recited the facts: You asked for distance. He is giving it. This is the correct outcome. The rest of him, the part that still dreamed in gasoline-scented shadows and golden hotel light was screaming.

His thumb moved before he could debate it further.

Shane- Good morning.

Two words. Innocuous. A restart. A thread thrown back across the chasm. He hit send and immediately stood up, the stool scraping harshly against the floor.

Pacing began. A tight, six-step circuit from the island to the living room window and back. He counted his breaths. Four in. Seven hold. Eight out. It didn't calm the frantic buzz under his skin. He checked the phone. Nothing. Of course. It was early. Ilya was in Russia. The time difference was... he couldn't even calculate it. His mind was static.

He paced for seventeen minutes. The silence of the phone was an amplifier for every terrible thought. *He's ignoring you. He's done. You finally pushed him away for good. He's with Svetlana, or he's in a meeting with some government creep, or he's just deleted your contact altogether. Probably found some easy omega in Russia who wouldn't cause so many problems.*

On the twenty-third minute, his phone buzzed on the countertop. He lunged for it, his heart a trapped bird slamming against his ribs.

IGR- Good morning. I am not in Russia. I left earlier than planned. I just landed in Boston.

The world tilted. Boston. He was back. On the same continent, in the same time zone. The distance, which had felt galactic, collapsed to a few hundred miles of manageable airspace. A wild, illogical hope, sharp as a shard of glass, pierced the anxiety.

Shane bit his lower lip hard enough to sting, the pain a grounding spike. He started pacing again, faster now, the six-step circuit feeling like a cage. His mind raced through calculations. Training camp didn't start for over a week. Ilya was in Boston.

The impulse was a riptide, pulling him under before he could fight it. His fingers flew over the screen.

Shane- Come to Montreal. If you want. Before camp. You could... hang out. For a few days.

He sent it and nearly threw the phone onto the sofa, as if it were about to detonate. *Hang out.* What a stupid, juvenile phrase. What did that even mean? Were they sixteen? This was the man who had built a prison of surveillance around him and then burned down a whole freaking house to get him back. They didn't "*hang out.*"

The wait this time was agony, a slow-motion freefall. He stood frozen in the middle of his living room, staring at the blank TV screen, seeing nothing. Every possible rejection played out in his head. *I am busy. I have things to do. It is not a good idea. We should maintain distance.*

The buzz, when it came, was a shock to his system.

IGR- Okay. There is a flight in one hour. It should land at Trudeau in just over three hours.

Okay.

Simple. Direct. No questions, no negotiations, no cautious probing. Just... okay.

The reality of it hit Shane like a gust of wind. He was coming. Ilya was coming to Montreal. In three hours. To *hang out.*

His phone slipped from his suddenly nerveless fingers, clattering onto the hardwood floor. He didn't pick it up. He turned and half-ran, half-stumbled down the hall to his bedroom, throwing open the doors to his walk-in closet.

He stared at the contents, and a wave of sheer panic washed over him. Everything was wrong. It was all uniforms: rows of impeccably tailored suits for press conferences, stacks of team-branded polos and hoodies, neat piles of dark-wash jeans and simple, solid-colored t-shirts. It was the wardrobe of Shane Hollander, Beta Hockey Star. It was structured, safe, and utterly, completely bland.

What did one wear to “hang out” with the architect of your trauma and the subject of your most erotic dreams? Nothing he owned seemed remotely adequate. The grey t-shirt was too casual. The dark green henley felt like it was trying at all. The jeans were just jeans.

“No, no, no,” he muttered, running his hands through his hair.

He needed help. He needed a translator for a situation he had no map for. He snatched his phone from the floor, his fingers trembling as he pulled up FaceTime and hit Rose’s contact.

She answered after two rings, her face filling the screen. She was in a makeup chair, a silk robe around her shoulders, a stylist hovering behind her with a curling iron. “Shane? What’s wrong?”

“I need help,” he blurted out, his voice tight with stress.

“What kind of help? Are you okay?” Her protective instincts immediately sharpened her tone.

“I need you to help me pick an outfit.”

Rose blinked. The stylist paused, glancing at the screen with curiosity. “An... outfit. For what?”

Shane began pacing again, the camera jostling. “For a date. I think. I don’t know. It’s not a date-date. It’s a hang-out. But it needs to be... right. Nothing in my closet is right. It’s all wrong.”

“A date.” Rose’s voice was flat. “With who?”

“I can’t- I’ll tell you later. Please, Rose. It’s not even a date. Its a hang out.”

The words tumbled out. He saw the instant it registered in her eyes. The concern hardened into something else- understanding, frustration, worry. She knew. Of course she knew. There was only one “he” that could reduce Shane Hollander to a pacing, closet-meltdown mess.

She was silent for a long moment, her gaze searching his through the screen. He could see the war in her expression: the desire to tell him to cancel, to run, to stick to the list. And the deeper loyalty, the one that made her his best friend.

Finally, she sighed, a short, exasperated sound. “Okay. Okay, you disaster. Point the camera at the closet. And for God’s sake, stop pacing. You’re making me seasick.”

Relief, weak and shaky, flooded him. He wasn’t alone in this. He aimed the camera at the rows of clothing. “See? It’s all terrible.”

“It’s all *you*,” Rose corrected, her professional eye already assessing. “Which is the problem, isn’t it? You don’t know who to be for this.” She leaned closer to her screen. “Alright. Forget ‘date.’ Think ‘confident, casual, I-have-my-life-together. I’m the hottest player in this damn league.’ Which you are. Show me that. Confident armor. Do you still have those black leather pants from that charity gala two months ago? The ones you said you’d never wear again?”

Shane blinked, then rummaged deep into the back of the closet. He found the garment bag, unzipped it, and held up the pants. They were slim-cut, buttery soft black leather. “These? Rose, I can’t wear these to just... hang out. They’re for a red carpet.”

“Exactly. They say you’re not trying to be casual. You’re making a statement. You’re not the same person as before. Now, a shirt. You need something underneath that isn’t aggressive. Something that softens the leather.” Her eyes scanned the shelves. “That semi-sheer white t-shirt. The viscose one. It’s elegant, it’s a little vulnerable, and it’s the exact opposite of a hockey jersey.”

Shane fumbled for it, holding it up. It was luxuriously soft, simple but elegant.

“Yes. That. It’s approachable but put-together. It says you didn’t try too hard, but you also didn’t just roll out of bed. Which, for you, is trying *very* hard. Now, shoes. Not athletic shoes. The black leather boots with that tiny heel—the Louboutins. Let me see you try it on.”

As Rose dictated and Shane pulled items out, creating a small pile on his bed, the frantic panic began to recede, channeled into the manageable task of following instructions. This was a problem with a solution. Pick A, then B, then C. Yet, with each selected item, the reality solidified. He was building an outfit for Ilya. He was preparing for his arrival. The countdown, once a source of nausea, was now a heartbeat in the room.

“You’ll look like you have a spine and a pulse, which is an improvement over your usual ‘reliable neutral’ palette. Now, the blazer. You need to pull it together, make it look intentional, not like a costume.” She tapped her chin. “The black Saint Laurent blazer. The one with the sharp shoulders and the satin lapel. It’s severe. It’s expensive. It says ‘I am in control of this situation,’ even if you’re currently having a meltdown on FaceTime.”

He pulled out the blazer, the weight and cut of it immediately feeling different in his hands. It wasn’t a sports coat; it was a piece of architecture. As he laid the pieces on the bed—the inky leather, the cloud-like shirt, the sharply tailored blazer—the frantic panic began to recede, replaced by a strange, focused calm. This wasn’t just picking clothes. This was constructing a persona. A version of Shane Hollander who was confident, sophisticated, untouchable. A version who could handle Ilya Rozanov showing up in his city with three hours’ notice.

Rose’s gaze was serious now, all business. “Shane... this outfit isn’t for ‘hanging out.’ This is for a negotiation. A reunion. A declaration. Are you sure this is what you want?”

He looked at the ensemble on the bed. It was a far cry from a grey sweater and jeans. It was a uniform for a battle he didn’t fully understand. “I don’t know what I want to do,” he admitted quietly. “I just know I can’t wear a team polo.”

Rose sighed, her expression softening with reluctant understanding. “Then wear the armor. Just remember, it’s still you underneath. And for god’s sake, text me when you get there and an hour after. I need a check in text every hour or I’m going there with a taser.”

She hung up, leaving him in the sudden silence of his bedroom. The countdown was no longer an abstract source of nausea. It was a clock ticking in his head, in the sleek lines of the leather pants, in the severe cut of the blazer. He had two and a half hours to become the man who could wear this outfit and face the ghost from his dreams, who was currently somewhere over the Atlantic, drawing closer with every passing minute.

Shane stared at the assembled outfit on his bed, the stark black and white a silent proclamation. The clock on his nightstand read just over two hours until landing. A new, more practical anxiety surfaced. Logistics. He picked up his phone, the glass cool against his still-tingling fingers.

Shane- What's your flight number? I'll pick you up.

He sent it, then immediately cringed. It was too direct, too presumptuous. It assumed a level of welcome Ilya might not feel. But the alternative, letting him get a cab, arrive in the city alone felt cold. Wrong.

The reply came faster than he expected.

IGR- United 1422. But do not trouble yourself. I will take a car. I need to check into my hotel first, get settled. Perhaps we could meet in the hotel restaurant after? It is neutral ground.

Hotel? Neutral ground?

The words were a cold splash of water. Shane frowned, his thumb hovering over the screen. He'd been so focused on the seismic fact of Ilya's arrival, he hadn't considered the mechanics. Of course Ilya would get a hotel. That was the sensible, independent, boundary-respecting thing to do. The thing a casual acquaintance would do. Just like Shane had wanted.

But they weren't casual acquaintances. They were... whatever this shattered thing was. And Shane had a perfectly good, empty guest room. A guest room that was, in fact, on the opposite side of the apartment from his own bedroom, with a full bathroom in between. It

was the epitome of ‘plenty of room.’ It was safe, private, and would save Ilya the cost and the sterile loneliness of a hotel.

His mind, always seeking the most efficient, structured solution, presented it clearly. It made logical sense. It was a kind offer. It was also, he realized with a sinking heart, a massive overstep. An invasion of the very ‘neutral ground’ Ilya was meticulously constructing.

He paced to the window, looking out at the quiet Montreal street. He wanted to text back: You can stay here. I have the space. The offer burned on his tongue. It was the truth. It was also a grenade rolled into the careful, demilitarized zone they were trying to establish.

He thought of Ilya in a generic hotel room, alone with his medication and his thoughts, staring at the same acoustic-tile ceiling Shane had stared at in Room 329. The image was desolate. He thought of Ilya here, in his space, surrounded by Shane’s things—his books, his carefully organized kitchen, the quiet hum of his life. That image was terrifying for a different reason. It was intimate. It was a vulnerability he wasn’t sure he was ready to offer, and a trust he wasn’t sure Ilya would know how to receive without twisting it.

But the hotel restaurant? It felt like a business meeting. A debriefing.

His brain’s need for clarity warred with the ocean of emotional ambiguity. What was the protocol for this? What were the rules? His rule had been ‘glacier pace.’ Ilya’s rule was ‘distance.’ Meeting in a public hotel restaurant was glacier pace. It was distance. It was correct.

It felt like a defeat.

He typed, deleted, and typed again, his frustration mounting.

Shane- You don’t need a hotel. I have a guest room. It’s separate. You’d have your own space.

He sent it before he could stop himself. A direct challenge to the ‘neutral ground.’ An offer of something that was neither the intimacy of his bed nor the sterility of a hotel. A middle ground he was desperately trying to engineer.

The wait for a reply was agonizing. He watched the three dots appear, then disappear, then appear again. Ilya was wrestling with it too.

IGR- That is a generous offer. More than generous. But the hotel is already booked. Non-refundable. And... it is better this way. The restaurant is good. I will text you the address when I am checked in.

It is better this way.

The finality of it was a door gently but firmly closed in his face. Ilya was choosing the buffer, the structure of a public, impersonal space. He was adhering to the letter of their unspoken law, even when Shane was suddenly, desperately, trying to amend it.

A sharp pang of rejection, clean and cold, shot through him. It was followed immediately by a wave of shame. He was the one who had demanded distance. He was the one who had needed walls. Now, when Ilya was meticulously building those very walls brick by painful brick, Shane was trying to kick a door in them. It wasn't fair.

He took a deep, settling breath. Four in. Seven hold. Eight out. The structure of the breath helped cage the unruly feeling. Ilya was right. It *was* better this way. Safer. More controlled. It was what he had asked for.

Shane- Okay. Text me the address.

Shane- And Ilya... I'm picking you up from the airport. I don't live far.

This time, he left no room for negotiation. It was a small reclaiming of agency, a tiny push against the wall. He wasn't asking. He was telling. He needed that one gesture, that one point of contact from the impersonal sky to the personal ground.

The reply was swift.

IGR- Okay. Thank you, Shane. I will see you at arrivals.

Shane put the phone down, his heart still beating a complicated rhythm against his ribs. He looked back at the outfit on the bed, the armor of leather and tailored wool. He would wear it. He would drive to the airport. He would meet Ilya in the fluorescent buzz of the arrivals hall, and then he would follow him to a neutral hotel restaurant.

He had gotten a concession for the car ride. A tiny fragment of the closeness he'd impulsively craved. The rest, the guest room, the shared space, the domestic quiet remained on the other side of a line Ilya was determined not to cross. For now, Shane would have to be satisfied with watching him from his side of it, dressed for a battle neither of them knew how to fight.

The clothes lay assembled on the bed, but Shane felt more like a raw nerves. The shower was his first attempt at a ritual, a reset. He stood under the spray, the water as hot as he could stand it, trying to steam away the lingering phantom sensations from the dream and the cold knot of anxiety in his gut. He scrubbed methodically, but his mind wouldn't quiet. It replayed the texts: *Neutral ground. Hotel restaurant.* It calculated the minutes until arrival. It fixated on the feel of the leather pants he would soon have to pull on.

Drying off, he faced the medicine bag on his bathroom counter. It was a small, zippered case that kept his life in control. Inside, arranged with military precision, were his weekly suppressant pills, his scent-neutralizing patches, his emergency anti-anxiety medication. His hand hovered. His routine was two patches: one in the morning, one in the evening, to ensure total, unwavering containment. To be Shane Hollander, Beta.

His fingers bypassed the pill organizer and went to the box of patches. He took out one. Just one. He applied it to the inside of his collar, right over his scent gland, over the fading mark of Ilya's bite, pressing it firmly until the adhesive caught. It was a compromise. A tiny, deliberate crack in the fortress. He wouldn't be broadcasting his omega scent, but the single patch was less than his full dose. A subconscious, perhaps reckless, allowance for the

possibility of... something. A sliver of authenticity in the constructed performance. The thought made his stomach flip.

Dressing was a slow, deliberate ceremony. The semi-sheer white t-shirt felt like wearing a cloud, its softness a stark contrast to the cool, commanding slide of the black leather pants as he pulled them on. They fitted like a second skin, supple and silent. He shrugged into the Saint Laurent blazer, and the transformation was immediate. The sharp lines of the shoulders squared his own, the severe cut pulling his posture straight. In the mirror, he didn't see the anxious man who'd been pacing his kitchen. He saw someone polished, formidable, and untouchable. The outfit was a statement, just as Rose had said. The problem was, he wasn't entirely sure what he was trying to say.

With an hour still to kill, the silence of the apartment became oppressive. The structured part of his brain, the part that thrived on pre-game routines, insisted on preparation. He got out his styling paste and worked it through his damp hair, using the techniques he'd learned from countless photo-shoot stylists, creating deliberate texture, a look of casual perfection that took focused effort. He checked his reflection. The hair, the clothes, the clean, scent-patched skin. It was a costume for a role he'd never rehearsed: Shane Hollander, Confident NHL MVP ready to get the Attention of the Alpha.

He was ready far too early. The urge to just go, to be in motion, was overwhelming. He grabbed his keys and his phone, his fingers brushing against the cool leather of the blazer's lapel as he locked his apartment door.

The drive to Trudeau was a blur of familiar streets under a pale summer sky. He parked in the short-term lot, the silence of the car closing in on him the moment the engine cut off. Now he was here. Now he had to wait.

Sitting was impossible. He got out, leaning against the driver's side door, then immediately pushing off. His hands felt alien, too large, with nothing to hold. He shoved them into the pockets of the leather pants, then pulled them out, crossing his arms over his chest. The pose felt defensive. He uncrossed them. He was twitchy, every nerve ending firing without purpose. The public space of the arrivals area felt like a stage, and he had no idea how to stand on it.

A stupid, desperate thought occurred to him. He pulled out his phone and googled: how to look cool waiting at airport arrivals.

The results were laughable. Stock photos of people holding signs with hearts, overly posed candids, listicles about “airport reunion style.” He snapped his phone off, a flush of heat rising up his neck. What was he doing? This was Ilya. The man who had seen him vomiting from anxiety, who had held him while he shook apart, who had looked into the heart of his obsession and confessed to murder. Posturing for him based on a lifestyle blog was beyond absurd.

But he needed an anchor. A voice from the real world, the simple world. He called JJ.

JJ answered on the second ring, the sound of video game gunfire in the background. “Cap? You good? You never call.”

“I need... a second opinion,” Shane said, pacing a tight circle beside his car.

“On a play? It’s the off-season, man, my brain is in potato mode.”

“Not a play. On... a vibe.”

The gunfire stopped. “A vibe. Okay. I’m listening.”

Shane took a breath, forcing his words to be calm. “If you were picking someone up at the airport. Someone you used to... know. And you wanted to look like you had your life together. Not desperate. What would you do? How would you stand?”

There was a long silence on the other end. Shane could practically hear JJ’s kind, uncomplicated brain processing this. “Okay,” JJ said slowly. “First, you’re overthinking it. But since you’re clearly already overthinking it... glasses.”

“Glasses?”

“Yeah. Sunglasses. They make you look mysterious. Not just staring at the doors like a creeper.”

Shane did own a pair. Several he received from a deal but he rarely used them. He thought he looked ridiculous.

“Second,” JJ continued, warming to his theme. “Don’t pace. It screams ‘anxious chihuahua.’ Lean. Lean on something. The hood of your car is good. But like, casually. One foot up, arms relaxed. You’re not waiting; you’re just... being there, and it’s a coincidence they’re arriving.”

“I’m picking them up.”

“Details, cap. Vibe is about illusion. Third, and this is key: have your phone out, but be looking at it like you’re mildly annoyed by a work email. Not like you’re refreshing their flight status every ten seconds. You’re a busy guy. They’re fitting into your world.”

Shane closed his eyes. JJ’s advice was both profoundly stupid and strangely practical. It was a script. A set of physical instructions to follow when his own internal script had failed. “So, glasses, lean, look annoyed at my phone.”

“Bingo. You wanna look like you have a million better places to be, but you’re choosing to be here out of the goodness of your heart. It’s all about selling the ‘none desperate’ look.”

“The ‘non-desperate’ look,” Shane corrected automatically.

“That’s the one. Who are you picking up, anyway? A scout? Agent?” JJ’s tone was curious but carefully light.

Shane hesitated. “Just... an old friend.”

Another pause. JJ was many things, but he wasn't dumb. The outfit query, the airport vibe check, the 'old friend', it added up to only one person. But JJ, in his profound loyalty, didn't push. "Well, tell your 'old friend' I said hey. And remember, lean, don't loom. You got this, cap."

"Thanks, JJ."

He hung up, feeling marginally less untethered. He put on the sunglasses, went to lean against the hood of his car. He leaned against it, trying to mold his body into a shape of casual indifference. He pulled out his phone and stared at it, trying to conjure a convincingly irritated expression.

He felt like an impostor. The severe, beautiful clothes felt like a disguise everyone could see through. The people flowing around him- families embracing, drivers holding signs, couples reuniting with kisses, highlighted the profound strangeness of his own mission. This wasn't a reunion. It was more like a diplomatic summit following a war.

Time stretched, elastic and cruel. He checked the flight status board. Landed. His pulse jumped. Then the wait for bags. Then customs. Each step was a new layer of suspense. He shifted his weight, the leather of his pants sighing softly. He tried the 'one foot up' pose against the car, but it felt staged. He went back to just standing, arms crossed, trying to project a calm he didn't feel.

His phone, the prop in his hand, buzzed. Not a notification. A text.

IGR- Landed. Just getting my bag. I will be out soon.

The words were simple. Factual. But they sent a jolt through his system, a live wire of anticipation that electrified the space between his heart and his stomach. The performance was over. The waiting was almost done.

He pushed off the car, standing fully straight. He didn't try to look busy or annoyed anymore. His gaze fixed on the doors where the passengers would emerge, his body thrumming with a

tense, silent readiness. The polished armor of his outfit felt like exactly what it was: both a shield and a declaration. He was here. On his turf. In his city.

And Ilya Rozanov was about to walk through those doors.

The first breath of Montreal air was a shock- so different from Russia, not cold, but clean, scrubbed of Moscow's diesel and political tension. Ilya adjusted the duffel strap on his shoulder, the weight familiar. The sunglasses were a necessity, cutting the fluorescent glare of arrivals into manageable, dark-toned slices. The sleeveless black hoodie and joggers were his go to airport clothes. If he'd known of the invitation to see Shane, he'd worn something better. The backwards baseball cap pulled low was the final piece, shadowing his face. He looked like any athlete traveling incognito. He felt like a man walking into a sniper's alley.

He moved through the crowd, his gaze- hidden behind the dark lenses, sweeping the waiting area with an efficiency born of long habit. Scan, assess, dismiss. Pillar. Family. Driver with a sign. Then-

His breath hitched, a tiny, almost imperceptible catch in his throat.

Shane. He was leaning against a black car, and he looked... fucking devastating.

The image from the texts hadn't done it justice. The black blazer cut a line that made his shoulders look impossibly broad yet sharp. Beneath it, the thin white shirt was a scandalous hint of skin. And the pants... the black leather molded to his legs with a silent, confident claim. This wasn't the Shane in team polos or soft sweaters. This was a revelation. A statement carved from shadow and light.

The reaction was instantaneous, a low, hot punch of desire that gathered in his gut and surged south, thick and demanding. *Fuck.*

He didn't break stride. The years of media training, of hiding every true feeling behind a smirk, clicked into place. But internally, it was a red-alert scramble. He subtly shifted the duffel bag in front of him, the bulky canvas a perfect, casual shield. He thanked every god he didn't believe in for the sunglasses. Behind their privacy, he could let his gaze devour. He tracked the elegant line of Shane's throat, the way the blazer hugged his narrow waist, the confident set of his stance. He looked powerful. In control. Beautiful. It was a different kind of ache, this sharp, wanting admiration. It was cleaner than obsession, more desperate than nostalgia. It just *was*.

He stopped a few feet away. "Your car is easier to find than a Montreal power play in the third period," he said, his voice carefully calibrated to sound light, slightly teasing. The familiar hockey jab was safe ground.

Shane's eyes- those steady, intelligent eyes, found his, seeing only their own reflection in the dark lenses. A faint, nervous smile touched his lips. "You made it. Baggage okay?"

"It is all here." Ilya hefted the duffel, using the motion to further adjust its protective placement. "You did not have to come."

"I wanted to." The reply was simple, and it landed somewhere deep in Ilya's chest, a warm, dangerous stone.

The walk to the car was a study in forced normalcy. Ilya was hyper-aware of the space between them, of charged air. He could smell it now, cutting through the airport odors: Shane's clean, soap scent, the faint, expensive note of wool from the blazer, and underneath... just the barest, barest trace of something sweeter, almost masked. The scent patch. He caught the faintest scent of Honeysuckle. Ilya's alpha senses, long-dulled by medication and despair, sharpened to a needle point. The discovery was a seismic shift. It wasn't an invitation. It was a crack in the façade. A tiny, monumental show of trust, or perhaps, a test.

He said nothing.

The car was a sensible, Ilya tossed his bag into the back and took the passenger side. The interior was immaculate, smelling of lemon cleaner and the faint, ingrained scent of Shane's beta-disguise. Now, in the enclosed space, the other, subtler note was more discernible. It

took every ounce of his willpower not to turn his head and inhale deeply, to try and catch more of it.

The engine purred to life. The silence that followed was thick, palpable.

“How was your flight?” Shane asked, eyes on the road as he navigated out of the garage.

“Long. Unremarkable. I watched a terrible movie about a talking dog.” Ilya kept his tone even, his body angled slightly toward the window, as if fascinated by the concrete pillars flashing by. It gave him a pretext to keep his profile turned, his lap hidden.

“Sounds... profound.”

“It was not. The dog’s motivations were unclear.” He risked a glance. Shane’s hands were tight on the wheel, knuckles pale. The elegant costume couldn’t hide the tension in his frame. “The traffic is light.”

“It’s the middle of the day.” A pause. “Your hotel is downtown. Near the old port.”

“Da, it said it was convenient when I booked it.”

Another silence, stretching too long. The air in the car was becoming unbearable. It was filled with everything they weren’t saying. Ilya could feel the heat of Shane’s body from across the console. He could see the way the leather pants tightened across his thigh when he worked the clutch. The blazer had slipped back slightly, and the sheer fabric of the shirt over the curve of his shoulder was an exquisite torture.

He needed to say something. Anything. “The outfit is new.”

Shane stiffened almost imperceptibly. “It’s just clothes.”

“You look very nice,” Ilya corrected softly, before he could stop himself. He immediately wanted to claw the words back. Too much. Too close.

Shane’s jaw tightened. He didn’t deny it. “You look... comfortable.”

Ilya looked down at his own hoodie and joggers, then back out the window. “I travel for utility.” *And to hide the evidence of how you affect me*, he didn’t add.

They lapsed back into quiet. The cityscape began to flow past- familiar buildings, banners for teams that weren’t theirs. The normalcy of the scenery was a bizarre contrast to the screaming tension inside the car. Ilya kept his breathing measured, his mind repeating the mantras Dr. Kostova had drilled into him. *You are in control. He is safe. The urges are just feelings, you can rise above it. It will pass.* But the feeling was a hard, aching throb behind his zipper, and the object of its focus was a foot away, smelling like the most delicious secret and looking like a dream he had forfeited the right to have.

He was grateful for the sunglasses. Grateful for the bag in his lap. Grateful, even, for the stilted, terrible small talk. It was the scaffolding holding him up. Without it, he would either reach out or shatter. He wasn’t sure which would be worse.

The hotel restaurant was all low lighting and dark wood, a deliberate attempt at intimacy that felt, to Ilya, like being displayed in a diorama. He’d handed his bag off to a bellhop with a murmured instruction and a generous tip, a transaction that bought him a few more minutes of barrier between his duffel and Shane’s perceptive gaze. He’d requested a private booth in the back, a tactical move. It provided a semblance of seclusion, while the public nature of the venue enforced a ceasefire. He couldn’t shatter here. The rules of civilization applied.

Sliding into the plush leather booth, he finally removed the sunglasses and cap, placing them on the seat beside him. The world became sharper, brighter, more dangerous. Shane sat across from him, the severe lines of his blazer a stark contrast to the soft, shadowy upholstery. He was studying the menu, giving Ilya time to study him without being a creep.

A waiter appeared. Ilya ordered a glass of ice water. When it arrived, he didn’t drink immediately. From the zippered pocket of his joggers, he retrieved a small, discreet pill case.

He shook out a single, pale blue tablet, the fast-acting mood stabilizer that he needed to be ‘normal’ for Shane. He dry-swallowed it with a practiced ease, meeting Shane’s eyes across the table as he did it. No apology. No explanation. A simple statement of fact: *This is what it takes for me to sit here without crumbling.*

Shane’s gaze flickered, but he said nothing. He returned to the menu, his fingers tracing the embossed text. After a few minutes of silence that stretched like hot tar, he closed it. “I’ll have the garden salad. Dressing on the side.”

Ilya almost smiled, a bitter, understanding twist of his lips. Of course. He remembered the need to control his food. That was something he had worked on to relax before but now old habits seemed to have returned. A meal that was mere sustenance, no pleasure, no indulgence. The opposite of everything Ilya felt churning inside him.

“The ribeye,” Ilya told the waiter. “Medium rare. Extra peppercorn sauce.” A primal, bloody choice. A claim of a different kind. He needed the protein, the iron, the tangible weight of it in his stomach to ground him.

The waiter left. The silence returned, but now it had a new texture. The performative tasks of arrival and ordering were gone. They were just two men in a booth, with nothing to look at but each other and the canyon between them.

Ilya let his eyes settle on Shane, really look, without the barrier of lenses. The sharp cut of the blazer, the tantalizing hint of skin through the shirt, the defiant set of his jaw. He was so beautiful it was a physical ache, a hollowing-out behind Ilya’s ribs. He focused on the water glass, the condensation beading on its side.

Then, Shane shifted. He uncrossed his arms, leaning forward slightly on the table. His voice, when it came, was lower, softer than their earlier stilted car talk.

“You know,” Shane began, his eyes not on Ilya’s face, but on his own hands where they rested on the dark wood. “I never thanked you. For the advice about the grill. Scott said the hotter coals were a game-changer.”

The words were innocuous. The tone was not. It was measured, deliberate. A subtle, almost imperceptible lace of something warmer underneath. Ilya's senses, already heightened, went on full alert. He kept his expression neutral, taking a slow sip of water. "He is so old he should have known. He would have figured it out."

"Maybe." Shane's gaze lifted, finally meeting his. There was a glint there, a testing sharpness. "But it was thoughtful. You've always been... observant. About details."

A direct reference to the past, wrapped in a seeming compliment. Ilya felt the first crackle of warning along his nerves. This wasn't just conversation. This was a probe. "Observation is a skill," he replied, his voice carefully flat. "Like any other. It can be used well, or poorly."

"Mm." Shane leaned back, the movement causing the blazer to gape slightly, revealing more of the sheer fabric underneath. His eyes traveled over Ilya, a slow, appraising sweep that felt nothing like the frightened or furious looks he was used to. This was calculated. "You really like the sleeveless look." He said with a smile.

The question was about his attire, but the subtext was a laser focus on Ilya's body. Ilya felt the heat of it like a touch. He forced himself to remain still, to not flex the arm Shane was so blatantly looking at. "I work hard for my body. Why not show it off." He said with a shrug.

"It's good," Shane murmured, a ghost of a smile playing on his lips- not the nervous one from the airport, but something more knowing. "It's a statement. Shows off the arms. All those hours of shooting pucks have... noticeable results."

There it was. Undeniable, deliberate flirtation. A soft, verbal caress aimed directly at the most volatile part of Ilya's psyche. The medication was a dull blanket over his emotions, but this was a needle, finding the gap in the weave. His heart began a slow, heavy pound against his sternum.

He could play along. He could fall into the old, easy rhythm of their banter, let it spiral into something charged and dark and mutual. He could say something like, *'You are one to talk, in leather that looks painted on.'* The words burned on his tongue.

But that path led back to the obsession. To possession. To the look in Shane's eyes when he'd discovered the trackers. Their food arrived and he frowned when he saw Shane move the salad dressing away and pick out half the chicken

So, he deflected. He looked down, cutting into the steak that had just arrived, the pepper sauce rich and pungent. "The results are for shooting pucks," he said, his tone dismissing the compliment. "Nothing more." He took a bite, the act of chewing giving him a moment to school his features, to push down the surge of raw want Shane's words had unleashed.

He saw Shane's confident posture falter, just for a second. A faint flicker of uncertainty in those steady eyes. The test had been administered, and Ilya had refused to react. He had chosen the salad over the steak, the water over the wine, the distance over the dangerous, inviting heat.

He kept his eyes on his plate, on the bloody, tangible reality of his meal. Every cell in his body was screaming to look up, to engage, to take what was being offered. But the man who would have taken was the man who had built a cage. The man he was now, medicated and trembling with the effort, could only do one thing: hold the line.

Even if it meant letting Shane think he felt nothing. Especially if it meant that.

The rest of the meal passed in a fragile, cautious conversation. They spoke of neutral things—the upcoming training camp structure, mutual acquaintances in the league, the peculiarities of Montreal in the summer. The conversation flowed, if haltingly, like water finding new paths around old, immovable rocks. Ilya ate his steak with deliberate focus, using the ritual of cutting and chewing to ground himself. Shane picked at his salad, every so often looking up through his lashes in a way that sent a fresh, quiet shock through Ilya's system.

It was the scent that was undoing him. With every minute that passed in the warm, enclosed booth, the single, insufficient scent patch on Shane's scent gland lost its battle. The clean soap and wool aroma was now underpinned by something warmer, sweeter, uniquely Shane. It was the ghost of the omega beneath the beta facade, a whisper of truth Ilya had only ever caught in fleeting, unguarded moments before. Now, it was a soft, persistent fog in the air between them, and every breath Ilya took was a conscious effort not to drown in it.

Combined with the way Shane was acting- leaning in just slightly to listen, laughing softly at a dry observation, letting his fingers brush against his own neck in a way that was either nervous or unconsciously provocative, it was a sustained assault on Ilya's chemically-fortified defenses. The mood stabilizer kept the panic at bay, but it did nothing to dampen the raw, aching *want*. It just made him excruciatingly aware of it, a prisoner watching the world through a soundproof glass wall.

His nerves felt scraped raw, every sense dialed to a punishing sensitivity. He was running on fumes of willpower.

"We should go," Ilya said finally, his voice tighter than he intended. He signaled for the check, needing the interaction to end, needing space where Shane's scent wasn't the only thing he could think about.

Shane didn't argue. He just nodded, that new, unreadable calm still draped over him like the expensive blazer. When the bill was settled and they stood, Ilya moved toward the lobby, assuming Shane would head for the doors, for his car, for the safety of his own home.

"Rozanov."

He turned. Shane was standing a few feet away, hands in the pockets of those impossible leather pants, looking up at him. The hotel's ambient lighting caught in his eyes.

"Yeah?"

"Are you going to invite me up?"

The question landed like a physical blow, low in Ilya's gut. A red flag the size of a billowing storm warning erupted in his mind. *Danger! Boundary. Retreat.* Every lesson from Dr. Kostova screamed at him to say no, to make an excuse, to reinforce the wall.

But Shane was looking at him, not with the old fear or anger, but with a quiet, daring curiosity. And he'd asked so softly. The little omega, a treacherous, possessive part of Ilya's brain supplied, even as he mentally flinched from the term. He couldn't deny him. Not when he asked like that. Not when every cell in Ilya's body was howling to say yes.

He gave a single, stiff nod. "If you want."

The ride in the elevator was silent, charged. Ilya stared at the ascending numbers, feeling Shane's presence beside him like a localized gravity field. His room was on the twelfth floor, a standard suite. He unlocked the door and let Shane enter first.

Shane didn't hover awkwardly. He walked into the sitting area, glanced around at the generic furniture, then, with a deliberate casualness that made Ilya's breath catch, went and sat on the edge of the king-sized bed. He smoothed a hand over the duvet, then patted the space beside him. An invitation.

Ilya froze in the doorway. Sitting on the bed with him was a line he could not cross. It was a gateway. He remained standing, leaning against the small entryway table, putting the width of the room between them.

He saw the flicker of disappointment on Shane's face, the subtle downturn of his lips he failed to hide. A pout. It was adorable, and it wrecked Ilya completely.

After a moment of heavy silence, Shane looked up. "Can I ask you something?"

Ilya nodded, his throat too tight for words.

Shane's tongue darted out, wetting his lips. Ilya tracked the movement, hypnotized. "You had cameras in my apartment," Shane said, his voice still soft, but with a new, razor-sharp edge beneath it. "In the bedroom."

A cold dread, separate from the heat of desire, drenched Ilya. This was it. The reckoning for one of his deepest shames.

“Does that mean,” Shane continued, holding his gaze, “you recorded us having sex? The first time?”

The air vanished from the room. Ilya’s body went rigid, his mind flashing to the encrypted file, buried under layers of security on a drive he hadn’t dared to look at in months. He’d deleted almost everything else- the footage of Shane cooking, sleeping, reading, living his life. But that one... that one and a few others he had kept. It wasn’t surveillance. It was a sacrament. A record of the single most perfect, untainted moment of his life, before the sickness had fully twisted his love into something monstrous. He’d told Dr. Kostova about deleting the files. He had lied.

He couldn’t speak. He just gave another slow, agonized nod, his eyes begging for a forgiveness he knew he didn’t deserve.

Shane absorbed this, his expression unreadable. Then, he said the words that shattered Ilya’s last remaining fragment of control.

“I want to see it.”

No. The denial was instinctive, visceral. To show him would be to expose the very core of his sickness, to let Shane see himself through the lens of Ilya’s obsessed, worshipping gaze. It would be the ultimate violation.

“I’ll... send it to you,” Ilya choked out, the compromise pathetic. A delay. A coward’s retreat.

Shane didn’t reply. Instead, he stood up from the bed. Slowly, never breaking eye contact, he reached up and shrugged off the beautiful, black blazer. It slid from his shoulders and pooled on the floor with a soft whump. He stood there in just the semi-sheer white shirt and the black leather pants, vulnerability and power fused into one devastating silhouette.

Ilya's control snapped. He didn't move forward. He took a stumbling step back, his back hitting the wall beside the door. The distance was his only defense.

"Shane," he rasped, the word a plea and a warning.

But Shane was done with warnings. He had come here, dressed like a temptation, asked the most dangerous question, and now he stood in the center of the room, waiting. The line had not just been crossed; it had been erased. Ilya was out of moves, out of medication, out of lies. He was just a man against a wall, staring at the only thing he had ever truly wanted, knowing he was seconds away from falling on his knees.

The plea in Ilya's voice was real, a raw scrape of sound in the quiet room. He was pressed against the wall, not by force, but by the sheer weight of his own need, using the unyielding surface to hold himself upright, to hold himself back. Shane stood before him, blazer discarded, a vision of deliberate provocation and heartbreaking vulnerability. The space between them wasn't space at all; it was a live wire, crackling with everything unsaid and everything remembered.

Shane didn't answer the plea. He closed the distance.

It wasn't an aggressive move. It was a slow, deliberate invasion, each step measured. He stopped when the toes of his boots almost touched Ilya's, his head tilting back to maintain eye contact. Ilya could see the pulse fluttering wildly in the hollow of Shane's throat, could smell the sweet, unmasked omega scent now blooming freely, a direct challenge to every shred of his control.

Then Shane leaned in and kissed him.

It wasn't like the dream. It wasn't a devouring possession. It was soft, a question. A tentative brush of lips against Ilya's own, which were parted in a silent gasp. The contact was a jolt of pure, undiluted lightning. Every nerve ending Ilya possessed, every synapse he'd tried to medicate into submission, fired at once.

The dam didn't just break. It vaporized.

A low, guttural sound ripped from Ilya's chest, part agony, part surrender. His hands, which had been clenched at his sides, flew up. One arm banded around Shane's waist, yanking him flush against his body, erasing the last millimeter between them. The other hand came up to cradle the back of Shane's head, fingers tangling in the perfectly styled hair, destroying its careful order. He used the leverage to spin them, reversing their positions in one fluid, powerful motion. Shane's back met the wall with a soft thud, and Ilya crowded into him, his body a cage of heat and muscle.

He tore his mouth away just enough to speak, his forehead pressed to Shane's, their breath mingling in ragged, hot gusts. His voice was a dark, shattered thing. "Tell me to stop right now. Say it. I will step back. You leave. This is your last...last chance."

He meant it. Every fractured word. He was holding onto the cliff's edge by his fingernails, and the order to stop would be the only thing that could make him let go.

Shane's answer was to surge up, sealing his mouth over Ilya's again. This kiss was not a question. It was an answer. A demand.

And Ilya was lost.

The kiss deepened, turning hungry and desperate. Ilya's tongue swept into Shane's mouth, claiming, tasting. He tasted like the crisp white wine from the restaurant, like mint, and underneath it, that unique, sweet-Shane flavor that was home and heaven and ruin. Shane moaned into the kiss, the sound vibrating through Ilya's entire being. His hands came up, not to push, but to pull. They fisted in the fabric of Ilya's sleeveless hoodie, gripping the hard muscle of his back, trying to drag him closer even when there was no closer to get.

Ilya's hand slid from Shane's hair, down the column of his throat. He didn't squeeze. He held. His thumb pressed against the frantic pulse, feeling the life beat there, a captive rhythm under his palm. It was a claiming of a different kind, a primitive, alpha gesture of possession and protection that made Shane whimper and arch into him. The sheer shirt was a maddening barrier. Ilya could feel the heat of Shane's skin through it, could see the shadow of his nipples, hard and pebbled against the fabric. He dragged his mouth from Shane's lips, down his jaw, nuzzling into the scent-rich gland at the junction of his neck and shoulder. He

inhaled, a deep, shuddering drag that made his knees weak. “Bozhe moy,” he groaned against the damp skin. “You smell... you are killing me.”

Shane’s head fell back against the wall, baring his throat further. His hands abandoned Ilya’s back, scrambling for the waistband of his joggers. He pushed at the fabric, his fingers clumsy with urgency, seeking skin. “Ilya... please...”

The plea, raw and wanting, was a spike of heat straight to Ilya’s groin. He was painfully hard, the confines of his pants agonizing. He let Shane’s seeking hand push under the elastic, let those cool, clever fingers brush against the burning skin of his lower abdomen. A violent tremor racked him. He wanted to let Shane touch him everywhere. He wanted to strip them both bare and lose himself in the heat and sweat and scent of him.

But the hand around Shane’s throat tightened, just a fraction. A warning. A control.

“No,” Ilya growled, the word muffled against his neck. He captured Shane’s wandering wrist, pulling it gently but firmly away from his body, pinning it against the wall beside Shane’s head. He interlaced their fingers, holding him there. “Not like this.”

“Why?” Shane gasped, trying to reclaim his mouth for another kiss. “I want you. You want me. I can feel it.”

“That is *why*,” Ilya snarled, frustration and desire twisting together. He kissed him again, hard and bruising, a punishment and a promise. He ground his hips forward, letting Shane feel the full, rigid length of his erection through their clothes. Shane cried out, a broken, beautiful sound, and rocked back against him, seeking friction. The leather of his pants whispered against the rough fabric of Ilya’s joggers.

Ilya’s free hand roamed, mapping the territory he’d once monitored from a cold, digital distance. He slid it under the hem of the sheer shirt, his calloused palm skating over the smooth, hot plane of Shane’s stomach, feeling the muscles jump and quiver at his touch. He traced the defined lines of his abdomen, up to his chest, his thumb circling a nipple through the fragile fabric. Shane gasped, his back arching off the wall, pushing into the touch.

“You are so beautiful,” Ilya breathed, his lips trailing wet, open-mouthed kisses along Shane’s collarbone. “This... this body. This mind. This heart. I wanted to own it. To lock it away where only I could see.” He bit down, not hard enough to mark, but enough to make Shane jolt. “I am trying... *trying*... not to be that man tonight.”

“I’m not a thing to own,” Shane panted, his hips still moving in a desperate, shallow rhythm against Ilya’s thigh. “But I’m here. I’m choosing to be here. Right now. With you.”

The words were a different kind of devastation. They offered a gift Ilya didn’t know how to accept without corrupting it. He kissed him again, swallowing his words, trying to drink his certainty. His hand left Shane’s stomach, sliding around to clutch the firm curve of his ass through the buttery leather, pulling him even tighter into the cradle of his hips. The friction was exquisite, torturous. He could feel the corresponding hardness in Shane’s pants, could imagine the wetness soaking through his underwear beneath the leather. The image alone nearly undid him.

He wanted to drop to his knees. He wanted to peel those pants down and taste him, to reduce Shane to a sobbing, pleading wreck under his tongue. He wanted to flip him around, push that shirt up his back, and fuck him right there against the wall, hard and fast, claiming him in the most basic, animal way.

The fantasies were a riptide, pulling him under.

With a Herculean effort that felt like tearing his own soul in two, Ilya wrenched his mouth away. He rested his forehead against the wall beside Shane’s head, his entire body trembling with the strain of holding still. His breath sawed in and out of his lungs. The hand around Shane’s throat gentled, becoming a caress, his thumb stroking the pounding pulse.

“Shane,” he whispered, the name a prayer and an epitaph. “Milyy. We have to stop.”

“No,” Shane protested immediately, trying to chase his lips. “Don’t. Not yet.”

Ilya caught his chin, forcing him to hold still, to meet his eyes. What Shane saw there must have given him pause- not just desire, but a profound, tortured war. “Listen to me,” Ilya said,

each word costing him. “If we go further tonight... I will not be the man you asked for in that hotel room. I will be the man who had cameras in your walls. The man who needs to possess every sigh, every gasp, to know it is for him and him alone. The monster is right here.” He pressed Shane’s hand against his own chest, over his hammering heart. “It is breathing the same air as the man who lo-cares for you. And I am trying... so hard... to not let the man win.”

The confession hung between them, stark and ugly and true. The heated arousal in Shane’s eyes flickered, mingling with understanding, with a trace of the old fear, and with something else, heartbreaking tenderness.

“You stopped,” Shane said quietly, his body relaxing incrementally against the wall. “You’re stopping now.”

“Da,” Ilya breathed, the relief and the agony of it equally potent. He slowly, carefully, unwound himself. He released Shane’s wrist. He took his hand from his throat. He stepped back, putting a foot of cold, empty space between them. The loss of contact was a physical pain.

Shane stood against the wall, disheveled and flushed, his lips kiss-swollen, his shirt half-untucked, his hair a wreck. He looked thoroughly ravished, and the sight was a fresh knife twist in Ilya’s gut. He watched as Shane’s expression shifted from dazed desire to something more complicated- frustration, yes, but also a dawning, weary comprehension.

“The better man,” Shane murmured, echoing Ilya’s words from what felt like a lifetime ago in the restaurant.

Ilya nodded, unable to speak. He was the better man standing in the wreckage of his own resistance, feeling every primal instinct scream in betrayal. He had never done anything harder in his life.

Shane pushed himself away from the wall. He didn’t approach. He bent, slowly, and picked up his discarded blazer from the floor. He didn’t put it on. He just held it, a bundle of black wool in his arms, a shield retrieved.

“Send me the video,” he said, his voice surprisingly steady. It wasn’t a flirtation or a challenge this time. It was a request.

“I will,” Ilya promised, his own voice gravel.

Shane looked at him for a long moment, his gaze sweeping over Ilya’s tense form, his own conflicted desire still evident in the flush on his skin, the rapid rise and fall of his chest. Then he turned and walked to the door. He paused, his hand on the handle, but didn’t look back.

The door clicked shut behind him.

Ilya stood frozen in the center of the silent room, the ghost of Shane’s scent and heat still clinging to him, the taste of him still on his tongue. His body throbbed with unmet need. His mind was a battlefield, strewn with the casualties of his old self and the fragile, wounded standard of the man he was trying to become.

He had let him go. He had chosen the harder, right thing over the desperate, easy thing.

It felt like a victory that had shattered every bone in his body. He slid down the wall to the floor, buried his face in his hands, and trembled.

Chapter End Notes

Well.

That certainly happened.

A few of you have already started picking up on some details I've been quietly scattering through the last few chapters, and I am delighted (and slightly terrified) by how observant some of you are. There are a couple of breadcrumbs in this chapter that may become very important sooner rather than later.

I won't say which ones.

Just know that some of the theories in the comments have gotten alarmingly close to my outline. 🙄🙄

Thank you all for reading, commenting, theorizing, screaming, and emotionally supporting these two disasters. Half the fun of posting is watching everyone put on detective hats and start connecting dots.

See you next chapter.



Chapter 24: Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Hello pocket friends ❤️

First of all: what the hell are you all doing to me in the comments?!

Some of your comments made me cry. Some made me blush. Some made me laugh out loud at work. Some had me kicking my feet like a teenager and staring at my phone with the dumbest smile imaginable.

I love it. Entirely too much.

This chapter came together way faster than expected because I got sucked into reading comments and suddenly my brain went: "well, now you HAVE to write the next one." I got my date in, paid attention to the hubby so now we're back!

A huge thank you to my beta reader, who continues to save me from myself on a regular basis.

And thank you to my gay best friend, who is the fourth love of my life, my emotional support gremlin, and the person most responsible for enabling this nonsense in the first place.

Anyway.

The boys are attempting communication.

The boys are attempting emotional growth.

The boys are attempting healthy relationship behaviors.

Please keep your hands and feet inside the vehicle at all times.

Chapter Notes

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

Ilya stood in the silent hotel room, the trace of Shane's scent still clinging to him like a fog over the whole room. He took a deep, shuddering breath, his body still trembling with the effort of holding back.

He picked up his phone, his fingers shaking as he dialed the concierge desk. The call connected on the second ring.

"Good evening, Mr. Rozanov. How can I assist you?"

"I need to leave the hotel without being seen," Ilya said, his voice steady despite the chaos inside him. "Can you direct me to private exit?"

There was a pause, a rustle of papers. "Of course, sir. Take the service staircase on the twelfth floor. It will lead you to the staff parking lot. There is a gate that opens directly to the street. I will ensure it is unlocked for you."

"Thank you," Ilya said, hanging up. He looked at the door, at the empty space where Shane had been. He was still here, in the air, in the taste of their kisses, in the heat of their bodies pressed together. Ilya could not let him leave without acknowledging it, without touching it one last time.

He crossed the room, his steps silent on the plush carpet. He opened the door, and Shane was just walking slowly down the hallway, his arms crossed, his expression guarded. Ilya's heart stuttered, a painful, beautiful shock.

"Can I walk you out?" Ilya asked, his voice soft, careful. He held out his hand, giving Shane the choice to take it.

Shane looked at the hand, then up at Ilya's face. There was a long, tense moment, then Shane uncrossed his arms and placed his hand in Ilya's. It was a surrender, a trust. Ilya felt it like a jolt, a current that traveled up his arm, into his chest, then his heart.

He led Shane down the hall, their footsteps silent in the empty corridor. They reached the service stairs, the door heavy and unmarked. Ilya pushed it open, revealing a narrow, utilitarian staircase leading down. Once they reached the ground level, he turned to Shane, their hands still linked.

"I'm going to court you," Ilya said, his voice barely above a whisper. "Properly. I won't fuck this up."

Shane's eyes widened, a soft, surprised gasp escaping him. Ilya smiled, a slow, soft curve of his lips. He reached up, his fingers tracing the delicate pattern of freckles across Shane's cheekbones. Shane leaned into the touch, his eyes fluttering closed, a soft sigh escaping him.

Ilya leaned in, pressing a soft, chaste kiss to Shane's lips. It was a promise, a seal on the words. He pulled away after a few moments, despite Shane's attempt to deepen the kiss. He stepped back, his hand still holding Shane's, his thumb brushing the pulse point at Shane's wrist.

"Go home, Krasavchik," he murmured, his voice gentle. "I'll call you later. Maybe we can do something tomorrow."

Shane nodded, his eyes still closed, his lips parted. Ilya watched as he turned and walked out the exit door, his hand trailing along the railing. Before turning left towards the parking lot, he looked back, a soft smile on his face. Then he was gone, swallowed by the late afternoon light.

Ilya stood there, in the dim light, the door to the service stairs still open, the cool air of the stairwell a stark contrast to the heat of the room they'd just left. He took a deep, shuddering breath, his body still trembling with the effort of holding back. But there was a new sensation now, a quiet, steady pulse of hope. He had touched the edge of the cliff, and he had not fallen. He had stepped back. He had chosen the right thing.

And tomorrow... tomorrow, he would start again. He would court Shane Hollander properly. He would not fuck this up.

The silence in the hotel room was absolute. It was a different silence than before Shane had arrived. That had been the silence of anticipation, a hollow, ringing quiet. This was the silence of the aftermath, thick and heavy, saturated with the omega's scent, of everything that had almost happened.

Ilya stood just inside the door, his back against it, as if barricading himself in. The click of the lock was the period at the end of a sentence he'd barely been able to speak. His body, which had been vibrating with a near-violent restraint, began to tremble in earnest. It was a full-system collapse. The adrenaline, the desire, the sheer, agonizing *will* it had taken to step back- it all drained out of him at once, leaving behind a hollow, shaky shell.

He slid down the length of the door until he was sitting on the floor, his knees drawn up. He dropped his head into his hands. The chemical blanket of the mood stabilizer was wearing off, and what rushed in to fill the void wasn't the obsession's familiar, possessive roar. It was something quieter, more devastating: a clear, unobstructed view of what he had just done, and what he had just denied himself.

He could still feel the imprint of Shane's body against his own, the surprising strength in his lean frame, the heat of him through the sheer shirt, the way his hips had rocked, seeking friction. He could taste him. Crisp mint and the underlying, unique sweetness that was Shane's own. The scent of him, that heartbreakingly vulnerable omega scent he'd so carefully hidden for years, was woven into the fibers of Ilya's hoodie, a fragrant brand on his skin.

He had been so hard it was painful. He was still hard, a dull, aching reminder. Every primal, alpha instinct had been screaming at him to take, to claim, to bury himself in that heat and scent and never come out. The monster had been wide awake, salivating, its claws sunk deep.

And he had told it no.

Not for himself. Not because he didn't want it with a desperation that felt like dying. But for Shane. Because Shane had asked for a better man in a hotel room months ago. Because the man who would have fucked him against that wall was the same man who had installed cameras, who had watched those videos not just with lust, but with a covetous, sickening satisfaction that he owned a piece of Shane no one else could see.

A shudder racked him, deep and cold. He thought of Shane's question. "Does that mean you recorded us?" The shame of it was a live coal in his gut. He had. He had kept it. In his most honest, most broken moments, he would take it out and watch it, not just for arousal, but for proof. Proof that it had been real. That Shane had looked at him like that, had touched him like that, had moaned *his* name. It was a relic of his sickness, and he had just promised to send it to its subject. To hand over a piece of his own pathology for Shane to examine. It felt like cutting out a part of his own soul and offering it on a plate.

His phone, discarded on the carpet beside him, began to vibrate. The screen lit up, casting a pale blue glow on the dark floor. The caller ID made his blood run cold.

Отец.

Father.

The man's face, bloated and perpetually sneering, flashed in his mind. The voice, slurred with vodka and contempt. "Love is control, Ilya Gregorovich. You show you care by making sure they cannot leave. You make them need you. It is the only way they stay."

For years, that poison had been the blueprint. It had twisted his genuine love for Shane into something monstrous, something that built cages and called them safety.

The phone buzzed again, an angry insect. A part of him, the old, wounded part that still craved that man's approval even as he despised him, wanted to answer. To hear the gruff voice, to fall back into the familiar, toxic pattern. It would be easier than this. Easier than sitting on the floor, trembling with the effort of being good.

His thumb hovered over the screen.

Then he saw Shane's face, not from tonight, but from that first horrible confrontation after the trackers were discovered. The betrayal, the hurt, the sheer fear. The look of someone realizing the person they loved was a stranger wearing a familiar face.

Ilya swiped his thumb across the screen, rejecting the call. He didn't just silence it. He blocked the number. A final, decisive click. The poison line was cut.

The silence felt cleaner after that. Heavier, but cleaner.

He needed an anchor. Not the anchor of the past, but the one guiding him toward a possible future. His fingers, still unsteady, scrolled past the blocked contact and found the one labeled Dr. Kostova. He had a standing instruction to call, day or night, if he was in crisis. Was this a crisis? He felt more stable than he had in years, and yet he was sitting on a hotel room floor, shaking apart.

He pressed call. It rang three times before she answered, her voice calm and alert, no trace of sleep. "Ilya. It's late, are you alright?"

The words tumbled out in a ragged, Russian torrent. He told her about the text, the airport, the devastating outfit, the restaurant, the scent patch, the deliberate flirtation that had felt like being flayed alive. He told her about the room, the kiss, the feel of Shane's body, the war inside him. He told her about the hand on Shane's throat, the way he'd pinned his wrist, the terrifying, beautiful moment when every cell in his body was screaming to take more. And he told her about stepping back. About the words he'd forced out.

He told her about the promise of a proper courtship." He confessed about the video, the deep shame of it, and his promise to send it.

There was a long silence on the other end of the line. He could hear the scratch of a pen on paper.

"Ilya," she said finally, her voice holding a warmth he'd rarely heard. "This is not a setback. This is perhaps your most significant breakthrough."

He let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. "It does not feel like one. It feels like I have been run over by a truck."

"The feeling valid, Ilya. Let yourself experience this and learn from it. This wont always be so difficult." she said, her tone turning warm again, which was somehow comforting. "The obsession, the pathological possessiveness, it seeks release. It seeks the dopamine flood of conquest and control. You denied it that flood. You experienced the intense craving, you had the object of the craving willingly in your hands, and you made a conscious choice based on a higher principle: his autonomy. Your love for him, not your need to own him, dictated your action. Do you understand the difference?"

He closed his eyes, leaning his head back against the door. “The love... hurts more. It is harder.”

“Yes. Obsession is a simple, hungry beast. Love is a complex garden. It requires patience, nurturing, respect for each other. You took the first, real step into this so called garden tonight. You did not trample the flowers because you wanted to hold them. You did not let your baser, Alpha instinct win.”

The metaphor was absurd, and perfectly accurate. He had wanted to trample, to devour. He had chosen to admire from a step away.

“My father called,” he said, the words quiet. “I blocked him.”

Another pause, another soft scratch of pen on paper. “Good. You are choosing your lineage. You are not your father’s son in this moment. You are becoming your own man.”

They spoke for twenty more minutes. She guided him through the physical aftermath, the shaking was normal, a neurological release of pent-up tension. She told him to drink water, to take a over the counter, non-habit-forming sleep aid if he needed it, to not punish himself with the memory of Shane’s body, but to acknowledge the feeling and let it pass. She approved of his plan to send the video. “It is a transfer of power. You are giving him back a piece of himself you stole. It will be painful for you. That is the point. The pain is the medicine.”

When he hung up, the room was still dark, but the oppressive weight had lifted slightly. It had been named, examined, and placed within the narrative of recovery, not ruin.

He pushed himself up off the floor. His body ached. He went to the minibar, ignored the alcohol, and took out a bottle of water. He drank it all, then opened his laptop. His fingers were steady now.

Finding the encrypted file took a moment. It was buried, but he knew the path by heart. He clicked on it. A video player opened. He didn't press play. He didn't need to. The thumbnail was seared into his memory: Shane, smiling up at him from a tangle of his own sheets, sunlight from his Montreal apartment window catching in his dark hair. A look of open, trusting affection that had long since been burned away by fear and betrayal.

His throat closed. This was the last vestige of his surveillance. His most cherished trophy. And it did not belong to him.

He attached the file to an email. His cursor hovered over the address field. He typed: S.Hollander@

The auto-fill completed it. He wrote no subject. In the body, he typed only two words.

As promised.

He hit send.

The action felt like a physical amputation. A vital, rotten part of him was severed and sent away. The relief was immediate, and immense. He was clean of it. Finally.

He shut the laptop. The room was quiet. The ghost of Shane's scent was fading, replaced by the sterile smell of air conditioning and the clean general hotel smell. He walked to the window, looking out at the glittering, indifferent lights of Montreal. Somewhere out there, in a clean, well-ordered apartment, Shane was alone with his own thoughts, with the memory of a kiss that had stopped, with a promise hanging in the air.

I'm going to court you.

The words felt terrifying and true. He had no map for this. No father's example to follow, no obsessive playbook to enact. He would have to invent it, moment by moment, with Dr. Kostova's voice in one ear and the memory of Shane's soft, trusting sigh in the service stairwell in the other. The books on Omega relations helped some, but before when he was in situations outlined in books, his instincts and learned behaviours took charge.

He would call tomorrow. He would ask about his day. He would listen. He would not assume. He would not track. He would just... be there. As a man, not just an alpha. As a hopeful suitor, not a desperate owner.

It was the hardest thing he would ever do. And for the first time, as he stood in the silent hotel room, the hollow ache in his chest began to feel less like emptiness, and more like space. Space for something new to grow.

The digital clock on Shane's nightstand glowed 6:08 AM. His body, trained by years of regimented routine, was already stirring before the alarm. The phantom sensations from the night before- the press of Ilya's body, the scrape of his teeth, the iron grip of his hand around his wrist, had woven themselves into his dreams, leaving him tangled in his sheets, heart pounding with a confused ache.

He swung his legs out of bed, the cool floorboards a shock to his system. Structure. Routine. He moved to the window, drawing the blinds to let in the pale, early morning light. Montreal was quiet, the city holding its breath before the day began. His own mind was anything but quiet.

The knock at his door at precisely 6:30 was so unexpected he froze, halfway through pulling on a running shirt. No one visited at this hour. Maybe Rose, was the only one who might, and she would text first. A cold, irrational dread, a leftover ghost from a different life, slithered down his spine. He approached the door cautiously, peering through the peephole.

No one stood there. Just the empty hallway. He unlocked the door and opened it a crack.

On the mat sat a simple, elegant cardboard box. Next to it was a slender glass vase holding a bouquet of flowers. Not a grand, romantic explosion of roses, but something thoughtful and understated: deep blue lisianthus, white astilbe, and sprigs of green eucalyptus, tied with a brown paper wrap. It was beautiful in a way that felt observed—cool colors, not

overwhelmingly perfumed, no loud too-bright colors. It was a bouquet chosen by someone who paid attention.

He brought them inside, setting the box and vase on his kitchen island. His fingers trembled slightly as he opened the box. Inside, nestled in insulated packaging, were two still-warm breakfast sandwiches from the artisanal bakery three blocks away- the one he'd mentioned in a text weeks ago as having the only acceptable sourdough in the city. There were also two perfect lattes in sealed cups and a small paper bag of their maple-pecan croissants, his favorite guilty pleasure.

There was no card.

He didn't need one. The specificity was the message. This wasn't a generic gesture. This was Ilya saying, *I remember. I listen.*

The dread evaporated, replaced by a warmth that was equally unsettling. It spread through his chest, sweet and dangerous. He traced the petal of a lisianthus, its texture like cool silk. This was courting. This was the "properly" Ilya had whispered in the dim stairwell. It was so normal, so *charming*, it completely disarmed him. The Ilya he knew- the one of grand, oppressive gestures, would have had the entire bakery delivered, or would have shown up at his door himself, demanding entry. This was quiet. Considerate. It respected his space and his schedule.

He took a picture of the flowers next to the open box of food, the morning light from his window making it look like a still-life. He sent it.

Shane- 6:30 is aggressively punctual. Did you bribe the bakery to open early?

The reply came before he could take a sip of the latte.

IGR- No bribery required. They open at 5:30 for construction workers. I am merely an enthusiastic early customer.

The flowers are not too much? How do you like them?

Shane smiled, a real one that softened his face. He cradled the phone.

Shane- They're not too much. They're perfect. Thank you.

The latte is still hot. How?

IGR- Insulated packaging and a driver who understands the value of a timely delivery. I calculated the travel time.

Of course he did. Shane could picture him, awake in the sterile hotel room, doing the math, orchestrating this small, perfect moment. The obsessive precision was still there, but its aim had shifted. Instead of monitoring his pain, it was anticipating his comfort.

Shane- You didn't have to do this.

IGR- I wanted to. Did you sleep?

The question was careful, laden with unspoken meaning. *Did you sleep, or did you lie awake thinking of me? Of us? Of how I stopped?*

Shane- Some. You?

IGR- Also some. The bed is large. And quiet.

An image flashed in Shane's mind: Ilya, alone in a king-sized bed in a generic hotel room, staring at the ceiling, wrestling with the same ghosts. The distance between their separate silences felt intimate somehow.

They texted back and forth for twenty minutes as Shane ate the sandwich which was, predictably, perfect and sipped the latte. The conversation was easy, light. They talked about the sourdough's tang, the upcoming training camp schedule, a ridiculous headline about a teammate. It was like the texting from before the obsession, from before the collapse. It was the friendship, tentative and precious, poking through the ashes.

Shane- I have a quick team admin meeting at 9. Logistics for the charity skate next week.

IGR- You should go. Do not be late on my account.

Shane- What are your plans today?

IGR- I will train at hotel gym. Then I will think of what to do next.

Shane bit his lip, his thumb hovering over the screen. The impulse was to say, Come over after. Just... be here. But the memory of the hotel room, of Ilya's trembling restraint, of his own desperate pull towards him, gave him pause. The guest room offer had been rejected. Ilya was building a courtship on neutral ground, brick by careful brick. To insist on his own territory felt like pushing.

Shane- A movie?

IGR- ?

Shane- For what to do next. We could see a movie. Tonight.

There was a pause. Shane could almost hear him thinking, analyzing the variables.

IGR- A public movie theater. With popcorn.

Shane- That's generally how it works.

IGR- I would like that. But I will pick you up. And I will bring you home.

Shane's breath caught. It was so... normal. So dating-101. It was also a subtle reassertion of the structure Ilya needed: defined steps, clear boundaries, a sense of control over the environment. A public place. A defined beginning and end.

Shane- Okay. Pick me up at 7.

The meeting was interminable. Shane sat in the Voyageurs' conference room, nodding as the community relations coordinator detailed the schedule for the charity skate, but his mind was elsewhere. It was replaying the feel of Ilya's hand in his in the service stairwell, the soft promise in his voice. It was analyzing the bouquet, the timing of the delivery, the specific choice of pastry. It was a problem to be solved, but for the first time, the problem was delightful.

After the meeting, as he was heading out, his phone buzzed.

IGR- Training done. The hotel gym is adequate. I have been thinking about the movie. Action or comedy?

Shane- Whichever you want.

IGR- I'm willing to sit through whatever boring movie you might like. Therefore, I am willing to endure poor pacing of a PG comedy movie for you.

Shane- That's very noble. But let's see what's playing. I'm not making you sit through a rom-com.

They settled on a big-budget action film- a safe, neutral choice with plenty of explosions and minimal emotional complexity. The ordinariness of the exchange, the negotiation of a simple evening plan, sent another warm, foreign thrill through Shane. This was what people did. This was dating.

Ilya arrived at 6:58 PM, driving a sleek, black rented sports car that was both utterly predictable and subtly thrilling. He was dressed down- dark jeans, a simple tight grey henley that stretched across his shoulders, a leather jacket. He looked both casual and intensely, magnetically present. He didn't come to the door as Shane requested, since neighbors were sitting on their balconies. He texted from the car.

IGR- I am here.

When Shane emerged, Ilya got out, coming around to open the passenger door for him. The gesture was old-fashioned, courtly. Their eyes met as Shane sat down, and the air between them crackled with the memory of the previous night. But Ilya just gave a small, contained smile and nodded. "You look very pretty today."

"Thanks," Shane said with a blush, sliding into the low seat. "So do you."

The drive to the cinema was quiet, filled with a comfortable tension. Ilya drove with focused precision, one hand on the wheel, the other resting on the gear shift. Shane watched the city lights slide by, hyper-aware of the few inches of space between Ilya's hand and his own thigh.

At the multiplex, Ilya insisted on buying the tickets, then the popcorn, one large ginger ale, to share and bottled water. He remembered Shane didn't like soda unless he ordered ginger ale 'as a treat'. They chose seats near the back, in a sparsely populated showing. As the trailers began, Shane felt a flicker of disappointment. The distance between their seats felt vast, a canyon in the dark even with only the armrest between them.

He glanced at Ilya, his profile illuminated by the flashing light of the screen. He looked relaxed, but his posture was upright, his attention seemingly fixed on the previews. Shane let out a small, unconscious sigh, his shoulders sinking a fraction.

He didn't see the way Ilya's lips twitched, the way he had to suppress an indulgent smile at the clear, quiet pout. Ilya had seen it, and the urge to reach over, to bridge the gap, was a physical pull in his chest. But he kept his hands to himself, curled around the popcorn tub.

The movie was exactly what they'd needed: loud, dumb, and visually spectacular. It demanded no emotional investment, only passive consumption. About halfway through, during a lull between car chases, Shane reached for the popcorn. His fingers brushed against Ilya's in the tub.

Both of them stilled.

On screen, something exploded. Neither of them looked.

Slowly, Ilya turned his hand, just enough to let Shane's fingers rest against his palm. It wasn't a hold, just a point of contact, warm and buttery from the popcorn. They left their hands like that for the rest of the film, a silent connection in the dark. It was more intimate than any kiss they'd shared so far.

When the credits rolled, they walked out, the shared popcorn tub empty, their hands swinging briefly close but not touching. The night air was cool.

"The special effects were so - I don't know what's that word. It looked fake." Ilya remarked as they reached the car.

"You're just mad you didn't think of using a grappling hook to swing between skyscrapers first," Shane replied, a real laugh bubbling up.

Ilya looked at him, the parking lot lights catching in his eyes. "Perhaps."

The drive back was different. The silence was softer, charged with the shared memory of linked hands in the dark. When Ilya pulled up to Shane's building, he put the car in park but left the engine running. The unspoken question hung in the air.

"Do you want to come up?" Shane asked, the words leaving his mouth before he could overthink them. "For tea? Or... something?"

Ilya's hands tightened on the steering wheel. He looked straight ahead, his jaw working. The struggle was visible, a storm playing out behind his eyes. The hotel room, the stairwell- the promise he'd made to himself and to Shane.

"A movie date ends with the drive home," he said finally, his voice low. "That is the... better choice for you."

"We can make new choices," Shane whispered.

Ilya turned his head then, and the look he gave Shane was so full of raw, aching want it stole the air from the car. "Do not tempt me, krasavchik," he murmured. "The man is winning, but the alpha has very persuasive arguments tonight."

Instead of answering, Shane leaned across the center console. He moved slowly, giving Ilya every chance to pull away. He didn't. When their lips met, it wasn't the desperate, wall-pinning clash of the night before. It was soft, searching, a continuation of the conversation their hands had started. Ilya's mouth was warm, and he tasted of salt and the faint, buttery hint of the popcorn. He made a low sound in his throat, a vibration Shane felt in his own chest, and his hand came up to cradle Shane's jaw, his thumb stroking his cheekbone.

It deepened, naturally, inevitably. The release of the pheromones scented air in the car, growing thick with the smell of leather and pine, of Ilya's clean alpha scent, and of Shane's own, lightly masked sweetness. Shane's hand found its way to Ilya's neck, fingers sliding into the soft curls at his nape. Ilya's other arm wrapped around him, pulling him as close as the console would allow, the gear shift digging into Shane's side, a minor, irrelevant pain.

This was different. This wasn't a test or a battle for control. This was a mutual discovery, a rediscovery. Shane sighed into the kiss, letting his head fall back slightly, giving Ilya better access. Ilya took the invitation, his mouth moving to Shane's jaw, then down the sensitive column of his throat, nipping lightly at the spot where his scent was strongest, just above the collar of his shirt. Shane gasped, his fingers tightening in Ilya's hair.

"Ilya," he breathed, the word half a plea, half a statement of fact.

Ilya pulled back, just an inch, his breath coming in short, hot gusts against Shane's damp skin. His eyes were dark, pupils blown wide in the dim light from the dashboard. "We should stop," he said, the words seeming to cost him. "The rules..."

"Fuck the rules," Shane whispered, chasing his lips again.

Ilya met him for one more searing, too-brief kiss before he firmly, gently, set Shane back into his own seat. He was trembling, a fine tremor running through the hand that now gripped the steering wheel again. "No," he said, more to himself than to Shane. "Not like this. Not in a fucking car." He took a deep, shuddering breath, visibly regaining his composure. "I am walking you to your door."

Shane, his own heart hammering, his body humming with unmet need, could only nod. The rejection was gentle, but it was a rejection nonetheless. It was also, he understood with a dawning, frustrating clarity, an act of profound respect.

Ilya turned off the car and came around to open Shane's door, holding his hand out to help Shane stand- another old-fashioned gesture that now felt achingly tender. They walked to the building's entrance in a silence that was no longer comfortable, but thick with suspended energy.

At the door, Shane fumbled for his keys. Ilya stood close, but not touching him.

"Thank you," Shane said, looking up at him. "For the flowers. The breakfast. The movie. The... everything."

A ghost of a smile touched Ilya's lips. "The 'everything' is hardest part."

"I know."

Ilya reached out then, not to pull him close, but to tuck a stray strand of hair behind Shane's ear. His touch was feather-light. "Goodnight, Hollander."

"Goodnight, Rozanov."

Shane unlocked the door and slipped inside. He didn't look back as he headed for the elevator, but he felt Ilya's gaze on him until the door swung shut.

Upstairs, in the quiet of his apartment, Shane leaned against his own front door. The flowers from the morning greeted him from the kitchen island, a silent testament to a day of careful, deliberate courtship. His lips were still tingling. His body was still awake with the echo of Ilya's touch.

He was being courted. Properly. By a man who was fighting a war inside himself to do it right. It was terrifying. It was the most hopeful thing that had happened to him in a very long time.

Across town, Ilya sat in the parked rental car outside Shane's building for a long time, watching the light go on in his apartment window. He replayed the kiss in the car, the feel of Shane yielding against him, the scent of him, the sweet, trusting sigh. He clutched the steering wheel until his knuckles were white, wrestling the "monster" back into its cage, brick by brick.

The man had won the day. The courtship continued. And for the first time, Ilya allowed himself to believe that the victory, however painful in the moment, might lead somewhere neither of them had ever dared to go: a future.

The rented sports car felt like a cage on the drive back to Boston. The scent of Shane- that fragile, heartbreaking blend of clean soap and unmasked sweetness still lingered in the upholstery, a delicious reminder of what had been offered to him. Ilya drove with the windows down, letting the cool, late-summer air scour the interior, but it was no use. Some scents adhered to memory, not just fabric.

His mind, usually a whirlwind of analysis and strategy, was preternaturally quiet. The silence wasn't the medicated blankness from Moscow. It was the spent, granular calm after a storm has passed, where every detail is sharp and raw. He could still feel the exact pressure of Shane's fingers linked with his in the popcorn tub, a point of contact that had sent more voltage through him than any body check. He could see the way Shane's lips had parted on a sigh in the dark of the car, an invitation Ilya had carved out a piece of his own soul to refuse.

The man is winning.

Dr. Kostova's words from their late-night call echoed. "*You are not your father's son in this moment.*" Each careful gesture- the flowers chosen for their elegance, not their ostentation; the movie date in a public space; the agonizing, respectful retreat at the door, was a brick in a new foundation. A foundation built on choice, not coercion. On patience, not possession.

It was the hardest thing he had ever attempted.

Boston greeted him with its familiar, brash skyline. His condo, when he entered, was a monument to sterile transience. Floor-to-ceiling windows, minimalist furniture, nothing on the walls. It was a place to sleep and store gear, not a home. He dropped his duffel by the door and went straight to the sleek, untouched desk in the corner. His laptop sat there, a black monolith.

The email.

He hadn't lied to Shane. He had, months ago, as part of his initial, frantic attempts to "heal," unlinked their email accounts. He had severed the digital umbilical cord that had allowed him to monitor Shane's flight bookings, his online purchases, his correspondence. It had been a necessary amputation.

He ignored the emails from his agent and team. Before the severing, he had seen things. Notifications. Tentative, exploratory emails from team executives and agents that had nothing to do with trade talks. They were about opportunities. Phrases like "future considerations" and "long-term vision for a player of your caliber" and "building a legacy." They were the kind of emails sent to a franchise cornerstone whose contract was entering its final year. Shane's rookie deal, like his own, was ticking down.

Ilya powered on the laptop. He didn't reopen the old, invasive pathways. He didn't need to. The knowledge was etched into him. At least six other teams had been sniffing around, his agent had confirmed, their interest growing as Ilya's on-ice performance remained stellar even while his personal life imploded. The offers weren't formal yet, but the groundwork was being laid. A king's ransom for the Russian scoring phenom.

And Shane... Shane would be receiving the same. The quiet, brilliant, unproblematic center who had led his team in points and grace under unspeakable pressure. Montreal would move heaven and earth to keep him. But other teams, hungry for his combination of skill and unflappable leadership, would be circling too. They just didn't know the secret that made his composure so hard-won.

A cold, complex knot tightened in Ilya's stomach. It wasn't jealousy. It was something more terrifying: parallel uncertainty. Their professional futures, which had always been intertwined through rivalry, were now on similar, precarious trajectories. They could end up on opposite sides of the continent. With the weight of new, gargantuan contracts and the ghosts of the past pressing down on the fragile new thing they were trying to grow.

His phone buzzed- a calendar alert. Preseason Physicals - 8:00 AM. The real world, with its impersonal demands, reasserted itself. He was back in the machine. The next few weeks would be a barrage of medical tests, media days, and early skates designed to separate the vacation-soft from the game-ready. Every move he made would be scrutinized. Was Rozanov

focused? Was he worth the massive investment? Was he a liability with all the fighting on the ice and unpredictability?

He showered, the water needling his skin. He thought of Shane's routine, the meticulous order of his life. The thought was a comfort. Shane was probably already asleep, his apartment quiet, the flowers on one of those fancy tables, perhaps beginning to wilt. A simple, ordinary end to an extraordinary few days.

Later, wrapped in a towel, his hair dripping, he picked up his phone. He didn't overthink it. He called.

Shane answered on the third ring, his voice soft with sleep. "Rozanov?" A hint of worry bled through. "Everything okay?"

Just hearing his name in that sleep-roughened tone unraveled something tight in Ilya's chest. "Da. Everything is okay. I just got settled back in Boston. I did not wake you?"

"It's okay. I was just reading." A rustle of sheets. "How was the flight?"

"Long. Quiet." *I missed you the moment I left your doorstep.* He didn't say it. The courtship required a lighter touch.

A soft, breathy laugh came through the line. It was the best sound Ilya had heard in months. "That's your fault. You bought the large."

"A strategic error."

They talked then, not about contracts or obsessions or the terrifying open field of their future. They talked about nothing. The weird abstract art in Ilya's lobby he'd never understood. The book Shane was reading about naval history. The way Hayden had texted Shane a blurry picture of a squirrel wearing a tiny hat. It was easy. It was the friendship, rediscovered, its edges softened by everything that had happened since.

Ilya lay back on his cold, too-large bed, the phone pressed to his ear, and let Shane's voice paint pictures in the dark. This was the part he had missed most catastrophically: the daily texture of him. The shared, stupid universe of two people who simply know each other.

"My physical is tomorrow," Ilya said after a comfortable silence. "The circus begins."

"Mine's Thursday," Shane replied. Then, his voice careful, he added, "It's a big year."

The understatement hung between them, Ilya could hear the nerves over the phone. *It's the last year of our rookie contracts. Our value is at its peak. Our lives are about to be auctioned to the highest bidder.*

"Da," Ilya said simply. He didn't ask the questions burning in his mind. *Have they called? What are you thinking? Do you want to stay with Montreal?* To ask would be to step into the old patterns, to assume his need to know superseded Shane's right to privacy. Instead, he said, "You will be magnificent. As always."

Shane was quiet for a moment. "You too. Just... try to look like you've slept, okay? For the photos."

A real smile touched Ilya's lips. "I will wear extra sunglasses."

They lapsed into silence again, but it was the good kind, the kind that felt like sharing oxygen over a long distance.

"I should let you sleep," Ilya murmured, though every cell in his body resisted ending the connection.

"Yeah. Big day for the circus." Shane's tone was warm. "Goodnight, Ilya."

“Goodnight, krasavchik.”

He held the phone to his ear for a second after the call ended, listening to the empty silence, already missing the sound of Shane’s breath. Then he placed it on the nightstand and stared at the ceiling.

The future was a maze of contracts, cameras, and unknown cities. The past was a minefield of his own creation. But the present, this fragile, deliberate present where he could call Shane Hollander and talk about squirrels in hats, felt like a miracle he had no right to, but would fight with every reformed bone in his body to keep.

The man was winning. And for the first time, Ilya began to suspect the prize might be worth more than any trophy, any contract, any obsessive dream of total possession. It might simply be this: the right to hear his voice in the dark, and to know he had earned the privilege to listen.

The number 194 became a silent, persistent guest in Shane’s mind. It followed him from the clinic to the gym, from the ice to his quiet apartment. It wasn’t about aesthetics or performance; it was about deviation. For years, his body had been a precise instrument, its weight a constant variable in the equation of his control. 190 pounds was the output of a life meticulously calibrated specific caloric intake, measured exertion, managed stress. It was the weight of Shane Hollander, Beta Hockey Star, a figure of immutable stability.

194 was the weight of something else. Something unplanned.

He stood in his kitchen three days after the physical, staring at the weekly menu emailed by the private chef Ilya had quietly hired for him. It was another one of those “courting” gestures- thoughtful, observant, removing the daily mental load of meal prep so Shane could focus on training and recovery. The menu was elegant, balanced, and full of the wholesome, nutrient-dense foods an athlete needed: grilled salmon with quinoa and roasted asparagus, bison chili with sweet potato, berry chia seed pudding for breakfast.

It was perfect. And it felt like an indictment.

Because he had eaten the chef's food. He had enjoyed the perfectly seared scallops, the rich avocado chocolate mousse. He hadn't tracked a single macro. He'd simply consumed, trusting the expertise behind it, and his body had responded by shifting its set point.

His phone buzzed on the counter. A text from Ilya.

IGR- Chef Laurent sends his compliments. He says you have the palate of a man who appreciates quality. I think he is flirting. I should fire him. Get you old grandmother to cook for you.

A week ago, the text would have made him smile. Now, it felt like a spotlight on his lapse. Chef Laurent's quality had added four pounds of unplanned mass.

Shane's fingers moved over the screen, pulling up the reply email to the chef. His therapist's voice, Dr. Mayra's calm, rational tone, echoed in one ear. "You're defining your capacity. Protecting your energy. That's autonomy."

But another voice, older and more familiar, hissed louder. Autonomy is control. Control is numbers. Predictability. Safety. Gaining this weight is making you softer. *If someone notices your hips getting rounder, they can put the pieces together.*

He began to type, his movements sharp and precise.

Mr. Laurent,

Thank you for the proposed menu. Please make the following adjustments for the coming week:

- Remove the quinoa from the salmon dish. Substitute with double the asparagus.
- Omit the sweet potato from the chili. Extra lean ground bison only, with increased leafy greens.

- The berry chia pudding is to be replaced with plain Greek yogurt (non-fat) and a separate portion of whole berries
- Please ensure all sauces are served on the side, if included at all. Vinegar or lemon-based dressings only.
- Remove the avocado mousse dessert option entirely.>

The goal is maximum lean protein and fibrous vegetables, minimal simple carbohydrates and fats

Sincerely,

Shane Hollander

He hit send before he could second-guess it. A cold, clean sense of order washed over him. He needed to get down to 190lbs again, before the season.

His phone buzzed again. Ilya.

IGR- You are quiet today. Did the skate go poorly?

Shane stared at the message. Ilya was noticing his patterns, his moods. Another observation. This one felt less like being seen and more like being monitored. The old paranoia, a ghost he thought he'd buried, tapped on the glass of his mind.

Shane- Skate was fine. Just tweaking the meal plan with the chef. Getting ready for camp.

He needed to justify it. To preempt the question.

IGR- Laurent's plans are designed for peak athletic performance. He knows his business.

Shane- I know. Just personal preference. Need to lean out a bit.

The lie tasted bitter. It wasn't about leaning out. It was about erasing the evidence of his own contentment. The four pounds were a monument to a summer where he'd laughed at texts, savored pastries, and kissed someone in a dark car without calculating the consequences. They had to go.

IGR- As long as you are getting enough fuel. The preseason is a grind.

The concern in the text was palpable, and it irked Shane. It felt paternal. Like Ilya was overseeing his care, even from a distance. The chef, the check-ins, they were threads of a safety net Ilya was weaving around him again. But this time, Shane was the one feeling trapped by it.

Shane- I've been fueling this body for a long time. I think I know what it needs.

The moment he sent it, he winced. It was defensive, sharp. He was picking a fight over a menu. Over his own irrational reaction to a number on a scale.

Ilya's reply took a minute.

IGR- You are right. Forgive me. It is your body. Your choice.

The words were correct. Respectful. Exactly what he'd asked for. So why did they make him feel so alone?

His next session with Dr. Mayra felt charged. He sat in the familiar armchair, the weight of the unsaid pressing on him.

“Something’s wrong. You’re all tense.” Dr. Mayra observed, not unkindly. “Last time, you spoke about feeling frustrated but ultimately safe within the new boundaries. Today, you seem... agitated.”

Shane picked at the seam of his jeans. “I gained weight.”

Dr. Mayra waited.

“Four pounds. At my physical.”

“And how do you feel about that?”

“It’s... wrong,” Shane said, the word bursting out of him. “It’s a deviation. My weight is 190. It has been for years. Through everything. It’s a constant.”

“A controlled variable,” she offered.

“Yes. And now it’s not. And I... I changed the meal plan the chef sends. I cut out all the carbs, the healthy fats, the desserts. I need to get back to 190.”

“Why?”

The question was so simple it felt like a trap. “Because that’s my weight. That’s the correct number.”

“According to whom? Your performance metrics from last season? Your doctors? Or an internal standard you set during a period of extreme stress and suppression?”

Shane fell silent. She had neatly dismantled his logic.

“You told me you’ve been feeling calmer. That your sleep has improved. That the texts with Ilya, while complicated, have brought a sense of... connection. Is it possible your body is responding to a decrease in chronic stress? That four pounds might represent a healthier baseline, not a failure of control?”

“It feels like a failure,” he whispered, the admission shameful. “It feels like I’ve been... indulgent. Distracted.”

“By Ilya’s attention? By his gifts?”

“By all of it,” Shane confessed. “The flowers, the food, the... the way he talks to me now. It’s like I’ve taken my eye off the ball. Literally and figuratively. My body is the first thing to show it.”

Dr. Mayra leaned forward. “Shane, for years, your body has been a fortress. You medicated it to hide its nature. You trained it to project an image of impenetrable, beta strength. You controlled its every input and output to maintain a specific, unchanging form. That fortress kept you safe. It also kept you isolated inside it.”

She let that sit for a moment. “What if these four pounds aren’t the walls crumbling? What if they’re you, very carefully, opening a window? Letting in a little air. A little light. Maybe even letting someone else see in. you have a more active social life. You’ve been taking control of your free time and doing things you love.”

The analogy was too apt. It made his eyes sting. He thought of Ilya seeing him- really seeing him- not as a perfect, controlled idol, but as a human who ate croissants and gained a few pounds and sometimes sent sharp texts when he felt cornered.

“He hired a chef,” Shane said, deflection in his tone. “It feels like another form of control. Just a nicer cage.”

“Did you ask him to hire the chef?”

“No.”

“Can you tell him to cancel the service?”

“No. I like it actually. It makes me feel like he... I don't know, like I'm being looked after.”

“Then it is a gift with an off-ramp. Your autonomy remains intact. The choice to alter the menu was you exercising that autonomy.” She paused. “Though, perhaps ask yourself: are you changing the menu for performance, or are you punishing your body for changing? For daring to reflect a life that is becoming slightly less rigid, slightly more... lived-in?”

The session ended with more questions than answers, but with the thorny issue named: his weight wasn't just a number. It was a barometer for his fear of the very changes he was supposedly trying to embrace.

That evening, a new menu arrived from Chef Laurent. It adhered strictly to Shane's mandates: no carbs, no sweets, lean protein and greens presented with elegant, Spartan simplicity. It was exactly what he'd asked for.

Attached was a note.

Mr. Hollander,

Your adjustments have been made. Please note that the removal of complex carbohydrates may impact energy levels during high-intensity training blocks. I will monitor and can adjust protein sources accordingly. My goal is to support your objectives.

Respectfully,

Laurent

It was professional, accommodating, and contained a subtle, expert warning. Shane felt no triumph, only a hollow victory. He had successfully reasserted control over a spreadsheet of food. He had not addressed the storm inside him.

He looked at the vase on his bookshelf. The lisianthus were fully dry now, their blue petals papery and delicate, preserved in their moment of beauty. A gift he had accepted. A gesture from a man trying to court him properly.

He thought of Ilya's text: "It is your body. Your choice."

The right words. The respectful words. Why did they leave him feeling so adrift?

Because, he realized with a sinking clarity, part of him was terrified that if he truly relaxed his control- if he allowed the weight to stay at 194, if he enjoyed the chef's meals without scrutiny, if he leaned fully into the terrifying, gentle promise of this new version of Ilya, he would lose himself entirely. The fortress walls might not just develop windows; they might dissolve altogether, leaving him exposed in a way he hadn't been since he was a teenager injecting illegal suppressants in a bathroom stall.

The scale was a manageable problem. A number to be corrected. The much harder problem was figuring out who Shane Hollander was allowed to be on the other side of all this, not just a 'beta', not just a survivor, not just an object of obsession or a subject of a courtship, but a man, in a body that was changing, facing a future that was terrifyingly, exhilaratingly unwritten.

The encrypted file arrived just after midnight, the night before the first preseason scrimmage. Shane had been in bed, eyes closed but mind racing through power-play setups and the nagging, hollow feeling left by his own restrictive meal plan. His phone, set to Do Not Disturb, buzzed once with a specific, overriding alert he'd assigned only to Ilya's or his parents forms of communications.

His heart, already unsettled, gave a hard, single thump against his ribs. He sat up, the cool sheets pooling around his waist. The room was dark, lit only by the faint ambient glow from the city outside his window. He reached for the tablet on his nightstand, its larger screen feeling suddenly necessary, a more appropriate stage for whatever was coming.

The email was stark. No subject line. The body contained only two words: As promised. And below it, the attachment. A video file, cryptically named with a string of numbers and letters.

Ilya's voice from the hotel room, strained and ashamed, echoed in the silence. *I'll send it to you.*

Shane's fingers were cold. He tapped the file. A media player opened, filling the screen with blackness for a moment before resolving into an image.

It was his old apartment. The one he'd lived in before the kidnapping, before the surveillance was discovered. The camera angle was high, in the corner of his bedroom, near the ceiling. A hidden lens capturing the entire room. The quality was shockingly clear. He saw his own bed, the navy duvet cover he'd since replaced, the stack of books on his nightstand. The late afternoon sun slanted through the blinds, painting stripes of gold across the floor.

And then, he saw himself.

He watched his past self walk into the frame, wearing a soft, faded Voyageurs t-shirt and sweatpants. He was smiling, a little shy, a lot nervous. He was talking to someone off-camera, his gestures careful. Then Ilya entered the shot.

Shane's breath caught.

Ilya looked younger. Not in years, but in spirit. The harsh lines of perpetual tension that had later carved themselves into his face were softer. His eyes, which Shane had become accustomed to seeing as either blazing with intensity or hollowed with exhaustion, were alight with a different fire. It was a mix of awe, hunger, and a tenderness so raw it was painful to witness.

He watched as Ilya reached for him, his movements not with the desperate, claiming aggression of their later encounters, or the carefully measured restraint of the present, but with a reverence that seemed to surprise even Ilya. His large hands framed Shane's face, his

thumbs stroking his cheekbones with a touch so gentle it made present-day Shane's skin prickle.

The audio was clear. He heard his own laugh, a sound he barely recognized-light, unguarded, free of the underlying hum of anxiety that had become its permanent bass note. He heard Ilya's voice, lower, a rough caress. "You are so beautiful, Shane. It steals my breath."

The Shane on screen flushed, ducking his head, and Ilya tipped his chin back up, forcing eye contact. "No. Look at me. Let me see it."

The progression was slow, achingly so. A dance of shedding layers, not just of clothing, but of defenses. Ilya was meticulous. He kissed every new inch of skin revealed, the hollow of his throat, the slope of a shoulder, the plane of his stomach. He kept pausing, his eyes searching Shane's face.

"This okay?" Ilya asked, his voice gravelly, as his hand slid under the waistband of Shane's sweats.

"Yes."

"Tell me to stop."

"Don't stop."

Present-Shane watched, transfixed. He was a ghost in his own bedroom, observing the moment of happiness. He saw the trust in his own eyes, a trust that had been so complete it was its own form of blindness. He saw the way his body arched into Ilya's touch, a language of pure, uncomplicated wanting.

But it was Ilya who held his focus. The alpha's attention was absolute. It wasn't just sexual, it was devotional. His eyes never left Shane's face for long, constantly checking, reading, ensuring every gasp was pleasure, every shiver was welcome. When he finally, slowly, entered him, he did it with a controlled, shaking slowness that spoke of a fear of hurting him that outweighed his own desperate need. He buried his face in Shane's neck, his shoulders trembling with the effort of his restraint.

“You feel... Bozhe moy... you feel like heaven.”

Shane watched, his own body responding traitorously to the memory, heat pooling low in his belly. He was fascinated. This was the obsession in its pure, nascent form, before it curdled into something malignant. It was still possessive, but the possession was of the moment, of the feeling, not of the person as an object. Ilya was worshipping, not cataloging.

Then, he saw it.

As the intensity built, as Ilya's thrusts became less measured, more driven by primal need, there was a moment. Ilya pulled back slightly, his body shielding the movement from the camera, but not completely. Shane's own legs were wrapped around Ilya's waist, his head thrown back in ecstasy, oblivious.

Ilya's hand moved between their bodies. A quick, deliberate motion. A flicker of something translucent and discarded, barely caught by the wide-angle lens, falling to the sheets beside them.

The condom.

Shane's finger stabbed the screen, freezing the frame. He leaned in, his heart now a frantic drum against his ribs. He rewound. Five seconds. Played it in slow motion.

There. Unmistakable.

Before re-entering him, Ilya had removed it.

A cold fury, sharp and clean, sliced through the haze of arousal and nostalgic ache. It was a violation. A profound, dangerous betrayal of trust. It was the ultimate act of the obsession, the need to claim, to connect, to *breed*, overriding safety, consent, rationality. He'd been vulnerable, lost in sensation, and Ilya had made a decision that risked everything- his career, his secret, his very body.

The anger was a white-hot spike. He wanted to throw the tablet. He wanted to call Ilya and scream, to unleash every foul, hurtful word he could summon. How dare he? After everything, this was the proof- the sickness was there from the very beginning, woven into the most intimate moment they'd shared.

He sat there, shaking, the frozen image of their joined bodies a grotesque mockery on the screen. He forced himself to breathe. Four in. Seven hold. Eight out. The numbers were a lifeline.

His thumb moved, un-freezing the frame. The video continued.

He made himself watch. Through the haze of his fury, he saw Ilya's face. The ecstasy was there, yes, a raw, animal triumph. But so was something else. A vulnerability so deep it was terrifying. Tears glistened in Ilya's eyes as he moved, as he came, his release a shuddering, almost sob-like collapse onto Shane's body. He didn't pull away. He held Shane so tightly it looked like he was trying to merge them into one entity.

"Moy... moy...", Ilya chanted, the word lost in the skin of Shane's shoulder. It sounded less like a boast and more like a desperate, hopeful prayer.

The fury in Shane's chest splintered, confused.

The video continued past the climax. Ilya, still buried inside him, nuzzled his neck, placing soft, open-mouthed kisses along his scent gland. He whispered in Russian, too low for the microphone to catch clearly, the words a continuous, soothing stream. His hands, which had been gripping hard enough to bruise, now smoothed over Shane's back, his sides, a tender apology written in touch.

Present-Shane watched as his own body on screen gradually went limp, his breathing deepening into the rhythms of sleep. Satisfied, utterly spent. Ilya finally, carefully, withdrew. He didn't get up immediately. He just lay there for a long moment, propped on one elbow, watching Shane sleep. The look on his face... it was devastation. It was love so profound it bordered on grief. He reached out and brushed a strand of sweat-damp hair from Shane's forehead, his fingers trembling.

Then, he slowly got out of bed. He walked, naked and unselfconscious, to the bathroom. He returned with a warm, damp cloth. And with a tenderness that made the breath catch in present-Shane's throat, he began to clean him. He was meticulous, gentle, wiping away the evidence of their joining from his stomach, his thighs. He turned him slightly to ensure he was clean everywhere, his touch clinical and loving in the same motion. He fetched a glass of water from the kitchen, lifted Shane's head, and encouraged him to drink a few sleepy sips.

Then, he got back into bed. He pulled the covers over them both. He gathered Shane into his arms, tucking his head under his chin. And he stayed awake.

For over an hour, the video showed Ilya, eyes open in the dark, staring at the ceiling or down at the man in his arms. Every few minutes, he would press a kiss to Shane's hair, his temple, his shoulder. A random, quiet punctuation in the silent vigil. He was guarding. He was savoring. He was, quite clearly, memorizing.

Shane watched, his earlier anger now a tangled, heavy knot in his gut, wrapped in vines of a longing so acute it was a physical pain. He had no memory of this. None. He'd fallen asleep feeling sated and loved, and had woken up alone. He'd assumed Ilya had left. He'd never known about the careful cleanup, the water, the hours of silent, wakeful holding.

This was the man who had removed the condom? The same man. The monster and the caretaker were not separate people. They were the same shattered entity, capable of a reckless, terrifying violation and a breathtaking, selfless tenderness in the same hour.

The video ended. The screen went black, reflecting Shane's own stunned, pale face back at him.

He was shaken to his core. More turned on than he could ever remember being, his body humming with a confused, desperate arousal that felt connected to the devotion on the screen, not just the sex. And he was still, fundamentally, upset. The risk Ilya had taken was unconscionable. It was the starkest proof of the obsessive pathology Dr. Mayra had tried to describe.

But the anger wouldn't hold its shape. It kept melting against the image of Ilya's tear-streaked face at the moment of climax, and the later image of him wiping Shane's skin with such reverent care.

He had a hundred questions. They swarmed in his head, a chaotic buzz.

Why did you do it?

Were you trying to get me pregnant?

Did you even think about what that would have done to me?

Why did you stay awake?

What were you thinking?

Why did you look so sad?

Do you still look at me like that when I'm not looking?

He picked up his phone. The text thread with Ilya was the last thing open. His thumbs hovered over the keyboard. What could he possibly say?

I watched it. Too neutral.

How could you? An accusation that would trigger defensiveness or shame, and shut down any real conversation.

His mind, ever-seeking structure, tried to categorize his reactions. He made his mental list of what he would need to bring up when they were next face to face.

The need for clarification won. He couldn't sit with this maelstrom alone. He needed data. He needed Ilya's voice, his explanation, however flawed or painful.

He didn't text. He called.

The phone rang once, twice. Ilya answered on the third ring. His voice was wide awake, clear, and layered with a tension that told Shane he'd been waiting for this call.

"Shane."

"I watched it," Shane said, his own voice sounding thin and far away.

A beat of silence. He could hear Ilya's steady breath on the other end. "I know."

"You took the condom off."

No pretense. No easing into it. The statement hung in the digital space between them, an indictment. Ilya didn't deny it. He didn't offer excuses. His voice, when it came, was low, stripped bare. "Da. I did."

"Why?" The word was a crack in Shane's composure.

A long exhale. "In that moment... I wanted nothing between us. Not latex, not fear, not your suppressants, not my own sanity. I wanted it to be just you and me. Skin to skin. As close as two people can be. It was... a madness. A selfish, terrible madness. I knew it even as I did it. And I did it anyway."

The honesty was disarming. It wasn't a justification. It was a confession.

"You could have... you risked everything," Shane whispered, the enormity of it crashing over him again.

"I know. There is no defense. It is the single most unforgivable thing I have ever done to you. Even more than the cameras. Because that..." Ilya's voice broke. "That was me putting my sickness inside you in the most literal way possible. It is the reason I never asked for more,

after. The reason I was so afraid of my own obsession. I saw what it made me capable of in a moment of... of what I thought was love.”

Shane closed his eyes. The knot in his gut tightened. “You stayed. After. You cleaned me up. You held me for hours.”

A soft, shocked silence. “You remember that?”

“No. I saw it. On the video. I don’t remember any of it.”

Ilya made a small, wounded sound. “I wanted you to be comfortable. To feel... cared for. Not used. The two things... the act and the aftermath... they do not balance. I know this. One does not erase the other.”

The paradox. The unbearable, human paradox of Ilya Rozanov.

“You looked at me,” Shane said, his throat tight. “While I was sleeping. You looked... devastated.”

“I was,” Ilya admitted, the words raw. “Because I knew, even then, in some deep part of me I was ignoring, that I would ruin it. That my love was not a clean thing. That having you, truly having you, would break me in ways that would end up breaking you. I was holding paradise, and I knew I was its destroyer. I was trying to memorize what it felt like before I did.”

The tears came then, hot and silent, tracking down Shane’s face. He didn’t sob. He just let them fall.

“Why send it to me?” he asked, wiping his cheek with the back of his hand. “Why show me that? The good and the... the violation?”

“Because you asked,” Ilya said simply. “And because you deserve the whole truth. Not the curated truth. Not the truth that makes me look less monstrous. You have seen the monster in the daylight, in the trackers and the fire. You needed to see it in the dark, in the most intimate space we shared. And you needed to see... that it was not all there was. That even the monster is capable of holding a glass of water to your lips. It does not make it okay. It just makes it true.”

Shane sat in the dark, the tablet's black screen beside him, the ghost of his own pleased cries and Ilya's reverent whispers still echoing in the room. The hundred questions had distilled into one overwhelming, terrifying realization.

He was not just attracted to the better man Ilya was trying to become. The reformed, courting, respectful alpha.

A part of him- a deep, shameful, omega part that had thrilled to the breeding fantasy in his dream- was still, irrevocably, drawn to the devastating, all-consuming, monstrously devoted man in the video. The man who would break every rule to feel closer to him, and then spend the night in penance, holding him as if he were the only holy thing left in a ruined world.

“I don't know what to do with this,” Shane confessed, the admission a surrender.

“You do not have to do anything,” Ilya said, his voice gentle now, the confessional intensity receding. “It is information. A piece of the past. It does not obligate you to a future.”

But it did. It had changed the terrain. Shane now knew the full, flawed, terrifying topography of Ilya's love. The canyons of obsession and the peaks of tenderness were part of the same landscape.

“We have a scrimmage tomorrow,” Shane said, grasping for the familiar, for the structure of the game.

“I know. You should sleep.”

“I won’t be able to.”

“Then rest your eyes. Think of power-play formations. Think of anything but this.”

A weak, watery laugh escaped Shane. “That’s your advice?”

“It is the only safe advice I have left to give you,” Ilya replied, and Shane could hear the faint, sad smile in his voice.

They hung up a moment later. Shane placed the tablet facedown on the nightstand. He lay back, staring at the ceiling, just as Ilya had done in the video.

His body still hummed. His mind still churned. But the chaotic storm had settled into a heavy, profound knowing. The path forward was no clearer. If anything, it was more fraught. But he was no longer looking at a shadowy figure from his past. He was looking at a man, brilliantly, fatally flawed, whose love for him was the most beautiful and dangerous thing he had ever known.

And for the first time, Shane thought he might finally understand its true shape. It wasn't a cage or a sanctuary. It was both. And the choice of whether to step inside, knowing the full blueprint, was now, terrifyingly, his alone.

The morning light cutting through Shane’s blinds felt accusatory. It was too clean, too normal, illuminating the dust motes dancing over his tablet where the video had played. His body felt heavy, wrung out from a sleepless night spent caught between the visceral memory of arousal and the cold, hard fact of betrayal. The two sensations refused to reconcile, leaving him in a state of suspended, queasy shock.

He’d replayed it in his mind a hundred times. The slow, worshipful touch. The devastating tenderness of the aftermath. And the single, deliberate motion that undermined it all. A violation so intimate it felt like a theft. He hadn’t just risked Shane’s career; he’d gambled with his very biology, his autonomy, his future, for a moment of skin-on-skin connection.

The structured part of his brain, the part that had built a life on suppressants and control, screamed in protest. It drafted mental lists, categorized the offense under “Unforgivable,” and demanded action. But another part, a deeper, more primal part that had thrilled to the words “*I want to see your belly swell with my child.*” in his dream, watched the video of Ilya’s tear-streaked, devoted face and understood the impulse on a cellular level. The conflict was paralyzing.

He couldn’t sit with it. He needed the variable defined. He needed the equation solved. He needed to hear Ilya say it out loud.

His hand was steady as he picked up his phone, but his pulse hammered in his throat. He called.

Ilya answered on the first ring, his voice a low, wary rumble. “Shane.” No question. Just an acknowledgment of the storm he knew was coming.

“You said it was a madness,” Shane began, his own voice surprisingly flat, clinical. He was distancing himself through analysis. “You said it was selfish. But you haven’t said *why*. Not really. Not the core of it.”

A beat of silence. He could hear the faint sound of traffic, a city waking up on Ilya’s end. Boston. “I wanted to feel you,” Ilya said, the words simple and devastating. “All of you. Nothing in between.”

“That’s not an answer,” Shane pressed, the clinical tone cracking. “That’s a feeling. I need the thought process. I need to understand the risk calculus in your head. You didn’t know if I was on any other birth control. You didn’t ask. You just... decided. For both of us. Why?”

He heard Ilya take a sharp breath, as if steeling himself. “The chances... they were not zero. But they were small. Very small. You were not in heat. The timing was not optimal. It was a risk, yes. A stupid, risk. But it was a calculated one.”

“Calculated?” The word was a bullet. “You calculated the odds of getting me pregnant without my knowledge or consent?”

“No.” Ilya’s voice hardened, not with defensiveness, but with a grim, unflinching honesty. “I calculated the odds of conception. The consent... in that moment, Shane, I was not thinking of consent. I was thinking only of connection. Of claiming. Of being as close to you as a person can be to another. It was the most selfish moment of my life. I am not trying to justify it. I am explaining the sickness.”

Shane closed his eyes. The sickness. The obsession. Laid bare. “And if the odds had been higher? If I’d been in heat? What then?”

The silence that followed was so profound Shane could hear the blood rushing in his own ears.

“Then I would have done it anyway.”

The admission landed like a physical blow. It was the truth he’d been circling but hadn’t wanted to hear. There was no mitigating circumstance, no moment of passion so overwhelming it clouded judgment. The judgment was the passion. The obsession’s logic was its own.

“My ultimate dream,” Ilya continued, his voice dropping to a raw, haunted whisper, “the fantasy I would torture myself with... it was not just being inside you without a barrier. It was the thought of you, after. Carrying our child. My mark on you, in you, permanent. A part of me you could never erase. A life we made together, binding you to me in a way no contract, no promise ever could.”

He said it without shame, without apology for the desire itself. He apologized for the action, for the risk, for the violation of trust, but not for the dark, yearning core of the fantasy. It was the most honest thing he’d ever said to him.

Shane’s mind went blank. The lists, the categories, the analysis- they short-circuited. He was left floating in a void of pure, undiluted reaction. Horror. Arousal. Fear. A strange, terrifying sense of... recognition. The dream hadn’t been just his subconscious. It had been an echo of Ilya’s deepest, most closely held want, resonating in the bond their trauma had forged.

He couldn't speak. The silence stretched, thin and brittle.

"You asked for the truth," Ilya said finally, the words heavy with exhaustion. "The whole truth. That is it. That is the rotten heart of it. I wanted to own you in the most fundamental way a person can own another. And I knew it was wrong. And I wanted it anyway."

Shane found his voice, but it was small, a child's voice in the dark. "What do you want now?"

Another pause. This one felt different- less like the prelude to a confession, more like a man searching for a new language. "I want you to be safe," Ilya said, each word measured. "I want you to be happy. I want to be someone who deserves to be near you while you are those things. The dream... the fantasy... it is a ghost. I am not feeding it anymore. But I cannot kill what is already dead. I can only tell you where it is buried."

It was a profound distinction. He wasn't disavowing the nature of his desire; he was confessing its place in the cemetery of his old self. The man trying to court him with flowers and movie dates was the same man who harbored that ghost. The monster and the penitent shared a body.

Shane's head throbbed. He needed the conversation to stop. He needed to not be having it. He grasped for the mundane, for the structure of daily life.

"You have practice," he said abruptly, his tone shifting to something almost normal. "You're running late."

A startled noise from Ilya, almost a laugh. "How did you-"

"I can hear your coach yelling in the background. Or someone. Your team's morning skate is at 8:30. It's 8:17."

A beat of silence, then a genuine, weary chuckle. “Your brain. It is a remarkable thing. Even now.”

“Go,” Shane said, the command automatic. “Don’t be late because of this.”

“Shane-”

“Go, Ilya. We’ll... we’ll talk later.”

He hung up before Ilya could respond. He dropped the phone onto the bed as if it were hot, then immediately snatched it back up. His fingers flew over the screen, opening his notes app. He needed to parse this. He needed to break it down into components his reeling mind could process.

He stared at the list. It was neat. Organized. It made the chaotic torrent of feelings look manageable. But the words on the screen—“breeding fantasy,” “arousal,” “non-consensual risk” glared back at him, clinical and damning.

He thought of the video again. Not of the condom moment, but of what came after. The tender cleanup. The watchful, tearful vigil. The man who held a glass of water to his lips was the same man who had risked his future for a feeling.

Dr. Mayra’s question echoed: “Do I have the capacity to choose something else?”

Looking at the list, at the cold facts of Ilya’s confession, the answer seemed like it should be a resounding yes. He should walk away. This was pathology. This was danger.

But then he thought of the movie date. The careful distance in the car. The respect at his door. The daily texts that asked for nothing, that simply said *I am here*, and *I am thinking of you*. The man who was trying, every day, to build a new self over the rotten heart of the old one.

He thought of his own body's traitorous response, both in the dream and while watching the video. The part of him that heard "I wanted you carrying our child" and didn't recoil in pure horror, but felt a deep, secret thrill.

He was not just afraid of Ilya's obsession.

He was afraid of his own complicity in it.

His phone buzzed. A text.

IGR- I am at the rink. I am sorry. For everything. Not for the truth, but for the pain it causes you. It is a heavy burden. You should not have to carry it.

Shane read the message three times. It wasn't an excuse. It wasn't a plea. It was an acknowledgment of the weight he had just dropped onto Shane's shoulders. It was, in its own twisted way, a form of respect.

He didn't reply. He couldn't. The lists and categories were failing. The equation was unsolvable with the data he had. The only clear next step was the one he'd typed: Discuss with Dr. Mayra.

He got out of bed. The morning routine: shower, skincare, dress, protein shake, felt like moving through wet cement. His body, the body Ilya had dreamed of filling with his child, felt alien to him. He caught his reflection in the mirror after his shower, his hand unconsciously drifting to his lower abdomen. Flat. Unmarked.

For now.

The thought wasn't entirely his own. It was seeded by Ilya's confession, by his own dream, by a biology he'd spent a lifetime suppressing. He dropped his hand, a flush of shame heating his skin.

He had a day of meetings, training. He would go through the motions. He would be Shane Hollander, reliable beta center, teammate, friend. He would smile at the right times, nod in the right places.

And all the while, in the silent, secret center of him, the ghost of Ilya's ultimate dream would whisper, and his own treacherous heart would listen.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading ❤️

I've been absolutely living for the comments lately. The theories, the screaming, the emotional damage reports, the mentions of edging (!! the concern for Shane, the concern for Ilya, and the occasional comment that makes me stare into the distance for ten minutes because YOU NOTICED SOMETHING.

And speaking of noticing things...

A few readers have already started catching details that may become important later, which has been incredibly fun to watch.

So tell me:

What's your favorite part of Ilya's courtship attempt so far?

Are you Team Flowers, Team Breakfast Delivery, Team Movie Date, or Team Service Stairwell?

What do you think Shane's biggest obstacle is right now?

And most importantly... which one of these idiots is going to crack first? Will I have Shane try to crack Ilya's head like a watermelon with his thighs?? (Thanks gay besties for THAT visual)

I read every single comment, even if I can't always respond immediately.

See you in Chapter 25. ❤️

Chapter 25: Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Hi friends 

First things first: thank you. Thank you for the comments, the theories, the emotional support, the yelling, the concern for Shane's wellbeing, the concern for Ilya's sanity (which is fair), and for continuing to take this journey with me.

Some of your comments genuinely made me cry. Some made me laugh so hard I had to walk away from my computer. Some had me blushing and kicking my feet like an absolute fool. I read every single one of them, and they have been such a huge motivation while writing this story.

A massive thank you to my beta reader, who somehow continues to wrangle this increasingly complicated emotional disaster into something coherent. Any remaining mistakes are mine, not theirs.

And of course, thank you to my gay bestie- the fourth love of my life- who has listened to me ramble about these two hockey idiots for an unreasonable number of hours and still answers my messages, and gives me stick figure drawings of the spicy scenes when I'm stuck.

I think you've earned this chapter.

Be nice to me. 

Chapter Notes

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

The soothing silence of Dr. Mayra's office had become a sanctuary. Here, in the plush armchair, Shane could lay out the tangled threads of his life and trust her to help him find a pattern, or at least not to judge the knot.

Today, the knot was particularly hard session.

"So," Dr. Mayra began, her pen poised over her notebook. "You received the video. You watched it. You confronted him. You've had time to sit with his explanation. Where does that leave you?"

Shane looked at his hands, clasped tightly in his lap. “In two pieces,” he said, the honesty surprising him with its bluntness. “One piece is furious. It’s logical. It has lists. It says, ‘He violated your bodily autonomy in the most fundamental way. He risked your entire life for a feeling. This is the obsession, undressed. Run.’” He took a breath. “The other piece... saw the way he looked at me. The way he held me after. And it doesn’t want to run. It wants to understand the man who contains both those things.”

Dr. Mayra nodded, her expression neutral. “And which piece is speaking right now?”

“They’re arguing,” Shane admitted. “The logical piece is louder. It’s... safer. But the other piece isn’t quiet. It keeps replaying the the look in his eyes over and over again.”

“Let’s talk about the lists,” she suggested. “The logical piece. What does it want?”

“Boundaries. Explicit, non-negotiable boundaries. No more unilateral decisions. Ever. About anything. If we ever... if there’s ever a physical relationship again, everything is discussed. Everything is consented to. Step by step.”

“That sounds like an excellent starting point for any healthy relationship, but especially vital here,” she affirmed. “And the other piece? The one that saw him cry?”

“It wants... to believe the tears were real. That the care was real. That the man who wiped me clean is as real as the man who took the condom off. It wants to believe they can be separated. That the second man can win.”

“Do you believe they can be separated?”

Shane was quiet for a long moment. “I don’t know. But I believe he’s *trying* to separate them. The gifts, the texts, the distance he keeps... it’s all him trying to build a new pattern. One where care doesn’t have to mean control.”

Dr. Mayra made a note. “That’s a significant observation. You’re attributing positive intent to his current actions, while holding him fully accountable for his past ones. That’s a mature, and very difficult, space to occupy.”

“It’s exhausting,” Shane confessed.

“I imagine it is.” She set her pen down. “Shane, I want to pivot slightly. We’ve spent a lot of time discussing Ilya, his pathology, his progress. I want to talk about you. About your patterns.”

He looked up, wary. “My patterns?”

“You are, by nature and necessity, a people-pleaser. You manage perceptions. You maintain control through impeccable performance- in hockey, in your public persona, in your suppressed biology. You say ‘yes’ to avoid conflict, to maintain harmony, to be the perfect son, the perfect teammate, the ideal beta, the perfect role model to minorities and Canadians in general.” She leaned forward slightly. “Where in your life are you practicing ‘no’?”

He thought of the league promoters. “I slowed down the promos the league wanted me to do for the weekly home games. Tuesdays and Thursdays, before two.”

“Good. That’s a start. But I’m talking about the deeper ‘no.’ The ‘no’ that isn’t about scheduling, but about desire. The ‘no’ that says, ‘I don’t want this, even if it disappoints you.’ The ‘no’ that expresses a preference, a flaw, a need.”

Shane shifted in his chair. The question felt invasive. “I don’t know.”

“I think you do,” she said gently. “With Ilya, even now, you are so focused on understanding *his* motivations, *his* progress, *his* capacity for change. Where is your own? What do *you* want, Shane? Not what you think you should want, or what would be safest, or what would please him or your parents, or fans or the league. What does the part of you that isn’t perfect want?”

The question hung in the air, vast and terrifying. He'd spent so long defining himself by what he *wasn't* - an omega, a problem, a burden and what he had to be- the team star, a beta, being in control at all times, that the concept of a pure, unmediated want felt alien.

"I don't have to be perfect?" The words came out softly, more a child's question than a man's.

Dr. Mayra's smile was kind. "No. You really don't. In fact, trying to be perfect is what keeps you locked in this cycle. It's what made you the perfect target for an obsessive love- you presented a flawless, controlled surface, and Ilya, in his brokenness, became obsessed with uncovering the 'real' you underneath. What if you just... were the real you? Messy, sometimes unsure, saying 'no,' saying 'I want,' making mistakes?"

"It sounds dangerous," he whispered.

"It is. Being known is always dangerous. But it's also the only path to being loved for who you actually are." She paused. "As for Ilya... my advice remains the same as before. Extreme caution. But caution doesn't have to mean paralysis. If you are honest with yourself about what you are and are not willing to accept, and if you communicate those boundaries clearly, and if he continues to respect them... then it is okay to see where it goes. At a pace *you* set. Your healing is not contingent on his. Your journey is separate. They can run parallel, or they can diverge. That is your choice."

The session left him feeling scoured out, raw but clearer. The mandate was terrifying: be imperfect. Express wants. Say no.

He tried it in small ways first. When his mother called, bubbling over with news of a "lovely, stable beta from a good family" who just happened to be in town and would *love* to meet for coffee, Shane didn't give his usual non-committal hum. He took a breath and said, "No, Mom. I'm not interested in being set up right now."

The silence on the other end was profound. Then, a hesitant, "Oh. Okay, sweetheart. That's... that's fine." She sounded bewildered, a little hurt, but not angry. The world didn't end.

When the team's community relations coordinator emailed asking if he could add a last-minute hospital visit to his already-packed Thursday, he wrote back: "I'm sorry, my class is on that day. I can offer a time next week, or perhaps another player is available." The coordinator wrote back a perfectly pleasant, "No problem, we'll ask Hayden!"

Each small "no" felt like a muscle he'd never used before, aching but strengthening.

University was his new refuge. In the lecture halls of McGill, poring over architectural schematics and historical texts, he wasn't Shane Hollander, NHL center or traumatized omega. He was Shane Hollander, student. The problems here were clean. They had solutions. The Gothic arch either supported the weight or it didn't. The foundations of Bauhaus were a matter of historical record, not emotional interpretation.

He loved it. He loved the smell of old books and dry-erase markers. He loved the focused silence of the library, the rustle of pages, the click of his own pen. He was older than most of the other undergraduates, and his fame occasionally drew whispers or hesitant glances, but the academic environment was a great leveler. Here, his value was in his analysis of Vitruvius, not his slap shot accuracy.

He was working on a paper about the influence of defensive military architecture on early Canadian fortifications when his phone buzzed with a text. A familiar, now-welcome flutter in his chest.

IGR- Boston's public library has a first edition of Palladio's *Quattro Libri*. I stood near it and thought of you. It is behind glass. I did not attempt to steal it, though the thought occurred.

Shane- Theft is generally frowned upon, even for rare books. Also, you'd never fit it in your gear bag.

IGR- This is the practical thinking I rely on you for. How is the fortress of Louisbourg?

Shane- Poorly designed against sustained cannon fire. My professor is less critical.

IGR- Your professor did not have to withstand a slapshot from Ovechkin. His standards are low.

Shane smiled, a real one, alone in the library carrel. This was the new normal. Light. Easy. A connection that spanned cities and histories, both personal and architectural. It was what he'd said he wanted. What he'd asked for.

So why did he sometimes stare at the phone after these exchanges, a hollow feeling growing beneath his ribs?

The NHL season began like a great machine rumbling to life. The rhythm was comforting: travel, game, recovery, practice, repeat. Montreal started strong. Shane's line was clicking, his own play sharp, his body responding to the grueling pace. The 194 pounds settled into a new, solid equilibrium; he was stronger, not softer, and the scale's judgment mattered less as his performance spoke for itself.

Ilya, in Boston, was also tearing up the league. Their texts became a running commentary on their parallel statistical standings.

Shane- Two goals against Tampa. You're showing off.

IGR- One was an empty netter. Do not be too impressed. I saw your assist on the power play. The pass was... acceptable.

Shane- It was a saucer pass through three defenders.

IGR- As I said. Acceptable.

The gifts continued arriving when Shane was on the road.

The first came to his hotel in Chicago. A concierge brought up a small, elegant box. Inside, nestled in tissue paper, was a pair of custom-made skate guards. Not the standard team-issue rubber ones, but guards crafted from rich, dark leather, his number 24 embossed on the side in subtle, silver foil. There was no note. None was needed. They were beautiful, practical, and spoke of a deep understanding of his daily reality. He ran his fingers over the leather, a complicated warmth spreading in his chest.

In Dallas, it was a first-edition copy of John Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice*, a text he'd referenced when they were first getting to know each other so long ago. The book was old, the spine delicate, and tucked inside the front cover was a plain card with a single, precise line of handwriting: "For your fortress of books. - IGR."

In Vegas, a set of incredibly high-end, noise-canceling headphones arrived. The attached card read: "I know you need to shut the world out sometimes. Hope these help." He'd never mentioned the sensory overwhelm he sometimes had, but of course, Ilya had noticed.

Each gift was thoughtful, personal, and utterly non-possessive. They weren't jewels or grand gestures. They were solutions to small problems, acknowledgments of his interests, tokens of care that asked for nothing in return. They were, in a word, perfect.

And that was the problem.

The frustration built slowly, a pressure cooker with the valve sealed shut. Their calls and texts remained in the same lane: flirty, fun, lighthearted. Ilya shared anecdotes about his teammates, complained about the food in various cities, sent him ridiculous memes that made him snort. He asked about Shane's classes, listened intently to his descriptions of vaulting techniques, and offered surprisingly insightful comments. It was everything Shane had once mourned the loss of- the friendship, the easy camaraderie, the intellectual connection.

But it never deepened. It never strayed into the dark, tangled woods of what had happened in that hotel room, of the video, of the confession. It was as if they had mutually agreed to have the other man push the relationship forward but neither of them were.

After a hard-fought win in Toronto, Shane lay in his hotel bed, bone-tired but buzzing with adrenaline. His phone lit up.

IGR- The deflection off Petrov's skate was lucky. But the patience on the second goal... that was you. You see the ice like no one else.

Shane- Thanks. I'm watching the highlights from your game now.

But Shane frowned. He did not want to talk about hockey. He wanted Ilya to tell him that he was missed, that he couldn't wait until they were in the same city so they could see each other.

IGR- Did you ice the shoulder?

Shane- Yes, mom.

He replied sarcastically, trying to get a rise out of the Russian.

IGR- Good. Rest.

Shane stared at the exchange. It was supportive, affectionate even. But it was safe. It was the conversation of close friends, of devoted teammates. Not of two people who had seen the absolute worst of each other and were trying to find a way back to something else.

The hollow feeling yawned wide. He thought of the leather skate guards, now protecting his blades in the equipment room. He thought of the gifts, carefully packed in his luggage. He thought of Ilya's voice, raw and shattered, saying, "My ultimate dream... it was the thought of you, after. Carrying our child."

Where was that man? Where was the man who felt things so violently, so deeply? Had the therapy and the medication smoothed him out into this... this perfect, thoughtful, distant pen pal?

He wanted the intensity. Not the destructive, possessive kind, but the *realness* of it. He wanted to talk about the video, not as a crisis, but as a part of their history. He wanted to ask if Ilya still had those dreams, and if he did, what he felt about them now. He wanted to scream that the gifts were lovely, but they weren't enough. He wanted to be seen again, in all his messy, complicated, imperfect reality, not just as the curated recipient of perfect presents.

His fingers flew over the screen before his logical brain could catch up.

Shane- The gifts are amazing. Thank you.

IGR- You are welcome. The headphones are working?

Shane- They're great. It's just... is this it?

The send button felt like jumping off a cliff. The three dots appeared immediately, then disappeared. Then appeared again. A long, long minute passed.

IGR- Is what it?

Shane- This. The texts. The jokes. The perfect, thoughtful gifts. The careful distance. Are we just going to be... this? Forever?

He could feel the tension through the phone, a continent away.

IGR- What would you have us be?

Shane- I don't know. Real. You sent me a video of you taking a condom off me without my knowledge. We can't just talk about power plays and architecture forever.

The silence this time was absolute. No dots. Nothing. Shane's heart hammered against his sternum. He'd done it. He'd said no to the pleasant status quo. He'd pointed what he wanted/

When the reply came, it was short.

IGR- No. We cannot stay how we are now.

But what is alternative, Shane? I am trying to be man you can have conversation about everything with. That man will not survive a conversation about the video. Not yet. The other man... the one who wants that conversation, who wants more... he cannot be trusted with you. I am building a bridge between them. I am trying my best.

Shane read the message three times. The frustration didn't evaporate, but it morphed. It wasn't that Ilya was avoiding depth. He was consciously, painstakingly, constructing a pathway to it that wouldn't collapse under their weight. The flirty, lighthearted connection wasn't the end goal; it was the foundation for something that could hold more.

He was practicing too. Saying 'no' to his own darkest impulses, building a new way of being with Shane, one careful plank at a time.

The realization was a balm and a burden. It meant the waiting wasn't passive. It was active, grueling work in progress. And Shane had just stomped on the new paths they were trying to build, demanding to know why it wasn't finished.

He typed, his fingers less frantic now.

Shane- I'm sorry. I'm frustrated. I see that you're putting in the effort like I asked. I just... miss the other side of our relationship sometimes.

IGR- Be patient with me, krasavchik. Please.

The old endearment, spoken not with possession but with a soft plea, undid him.

Shane- I'll try.

Another gift arrived two days later, in Winnipeg. It was a small, flat package. Inside was a single sheet of high-quality vellum. On it, drawn in precise, detailed ink, was a blueprint. The cottage- labeled in a neat, architectural hand. A thick cardstock was in front: *I added something you might want to add. I hope you like it. I had this started before-my gift to you.*

He noticed another building added behind the treeline. A gym-but a gym with a practice hockey rink. Plans already laid out perfectly. It was a gift that spoke both their languages. Hockey and design. Analysis and affection. He could just imagine it, the same style as the cottage, large floor to ceiling windows, sophisticated. It said, *I see all of you. The student and the star. And I have built you this as my offering.*

Shane pinned the blueprint to the wall of his hotel room. He studied the lines, his heart melting at such a thoughtful gesture.

He lay back on the bed, the hollow feeling momentarily filled. It wasn't the intense, all-consuming connection he sometimes ached for. It wasn't a resolution. But it was progress. It was two damaged people, on opposite banks of a river of pain, slowly, carefully, building a bridge toward each other. One imperfect, beautiful step at a time.

Two weeks later, Shane was a storm on legs. His mood was as unpredictable as the Montreal weather in late October, swinging from frosty to thunderous in the span of a few hours. He was due to start his cycle any day now, and the hormonal rollercoaster was making his usually even keel see-saw wildly.

He was sitting in his apartment, the lights low, the sound of the city muted through the closed windows. His phone buzzed on the coffee table. A text from Ilya.

IGR- The play against Toronto was impressive. The way you forced the turnover and capitalized on the breakaway... such a good trick. Plus you looked edible in the new uniform.

Shane stared at the message, his fingers hovering over the screen. He should reply. He *wanted* to reply. But the words that bubbled up inside him were not the sweet, flirty responses Ilya was used to. They were sharp, accusatory, fueled by the hormonal storm raging inside him.

Shane- Did you watch the game or just my ass in those pants?

He hit send before he could overthink it. He knew it was unreasonable. He knew Ilya had done nothing to deserve this. But he couldn't stop the words. They were a release, a valve for the pressure building inside him.

Ilya's response was immediate.

IGR- I watched the entire game. Your ass was not the only thing I noticed. If you are going to insult me, come up with something better.

Shane huffed, a sound somewhere between a laugh and a growl. He typed out another snarky reply, but paused. He was being a brat. He was taking out his frustration on Ilya, who had done nothing to warrant it. He deleted the message and typed a new one.

Shane- Sorry. I'm being an ass. It's... it's my time of the month.

He sent it, bracing himself for Ilya's reaction. The three dots appeared, disappeared, appeared again. Then:

IGR- I see. You are excused. And I know when you usually have your cycle. I have read your medical records, remember?

Shane's blood ran cold. He'd forgotten, in the heat of his hormonal rage, that Ilya had seen everything. Every test result, every doctor's note. Including the ones about his omega status, his cycle, his suppressant use.

Shane- You fucking asshole! I tell you something important and that's all you have to say? Forget it then. You're probably distracted with some whore and want to get me off the phone.

Ilya's reply was immediate.

IGR- I will remind you if it means you treat me with less hostility. I am not your enemy, Shane. I understand you are not feeling like yourself right now, I will respect me and you need to calm down.

Shane's fingers hovered over the screen. He wanted to snap back, to defend his autonomy, his privacy. But Ilya was right. He was being hostile for no reason. He took a deep breath, letting it out slowly.

Shane- I'm sorry. Again. I'm just... on edge.

IGR- I know. I wish I could be there to... help.

Shane's heart skipped a beat. Ilya had never offered to help with this before. He'd always respected Shane's privacy, his boundaries. But now, he was offering... what? Comfort? Support?

Shane- You can't. But... thank you.

IGR- If you need to vent, or if you want to talk, I am here. Even if you are unreasonable.

Shane smiled, a small, genuine smile that felt good after the storm of snarky texts.

Shane- I'll keep that in mind. Thank you.

They left it at that. Shane set his phone down, leaning back against the couch cushions. He felt better. Calmer. The storm inside him had settled, at least for now.

But the next day, the cycle started. And with it, the hormones, the emotions, the irrational thoughts. He snapped at Ilya over the smallest things. He picked fights over nothing. He was a whirlwind of moods, and Ilya was the convenient target.

On the third day, Ilya had had enough. He called Shane over FaceTime, his expression stern, his eyes glinting with an emotion Shane couldn't quite read.

"Hollander," he said, his voice low, commanding. "Stop this."

Shane blinked, taken aback. "What?"

"This... this brat you are being. I understand your hormones are causing you distress. But I will not be your punching bag. If you need to vent, I will listen. But I will not tolerate this behavior. Not from you. Not from anyone."

Shane stared at him, his mouth open in shock. He'd never seen Ilya like this. He was... dominant. Authoritative. And it wasn't the obsessive, possessive dominance Shane had seen before. It was something else. Something healthy.

He felt a flush come over his face. He was being unreasonable. He was taking out his frustration on the one person who had always been there for him. The one person who understood him.

"I... I'm sorry," Shane stammered, his voice small. "I didn't mean to... I'm sorry."

Ilya's expression softened. "I know. But I will not enable this behavior. You are better than this, Shane. You deserve better than this."

Shane felt a lump form in his throat. He was better than this. He deserved better than this. And Ilya... Ilya was trying to give him that. To give them that.

"I'll... I'll try to be better," Shane said, his voice steady now. "I promise."

Ilya nodded, a small, satisfied smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Good. Now, tell me about your class today. The one on Gothic architecture, yes?"

Shane smiled back, the tension in his chest easing. They talked about classes, about hockey, about nothing and everything. It was a normal conversation. A good conversation. And it was a start to calm him down.

Ilya paced the length of his therapist's office, his hands clenched behind his back. The room was a sanctuary, a space where he could speak freely without fear of judgment or repercussion. Dr. Kostova sat in her usual chair, her expression calm, her pen poised over her notepad.

"Tell me about your week, Ilya," she began, her voice steady and non-judgmental.

Ilya took a deep breath, his gaze fixed on the abstract painting on the wall. "I played better," he said, his voice measured. "I scored three goals in the last game. The team is winning."

Dr. Kostova made a note. "And how does that make you feel?"

Ilya paused, considering the question. "Relieved," he admitted. "I've been... distracted. Since Montreal. Since Shane."

She nodded, her pen moving across the page. "And how is Shane?"

The question was a minefield. Ilya navigated it carefully. "He's... well. He's playing well. He's enjoying his classes. He's... testing me."

Dr. Kostova raised an eyebrow. "Testing you?"

Ilya nodded, a small, bitter smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "He's... acting like a brat. Snapping at me over nothing. Being unreasonable. It's... it's a good sign, I think. According to some omega books I've been reading, it's a way for them to test their alpha. To see if they can push boundaries and still be safe."

Dr. Kostova set her pen down, her expression thoughtful. "And how do you feel about this testing?"

Ilya unclenched his hands, running a hand through his hair. "Frustrated," he admitted. "I want to... to react. To push back. But I know I can't. Not yet. Not until he trusts me again. Not until he's sure I won't... revert."

"And how do you manage this frustration?"

Ilya looked at her, his eyes steady. "I go to the gym. I run. I play hockey. I... I talk to Svetlana. She keeps me grounded."

Dr. Kostova made another note. "And your father?"

Ilya's expression darkened. "I ignore him. He calls, he texts, he leaves messages. I delete them without listening. I... I can't. Not right now. Not with Shane so close."

She nodded, her expression understanding. "And this decision to ignore him? Is it because of Shane or because you are done with that part of your life? Are you mourning the loss of the relationship or does it create a relieved feeling? "

Ilya was quiet for a moment, then he said, "Relieved. It's... it's a relief to not have to... to not have to be what he wants me to be. To not have to live up to his expectations."

Dr. Kostova smiled, a small, genuine smile. "That's progress, Ilya. That's you taking control of your own narrative. That's you choosing your own path."

Ilya felt a warmth spread through him at her words. It was a validation, a confirmation that he was on the right track. He thought of Shane, of his snappy texts, his unreasonable demands. He thought of the way he'd snapped back, not with anger, but with calm, measured responses. It was a new kind of control, a new kind of strength.

"I... I think I'm getting better," he said, his voice soft. "I think I'm learning to... to be the man Shane needs me to be. Not the man my father wants me to be. Not the man my obsession wants me to be."

Dr. Kostova leaned forward, her eyes intent. "And what does Shane need, Ilya? What does he want?"

Ilya thought of the video, of Shane's body arching into his touch, of his soft sighs, his trusting sleep. He thought of the way he'd cleaned him up, of the hours he'd spent watching him sleep, memorizing every line of his face. He thought of the way Shane had looked at him in Room 329, his eyes wide, his cheeks flushed, his heart pounding in his chest. He thought of the way he'd walked away, of the promise he'd made to himself to be better.

"He needs... he needs to be safe," Ilya said, his voice steady. "He needs to be respected. He needs to be... seen. Not just as an omega, not just as a hockey star, but as... as Shane. The man he is, not the man he's supposed to be. He needs to be loved, not just possessed. He needs to be... free."

Dr. Kostova nodded, a small, satisfied smile on her face. "And what about you, Ilya? What do you need?"

Ilya looked at her, his expression serious. "I need to be the man who can give him that freedom. I need to be... better. I need to be... enough."

The session ended with Ilya feeling a sense of accomplishment, of progress. He left the office, the crisp autumn air filling his lungs, and walked to his car. He drove home, the city lights blurring past him, and sat in his apartment, the silence pressing in on him.

He thought of Shane, of his texts, of his snappy demands. He thought of the way he'd snapped back, not with anger, but with calm, measured responses. It was a new kind of control, a new kind of strength. It was the strength of a man who was learning to let go, to trust, to love without possession.

He picked up his phone, his fingers hovering over the screen. He thought of the last text Shane had sent, the one that had made him smile despite the frustration.

Shane- I'm not a cat. I looked it up when you kept calling me that.

He typed out a response, a small, teasing smile tugging at his lips.

IGR- I think you like it. When you are mad, you get angry face like a kitten. It is beautiful.

He waited, his heart pounding in his chest. The three dots appeared, then disappeared. Then appeared again.

Shane- I've been upset only when you don't notice me.

Ilya laughed, a real, genuine laugh that echoed in the empty apartment. He typed out a response, his fingers moving quickly over the screen.

IGR- I've noticed. I've always noticed. But I'm learning to be patient. To wait for you to be ready. To be the man you need me to be.

He hit send and waited, his heart pounding in his chest. The three dots appeared, then disappeared. Then appeared again.

Shane- You're learning fast.

Ilya smiled, a soft, satisfied smile that felt like a victory. He typed out a response, his fingers moving slowly over the screen.

IGR- I have the best teacher.

He leaned back against the couch, his eyes closed, a sense of peace washing over him. He was learning. He was growing. He was becoming the man Shane needed him to be.

And that was worth more than any goal, any victory, any championship. It was worth everything.

Ilya paced the length of his Boston apartment, his phone clutched in his hand. The screen displayed a picture of Shane, taken during one of their FaceTime calls. Shane's hair was messy, his cheeks flushed, and he was laughing at something Ilya had said. It was a picture Ilya had saved without Shane's knowledge, a secret memento of a moment when Shane had been happy, unguarded.

He set the phone down on the kitchen counter, his reflection staring back at him from the dark window. He looked tired. The circles under his eyes were darker than usual, a testament to the sleepless nights spent wrestling with his thoughts and his father's persistent calls.

The phone rang, the shrill sound piercing the silence. Ilya's father. Again. He ignored it, letting it ring out. He didn't have the energy to deal with his father's demands, his expectations, his disapproval. Not tonight. Not when Shane was so close.

He picked up the phone, his thumb hovering over Shane's number. He wanted to call, to hear his voice, to reassure himself that Shane was okay. But he didn't. He respected Shane's space, his boundaries. He would wait until Shane reached out to him. That was the new normal. The new *right* normal.

Instead, he pulled up their text conversation from earlier in the day. Shane had been snappy, unreasonable. Ilya had bitten back, not with anger, but with a calm, measured response. It was a dance they had been doing for weeks now. Shane would snap, Ilya would respond with calm, and eventually, Shane would apologize, or at least stop snapping. It was a pattern Ilya had come to recognize, to expect.

But it was exhausting. It was a constant test of his patience, of his control. And it was a reminder of the power imbalance in their relationship. Shane was testing him, pushing him, and Ilya was... letting him. Because that was what healthy boundaries looked like, wasn't it? Letting the other person push, to see if you would still be there when they pulled back.

But what if Shane never pulled back? What if this was the new normal? The thought was a cold, bitter pill to swallow.

His phone buzzed with an incoming text. It was Svetlana.

Sveta- You're overthinking again. I feel it. Stop it.

He smiled, a small, grateful smile. Svetlana knew him too well. She could read his moods like a book.

IGR- I'm trying. It's just hard. With Shane. He's testing me.

Sveta- That's good. It means he feels safe. It means he trusts you enough to test your boundaries.

IGR- I know. But it's... it's hard. To not react. To not... to not be what he's testing for.

Sveta- You're doing it. You're not the man your father wants you to be. Not the man your obsession wants you to be.

IGR- I just want... I want him to be happy. I want him to be here with me. Not just on the phone. Not just in texts.

Sveta- Then invite him over. To your house. Show him that you can be a good host, a good alpha. That you can respect his boundaries and still give him what he needs.

IGR- I was thinking about it. But... he's been so bratty. I'm not sure he'd accept.

Sveta- Then ask. Be honest. Tell him you want to see him. That you miss him. That you want to take care of him. In a healthy way. Not the old way.

IGR- I'll think about it. Thank you, Svetlana.

Sveta- Anytime, Ilyusha. You're doing great. Keep going.

He set the phone down, a sense of determination settling over him. Svetlana was right. He needed to ask. He needed to show Shane that he could be the alpha he needed, even when he was being unreasonable. Even when he was pushing boundaries.

He picked up his phone again, his fingers hovering over Shane's number. He took a deep breath, then typed out a message.

IGR- I want to see you. In person. At my house. This weekend. If you want to, of course.

He hit send, the message disappearing into the digital void. He waited, his heart pounding in his chest. The three dots appeared, then disappeared. Then appeared again.

Shane- Really?

Ilya smiled, a soft, satisfied smile that felt like a victory.

IGR- Don't be so boring. I wouldn't have asked if I didn't want you here. I've also noticed that you're still Shane. My Shane. And I want to see you.

He leaned back against the couch, his eyes closed, a sense of peace washing over him. He was learning. He was growing. He was becoming the man Shane needed him to be.

And that was worth more than any goal, any victory, any championship. It was worth everything.

The next day, Ilya woke up to a text from Shane. It was a picture. A close-up of a pair of sweatpants, faded and worn, the fabric soft from use. Ilya recognized them instantly. They were the ones he'd sent him recently. They were too long and wide, which for some reason made him extremely happy when he saw that they were Shane's preferred lounge pants now when he had no where to go. The ones he'd worn during their FaceTime calls, the ones that made Ilya's heart ache with a bittersweet longing.

Shane- I'm wearing your pants today. For luck.

Ilya smiled, a real, genuine smile that felt like a reward. Shane was thinking of him. He was wearing Ilya's clothes. He was thinking of their shared history, of their connection, and he was using it for luck.

IGR- I hope they bring you all the luck in the world. And more.

He laid back against the couch, his eyes closed, a sense of contentment washing over him. This was progress. This was Shane reaching out, even if it was just a picture of a pair of sweatpants.

The day of the first Boston game dawned grey and drizzly. Ilya woke up early, his body already buzzing with anticipation. Today, he would see Shane. In person. At his house. If Shane wanted to, of course.

He spent the morning preparing. He cleaned the house, not that it was messy after having the cleaning service there for extra time to make sure everything clean, but because he wanted it to be perfect. He picked up fresh flowers, because Shane loved them when he had some delivered, and the scent reminded him of Shane's apartment, of Shane himself. He checked the fridge, he had called the chef yesterday to make sure he could handle feeding the omega something that he'd like and would be a bit foolproof.

By the time the team left for the arena, Ilya was a ball of nervous energy. He sat in his seat in the locker room, his hands clenched in his lap, his mind racing. What if Shane changed his mind? What if he didn't come over? What if he did, but he was still unreasonable, still bratty?

He pulled out his phone, his fingers hovering over Shane's number. He wanted to call, to reassure himself that Shane was still coming. But he didn't. He respected Shane's space, his boundaries. He would wait until Shane reached out to him. That was the new normal. The new right normal.

The game was a blur. Ilya played well, but his heart wasn't in it. His mind was elsewhere, on the man across the rink from him racing against Marly for the puck. He was on edge every time someone came near him-they all seemed so much bigger than Shane and he'd hate to have to murder one of his teammates for injuring Hollander. Boston won 5-4 but he didn't feel guilty since Shane had blushed when they went down the line at the end of the game.

After the game, Ilya sat in the locker room, his head in his hands. He was exhausted, emotionally drained. He had played a full game, had gotten a hat trick, and had still felt like he was only half-present.

His phone buzzed. A text from Shane.

Ilya's heart stopped, then restarted, a hard, painful thump against his ribs. Shane would be on his way after the team debrief. To his house. Shane was coming. Ilya stood up, his hands shaking as he gathered his things. He didn't bother with a shower, didn't bother with changing. He just left, his heart pounding in his chest, his mind racing.

He drove home, his foot heavy on the gas, his hands tight on the wheel. He pulled into the driveway, his tires squealing. He ran to the door, his heart in his throat, his body buzzing with anticipation. As he ran to the bathroom to get ready.

He had just slipped some pants on when the doorbell rang. He checked himself out, pulling his pants a little lower, smoothing back his damp hair. He made sure his scent patch was on before slipping on his black slides and went to answer the door.

"Come in," Ilya said, his voice soft. He smiled to himself as he saw Shane looking around, taking in the details of the home. He asked sometime about the builder, making him grin. "Mr. Real Estate..."

Shane blushed hard, making his freckles of course stand out more as if only to please Ilya. He motioned if he needed to take off his shoes but Ilya let him know he was ok. Ilya led him to

the kitchen island, to where he had left a gift. It was a box, wrapped in simple, elegant paper. Shane looked at it, then at Ilya, his eyes wide.

"What is it?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Ilya smiled, a small, soft smile. "A gift. For you."

Shane took the box, his fingers tracing the edges of the paper. He looked up at Ilya, his eyes searching. "Why? I don't need more gifts though?"

Ilya's heart ached at the question. Why? Because Shane was here. Because Shane was wearing Ilya's clothes. Because Shane was testing him, and Ilya wanted to show him that he could be trusted. That he could be the alpha Shane needed him to be.

"Because I want to give you things," Ilya said, his voice steady. "I like the feeling of providing for you... that shows you that I see you. All of you. Not just the omega. Not just the hockey star. But Shane."

Shane looked at him, his eyes wide, his mouth open in a small 'O'. Then, slowly, he began to unwrap the gift. The paper fell away, revealing a small, elegant box. Shane opened it, his fingers careful, his breath catching as he saw what was inside.

It was a necklace. A simple chain, with a pendant shaped like a phoenix, its wings spread wide, its eyes made of two small, perfect rubies. It was a symbol of rebirth, of rising from the ashes. Of a new beginning.

Shane looked at it, then at Ilya, his eyes filled with tears. "Ilya... it's... it's beautiful."

Ilya smiled, a soft, satisfied smile. "It's you. Strong. Resilient. Beautiful. A phoenix rising from the ashes. That's you, Shane. That's who you are."

Shane looked at the necklace, then at Ilya, his eyes filled with tears. "Thank you," he whispered. "I... I don't know what to say."

Ilya reached out, his hand covering Shane's where it rested on the box. "You don't have to say anything. Just... wear it. For me."

Shane nodded, a small, hesitant movement. Then, he picked up the necklace, his fingers fumbling as he tried to put it on. Ilya's fingers fumbled slightly as he fastened the clasp of the necklace, his knuckles brushing against Shane's neck. He noticed it then, the subtle shift in Shane's scent. It was still Shane, sweet and soft- but there was an underlying note, a hint of something sharper, more pronounced. He recognized it as the scent of an omega near his heat, but it was muted, as if Shane had used only a single patch or had left an old one on for too long.

The necklace hung around Shane's neck, the phoenix resting just above his heart. It looked perfect. It looked right.

Ilya leaned back, his eyes never leaving Shane's face. "You look beautiful," he said, his voice soft.

Shane blushed, a soft, pink stain spreading across his cheeks. "Thank you," he whispered.

They stood there, inches apart, their bodies close, their breaths mingling. Then, slowly, Ilya stepped back, putting some distance between them. "We should... we should talk," he said, his voice soft.

Shane nodded, a small, sad movement. "Yes. We should."

They sat down at the kitchen island, their bodies turned toward each other, their eyes steady. They were ready. Ready to talk. Ready to listen. Ready to be honest. Ready to be the men they needed each other to be.

His body responded, a primal, instinctual reaction. His grip on Shane's neck tightened, his fingers tangling in the soft hair at the nape. Shane leaned into the touch, his eyes fluttering closed, a soft, needy noise escaping him.

Ilya stood there, frozen, his body humming with a sudden, sharp desire. He wanted to claim, to mark, to take. But he didn't. He forced himself to release Shane, his hands dropping to his sides, his breath ragged.

Shane, however, had other plans. He leaned up, his lips brushing against Ilya's cheek, close to his mouth, but not quite on it. Then, he moved. He slid over, his body pressing against Ilya's, his lips finding Ilya's in a soft, tentative kiss. It was a kiss filled with questions, with uncertainties, with a tentative, cautious hope.

Ilya stood still for a few seconds, shock rooting him to the spot. Shane rarely initiated intimacy. Even before their separation, he had been hesitant, his touches careful, measured. But now, here, in Ilya's kitchen, he was kissing Ilya. Fully. On the lips.

Then, Shane wrapped his arms around Ilya's neck, his body pressing closer, his lips parting, inviting. Ilya, unable to resist any longer, wrapped his arms around Shane, picking him up with ease. Shane's legs wrapped around Ilya's waist, his body molding to Ilya's as if they were made to fit together.

Ilya lifts him to the kitchen counter, setting him down gently. Shane's hands went to Ilya's hair, his fingers tangling in the short strands, pulling him closer. Ilya's hands went to Shane's hips, his thumbs tracing the line of his hipbones, his fingers digging into the soft flesh.

They made out, their bodies pressed together, their breaths mingling, their hearts pounding in sync. It was a kiss filled with questions, with uncertainties, with a tentative, cautious hope. It was a kiss that saying, *I want you. I want us. I want to try.*

And Ilya, for the first time in a long time, felt a spark of hope. A hope that maybe, just maybe, they could make this work. That maybe, they could try again without fucking things up.

Shane's lips were soft, tentative at first, then more insistent, more demanding. Ilya responded, his body pressing against Shane's, his hands tangling in Shane's hair, pulling him closer. Shane's legs wrapped around Ilya's waist, his body molding to Ilya's as if they were made to fit together.

Their kisses were filled with questions, with uncertainties, with a tentative, cautious hope. It was a dance of tongues and teeth, of soft noises and sharp breaths. It was a conversation in its own right, a dialogue of desire and hesitation, of trust and fear.

Ilya's hands roamed Shane's body, his thumbs tracing the line of his hipbones, his fingers digging into the soft flesh. Shane's hands went to Ilya's hair, his fingers tangling in the short strands, pulling him closer. Their bodies moved together, a rhythm as old as time, as instinctual as breathing.

Ilya's hand wrapped around Shane's jaw, his fingers tangling in the soft hair at the nape, his thumb tracing the line of Shane's cheekbone. It was a possessive, dominant gesture, one that would have made Shane bristle in the past. But now, he leaned into it, his eyes fluttering closed, a soft, needy noise escaping him.

"Shane," Ilya murmured, his voice hoarse with desire. "You're playing with fire."

Shane opened his eyes, his gaze steady. "I know," he whispered.

Ilya's grip tightened, his thumb brushing against Shane's lower lip. "You don't know what you're asking for," he said, his voice a low warning.

Shane leaned into the touch, his body pressing against Ilya's. "I do know, I haven't been able to stop thinking about this," he challenged, his voice soft but steady. He reached down and lowered the waistband of Ilya's lounge pants, reaching in and stroking him.

Ilya's eyes flashed, a primal, possessive hunger igniting in their depths. He leaned in, his lips capturing Shane's in a kiss that was anything but soft. It was a claiming, a marking, a promise of things to come. His tongue swept into Shane's mouth, his teeth nipping at Shane's lower lip, his hands tangling in Shane's hair, pulling him closer.

Shane moaned, the sound muffled against Ilya's mouth. His other hand went to Ilya's hair, his fingers tangling in the curls, pulling him closer. Their bodies pressed together, a rhythm as instinctual as breathing.

Ilya paced the length of his bedroom, his hands clenched behind his back, his eyes fixed on the floor. Shane sat on the edge of the bed, his body turned toward Ilya, his eyes steady. The tension in the room was palpable, a tangible thing that seemed to hum in the silence.

Ilya opened his eyes, his gaze locking with Shane's. There was a long, silent standoff. Then, slowly, Ilya nodded. "Okay," he whispered. "Talk."

Shane smiled, a small, satisfied smile that felt like a victory. "Sit down," he said, his voice gentle but firm. "Please."

Ilya hesitated, then sat down on the edge of the bed, his body tense, his hands clenched in his lap. Shane sat next to him, leaving a careful distance between them. He turned his body toward Ilya, his eyes steady.

"I... I want you to take control," Shane said, his voice soft but firm. "Not just in the bedroom. I want you to take control of... of us. Of this. Of what happens next."

Ilya looked at him, his expression guarded. "What do you mean?"

Shane took a deep breath, his eyes never leaving Ilya's. "I mean... I mean, I want you to make the decisions. I want you to... to guide me. To guide us."

Ilya's eyes widened, shock and something like hope flashing in their depths. "You... you want me to... to control you?"

Shane nodded, a small, hesitant movement. "I've been thinking about this. I've talked to my therapist, I did my research. I want you to take the lead. I want you to... to show me what you want. What you need. I trust you, Ilya. I trust you to... to guide me. To guide us."

Ilya was quiet for a moment, his eyes searching Shane's face. Then, slowly, he reached out, his hand cupping Shane's cheek, his thumb tracing the line of his jaw. "You... you don't know what you're asking for," he whispered, his voice hoarse with desire.

Shane leaned into the touch, his eyes fluttering closed. "Show me," he whispered back. "Show me what I'm asking for."

Ilya's grip tightened, his thumb brushing against Shane's lower lip. "Are you sure?" he asked, his voice a low warning. "Once we start... once I start... I don't know if I can stop."

Shane opened his eyes, his gaze steady. "I'm sure," he said, his voice soft but firm. "I want this, Ilya. I want you. I want us. I want to try."

Ilya's eyes flashed, a primal, possessive hunger igniting in their depths. He leaned in, his lips capturing Shane's in a kiss that was anything but soft. It was a claiming, a marking, a promise of things to come.

Shane moaned, the sound muffled against Ilya's mouth. His hands went to Ilya's hair, his fingers tangling in the short strands, pulling him closer. Their bodies pressed together, a rhythm as old as time, as instinctual as breathing.

Ilya's hands roamed Shane's body, his thumbs tracing the line of his hipbones, his fingers digging into the soft flesh. Shane's hands went to Ilya's hair, his fingers tangling in the short strands, pulling him closer. Their bodies moved together, a dance as old as time, as instinctual as breathing.

Their kisses were wet, messy, hungry. Ilya's were precise, controlled, desperate. They were a study in contrast, a dance of give and take, of push and pull. They were a conversation in

their own right, a dialogue of desire and hesitation, of trust and fear.

Their bodies pressed together, their breaths mingling, their hearts pounding in sync. It was a kiss filled with questions, with uncertainties, with a tentative, cautious hope. It was a kiss that said, *I want you. I want us. I want to try.*

And Ilya, for the first time in a long time, felt a spark of hope. A hope that maybe, just maybe, they could make this work. That maybe, they could build a new bridge, one kiss at a time.

The dark sheer drapes over the windows created a warm dimly lit atmosphere in the bedroom, the air was thick with tension and the scent of arousal. Ilya, was sprawled over Shane, his muscles taut as he watched Shane, who was withering under him as they kissed and touched. Ilya's heart pounded in his chest, a primal drumbeat that echoed the desire coursing through his veins.

Shane grew more and more frustrated, his eyes locked onto Ilya's. His pupils were dilated, a clear sign of his heightened state. He reached out, his fingers tracing the contours of Ilya's abs, feeling the power that lay beneath the surface. Ilya tensed, his body yearning for Shane's touch, yet he held back, his mind screaming at him to maintain control.

"Hollander," Ilya's voice was a low growl, a warning that he was teetering on the edge. Shane ignored it, his hands moving to Ilya's pants, pushing them down over his ass and using his foot to get them lower. Ilya's breath hitched as Shane's fingers brushed against his hardness, but he grabbed Shane's wrists, stopping him.

"Not like this, Shane," Ilya said, his voice firm. Shane looked up, his eyes filled with a mix of confusion and frustration. Ilya could see the need in him, the desperate desire for release. He understood it, felt it too, but he wanted more. He wanted to give Shane control, to teach him that he didn't always have to submit.

Ilya flipped them over, manhandling Shane to sit on his lap. Shane gasped, surprise and excitement warring in his eyes. Ilya positioned Shane's legs, opening him up, and guided just above his cock. Shane's eyes widened, understanding Ilya's intention. This position gave him the option to stop, to control the depth and pace.

Ilya leaned up, his breath hot on Shane's ear. "This way, you're in control, lyubimy," he whispered. Shane shivered, a moan escaping his lips as Ilya's hardness pressed against him. Ilya began to guide Shane slowly, to get comfortable with the pace.

Shane started to move, tentatively at first, then with more confidence. He moaned, his body arching down into Ilya's. Ilya could feel the heat, the pressure, and it was driving him wild. But he held back, focusing on Shane, on his pleasure.

After a while, Shane's movements became more frantic. "Ilya, please," he pleaded, his voice filled with need. Ilya understood. The position was good, but it wasn't enough. He flipped them over again, positioning himself between Shane's legs.

"I've got you, Solnyshko," Ilya murmured, his voice soothing. He started to move, his hips snapping forward, his cock sliding in and out of Shane's tight heat. Shane cried out, his fingers gripping the sheets, his body trembling with need.

Ilya leaned down, his face burying in the pillow beside Shane's head. He could feel the urge to bite, to mark Shane as his, but he held back. Instead, he focused on the pleasure, on the feel of Shane's body surrounding him, on the moans that escaped Shane's lips.

Shane's body tensed, his back arching as he came, his release coating Ilya's stomach. Ilya continued to move, his body chasing his own release. With a final thrust, he came, his body shuddering as he filled Shane with his seed.

Ilya collapsed beside Shane, his breath ragged. He pulled Shane close, their bodies still joined. Shane turned his head, his eyes meeting Ilya's. In them, Ilya saw satisfaction, contentment, and something more. Something that made his heart swell with a warmth that had nothing to do with the heat of their bodies.

In that moment, Ilya knew. They could never go back to how it was before. This was a connection, a bond that went beyond the physical. And he would cherish it, protect it, and nurture it, no matter what.

That thought was more terrifying than anything he'd ever experienced before.

The room was filled with their combined scents, no patches blocking the heady pheromones. Ilya pulled himself up to rest against the headboard watching the door to his bathroom-willing Shane to step out. He'd wanted to go with him, to carry him to the tub and start the water for him, to give him the proper aftercare but Shane had begged for a few 'human minutes' and walked to the bathroom by himself on shaky legs. When he came back out, he had cleaned himself up a bit and was blushing like crazy. He walked over slowly, shyly and climbed back into the bed, dragging the sheet over himself.

Ilya rolled onto his side, his eyes locked onto Shane's. He could see the desire in the omega's eyes, the hunger, the need. But he also saw the confusion, the uncertainty. Ilya smiled, a slow, predatory smile that made Shane's heart race.

"Come here," Ilya said, his voice a low growl. Shane shivered, his body responding to the alpha's command. He scooted closer, his body pressing against Ilya's. Ilya reached out, his hands gripping Shane's hips, pulling him even closer.

Shane turned his head, his eyes meeting Ilya's. He could see the satisfaction in them, the contentment. He smiled, a soft, lazy smile that made Ilya's heart swell.

"Thank you," he said, his voice soft. Ilya raised an eyebrow, questioning. Shane blushed, his eyes darting away. "For teaching me," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "For showing me... for making me feel..."

Ilya understood. He cupped Shane's cheek, his thumb brushing away a tear that had escaped Shane's eye. "You're welcome," he said, his voice firm. "I'll do anything for you, as long as you want me to."

Shane's eyes filled with tears, but he smiled, a watery, beautiful smile that made Ilya's heart swell. He leaned down, pressing a soft kiss to Shane's lips. It was a promise, a vow, a declaration of intent. He was here, and he was staying, and he was going to love Shane, protect him, and cherish him, no matter what.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting the room in shadows, Ilya and Shane lay entwined, their bodies pressed together, their hearts beating in sync. They were quiet, lost in their own thoughts, but the silence was comfortable, filled with a sense of peace and contentment that was almost tangible. Shane had tried to get up, but Ilya swallowed his pride and begged him to stay. The game was the next day, skipping one training wasn't hurting anyone.

"I told Hayden I'd-" Ilya's hand snapped up to Shane's neck, not squeezing at all, but holding.

"Do not mention another Alpha while your in my bed, still covered in my scent." Ilya growled, bringing his face closer to Shane's. He watched as Shane's eyes glazed over and a drugged, almost silly small smile over came his face.

Shane nodded and Ilya let go, beginning to pull back. "I apologize, but just do not say another alpha's name after what we did. My brain isn't -" He paused as if trying to find the words. "quiet right now. I need to settle down a bit more first."

Shane had agreed, reaching over to his pants and pulling out his phone. On a whim, he hit the speaker button as he was calling Hayden, making up an excuse for him to not check into the hotel.

They were not just alpha and omega, not just lovers. They were partners, equals, a team. And they knew, with a certainty that was bone-deep, that they were in this together, for better or for worse, for as long as they both shall live.

Chapter End Notes

WELL

THAT happened. 🙄🔥💙

After everything I've had them put each other (and all of us) through, Shane and Ilya finally managed to spend more than five minutes in the same room without someone crying, running away, committing a felony, requiring medical attention, or setting off several thousand alarm bells. 😊✨

Growth. 🌱

I wanted this chapter to focus on something that's been quietly happening in the background for a long time: both of them are changing. Not because they're trying to become what the other person wants, but because they're finally starting to figure out who they are outside of fear, obligation, trauma, and expectation. ❤️

💙 Shane is learning how to want things. YAY Shane!

♥️ Ilya is learning how to love without possession. GOOD JOB Ilya

Neither of those journeys are finished.

Not even close. 😊

I'd love to hear your thoughts because there are several moments I'm especially curious about:

🕯️ Ilya's therapy progress.

🎁 The gifts.

👄 The reunion.

😈 Whether Shane is becoming a menace on purpose.

🐻 Whether Ilya deserves a gold star for not immediately losing his mind.

Or did you never lose faith and just sit there watching me torture them for twenty-five chapters? 😊

As always, thank you for reading, commenting, bookmarking, leaving kudos, writing essays in the comments, making me cry, making me laugh, and generally enabling my obsession with these disaster men. 😊💕

I read every comment, even when I'm terrible at replying to all of them. They genuinely make my day. 💕

See you in Chapter 26. 🙄💙👉🌟

CHAPTER 26-My version of the tuna melt scene. Grab tissues lol. Will be posted Saturday or Sunday-I'm a third of the way done with it.

Chapter 26: Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Once again, thank you everyone for reading my little thought bubbles. The gasp that left me this morning when I saw I hit 1000 kudos- my heart was so happy.

A lot of readers picked up on just how terrified Shane actually is of the word mate, and a few of you were also very worried about what happens when someone like Ilya gets his hopes up.

Well. Today we find out. Thanks a mil to my beta reader and gay bestie-y'all are divine.

As always, thank you for reading, commenting, screaming, theorizing, and letting me emotionally torture you week after week. ❤️

Chapter Notes

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

Ilya did not sleep. Or rather, he forced himself to stay awake for the most part. He napped in short, fractured bursts, never sinking deeply enough to lose awareness of his surroundings. Every time his eyes drifted shut, panic dragged them open again. The room was dim, the curtains blocking most of the early morning light. Somewhere beyond them, Boston was waking up. Cars moved through wet streets. A siren wailed in the distance before fading away. Beside him, Shane slept on, still here. The thought repeated in his head over and over. Still here. The clock crept past four, then five. Then six. Shane never disappeared. Never woke up and changed his mind. Never looked at Ilya and remembered all the reasons he should have run. He simply slept. Ilya turned slightly onto his side, propping himself up on one elbow. God. He was beautiful. Not the polished version from interviews. Not Captain, Canada's Golden Boy Shane Hollander standing in front of microphones with perfect posture and practiced answers. This was different. His hair was a complete disaster. The dark strands stuck up in every direction, flattened strangely on one side where he'd spent hours buried in the pillow. A faint crease marked one cheek. An actual pillow imprint. Ilya stared at it with the sort of fascination normally reserved for religious miracles. His freckles seemed darker in the soft morning light. His mouth was slightly open. One hand was curled beneath his cheek. He looked younger somehow, like when they first met and the beautiful shy boy came up to him to introduce himself.

He was softer. Real. Better than perfect. Ilya's chest hurt, he had spent years obsessed with Shane Hollander. The impossible thing he could never have. Should never have again once he fucked up so royally but here they were, and he was determined not to make any mistakes. Yet somehow he'd never imagined this. That it would feel so good, that the dark thoughts that sometimes came into his head would be totally silenced by just having the omega in his bed for such an extended period of time.

He discovered more in the middle of the night than any camera or bodyguard had ever told him. Like how Hollander, who occasionally snored for about three seconds before stopping. Ilya discovered this at six twenty-three in the morning and nearly lost his mind.

Ten minutes later, he found a small cluster of freckles on towards the right of the small of his spine.

His gaze drifted lower. A bruise darkened Shane's shoulder, another along his ribs.

Hockey. It was normal, expected. Then his eyes caught the faint marks along Shane's hip. His stomach twisted. Those weren't from hockey. They were from him. Not severe, not enough to actually hurt Shane. But they were there, evidence of his hands.

Months ago, he would have looked at those marks and felt something possessive.

Something ugly. Now all he felt was guilt, he should have been more careful.

The thought settled heavily in his chest. Without thinking, he reached toward the bruise.

His hand stopped halfway, No.

Shane was sleeping. He didn't get to touch simply because he wanted to. Slowly, he lowered his hand back onto the mattress.

This was progress. Dr. Kostova would probably be proud. Ilya thought it was torture.

Shane shifted slowly.

Ilya immediately dropped his head onto the pillow and closed his eyes. Years of professional hockey had given him excellent reflexes and years of hiding emotions had made him an accomplished liar.

The mattress moved. A sleepy sound escaped Shane, then silence.

A few seconds later, he felt Shane turn over and facing towards him, then a tentative hand on his face. Shane was looking at him, touching him like he mattered. The feeling nearly stopped his heart.

His eyes were still heavy with sleep. He looked warm, comfortable.

Safe.

Ilya wanted to frame the image.

"Good morning," Shane mumbled.

"Good morning." He whispered, finally opening his eyes.

For a moment neither moved. They simply looked at each other, the silence wasn't awkward, or tense.

It was peaceful. So peaceful.

Something neither of them had much experience with.

Shane shifted closer first.

Just a few inches.

Then a few more.

Until his head settled against Ilya's shoulder, Ilya immediately wrapped an arm around him.

Not because he was afraid Shane would leave, but because he wanted to.

Because Shane wanted him to. The distinction mattered. They settled together beneath the blankets. No rush, no expectations.

Just warmth, just breathing. Together.

Ilya felt Shane relax against him little by little. Every muscle loosening. Every guard

lowering.

It occurred to him suddenly that they had never really done this before.

There had always been a hotel checkout. They were always on limited time when together.

But now? Nothing but a game tonight where they'd have some more time after until Shane's flight in the late morning.

The world could wait.

Shane yawned. The sound was ridiculously cute.

Ilya smiled despite himself.

"What?"

"You make the most adorable small noises."

Shane lifted his head.

"What does that even mean?"

"You make little noises."

"I do not."

"You do."

"I don't."

"You sound like angry kitten. Look like one too. Is my favorite."

Shane groaned and buried his face against Ilya's chest.

"Oh my God."

"Is true."

"I hate you."

"No." Ilya pressed a kiss into his messy hair. "You do not."

For the first time in a very long time, Shane didn't argue.

And for the first time in even longer, Ilya allowed himself to believe he might be right.

They stayed in bed for a while more. Shane shifted, turning onto his side to face Ilya. His eyes, still soft with sleep, held a familiar, warm glint. He reached out, his fingers brushing over the birthmarks across Ilya's chest. "Hey," he murmured, his voice husky.

"Hey," Ilya replied with a smile, his thumb stroking Shane's cheekbone. He noticed Shane's eyes darting from his face, to the walls, down to his body over and over again for a few minutes. He held his face still, moving him so that Shane had no other choice then to tell him what was going on in his head. "Use your words. Tell me what you need."

A slow, blush touched Shane's cheeks again. "Please fuck me again." Shane whispered, his eyes already glazed over.

The request, so blunt and quiet, sent a jolt of heat straight through Ilya's core. His body responded instantly, a low growl building in his chest. He moved, rolling Shane onto his back and covering him, bracing his weight on his forearms to cage him in. He dipped his head to capture that smiling mouth in a deep, promising kiss.

As he settled his hips between Shane's thighs, Shane's body tensed. It was subtle- a quick intake of breath, a faint tightening around his eyes. But Ilya felt it. He froze, pulling back just enough to search Shane's face.

"What?" Shane asked, the word breathless.

"You winced."

"I didn't. I'm fine." Shane replied, trying to pull Ilya to him again.

"You did." Ilya's voice was firm, leaving no room for argument. He shifted his weight off, his gaze scanning down Shane's body. The adrenaline and passion of the night had faded, leaving behind the honest aftermath: the deep muscle aches from the game, the tender bloom of bruises from their earlier, less careful couplings. He saw it now in the slight stiffness of

Shane's movements, in the way he'd favored his right side when he had turned.

Shane looked away, a faint blush coloring his cheeks. "It's fine. I want you to."

"I know you do," Ilya said, his tone softening. He leaned down and kissed him, slow and sweet, pouring all the 'no' into a 'yes' of a different kind. "But not like that. Not if it hurts you."

He kissed his way down Shane's body- over the sternum, sucking on a nipple briefly, the quivering abdomen, the hip bones. When he took Shane into his mouth, it was with a focused, worshipful tenderness that was its own kind of claiming. This wasn't about conquest or punishment. It was about giving pleasure so exquisite it made thought impossible. He used his tongue, his lips, the gentle pressure of his throat, building the sensation slowly, inexorably, until Shane's hands fisted in the sheets and his back arched off the mattress with a broken, grateful cry.

After, Ilya didn't let him drift too far into his head, he eased him back down from the high with soft words and kisses. When he felt Shane come back to normal, he kissed the inside of his thigh, then stood. "Stay."

He went to the bathroom, starting the water in the deep tub. He poured in a generous capful of the expensive, muscle-soaking oil he'd bought after noticing it on Shane's usual shopping lists and waited for the steam to begin to fog the mirrors.

When he returned, Shane was lying boneless, a sated, dazed expression on his face. Ilya gathered him up- eliciting a soft, protesting groan at being lifted and carried him into the cloud of warm, scented vapor. He lowered them both into the hot water, settling with Shane's back against his chest. A sigh of pure relief shuddered through Shane as the heat penetrated his sore muscles.

For a while, they just sat in the quiet, Ilya's arms loose around him, his chin resting on Shane's damp hair. His hands moved under the water, gently kneading the tight cords of Shane's shoulders.

"It's late. I should call Hayden. And my tutor... I usually go over some questions I have throughout the week." Shane said after a while, his voice soft and relaxed.

"The classes," Ilya said finally, his voice a rumble against Shane's back. "Architecture and business?" He felt Shane nod slowly.

"How are they?"

Shane relaxed further into the touch, lulled by the heat and the massage. "Good, hard though. I wasn't the best student before sports took over and not much has changed. I'm only good at the design classes. The business finance module is kicking my ass. All the depreciation schedules and liability curves. It's like a different language."

"But you like it."

"I do. It's... practical. It makes sense in a way that just playing doesn't always. It's for after."

He paused. "In case I get found out. It would help me manage the properties I had already. For having something that's mine, that I built."

Ilya's hands stilled for a moment on his shoulders. Something that's mine. The words resonated with a dark, secret echo in his own mind. He pushed it away, focusing on the pride in Shane's voice. "You will be good at it. You have a mind for planning. For seeing how parts make a whole." He resumed the massage, working down the line of Shane's spine. "The architecture, this is for the dreaming part, yes? For the 'what if'?"

A small, happy sound escaped Shane. "Yeah. It's the fun part. The creative part. Learning how to draw the spaces you imagine... it's relaxing. My professor says I have a good eye for flow. For how people move through a space." He stopped when Ilya chuckled.

"What? Is that too boring." Shane said with an indulgent smile, turning his head to look at

Ilya over his shoulder.

“It is, but also perfect for you, no?” Ilya agreed softly, thinking of Shane on the ice, his unparalleled spatial awareness, his anticipation. It was the same mind, applied to a different canvas. “You see the paths before they exist. Makes you good hockey player.”

They lapsed back into a comfortable silence, the water cooling around them. Ilya reached over to add more hot water, keeping the temperature perfect. He washed Shane’s hair with a careful, thorough gentleness, rinsing the suds away with a cupped hand.

In this quiet, steamy sanctuary, the bruises and the aches were just facts of their bodies, not wounds of their spirit. Here, Ilya wasn’t the monster from the broken door or the strategist in the dark hotel. He was just the man holding his omega in a bath, listening to him talk about his future, and feeling a fierce, protective pride that threatened to split his own chest wide open. He knew the other versions of himself were still there, waiting in the wings. But for this stolen time, he let them wait. This version, the caretaker, the listener, was the one Shane needed right now. And for Ilya, that was becoming the only version that mattered.

The water had cooled to a skin-temperature comfort, and Shane had melted into a pliant, boneless state against Ilya’s chest. With a soft grunt of effort, Ilya stood, lifting Shane effortlessly from the tub. Water sheeted off them both.

Shane, blinking slowly, reached automatically for the plush towel warming on the rack. Ilya caught his wrist, guiding the hand back down. “No,” he murmured, his voice a low vibration in the steamy room. “I have you.”

He set Shane gently on the thick bath mat and grabbed the towel himself. What followed was not a quick dry-off, but a ritual. Ilya started with Shane’s hair, blotting the dark strands with careful absorption until they were just damp. Then he moved to his shoulders, his back, his arms, using broad, firm strokes that were both practical and deeply soothing. He knelt to dry Shane’s legs, each stroke of the fabric over his calves and thighs methodical and thorough. Finally, he nudged Shane’s feet apart to dry between his toes, an act of such mundane intimacy that Shane’s breath hitched.

Ilya guided him to the bedroom, sat him on the edge of the bed, and retrieved the hairbrush from the ensuite. He stood behind Shane, working through the tangles with a patience Shane had never seen in him, his touch impossibly gentle. Each pull of the brush was smooth, untangling knots without a single tug of pain.

Next came the lotion the he knew Shane liked best- the expensive one that smelled of almond and vanilla. Ilya poured a pool of it into his palms, warming it before he began. His hands were calloused, powerful, yet they moved over Shane’s skin with a reverence that felt like a sacrament. He massaged it into the back of Shane’s neck, across his shoulders, down the length of his spine, over the faint bruises on his hips. He turned Shane to face him and did his chest, his arms, his stomach, even taking each of Shane’s hands to rub the lotion into his fingers and palms. The room filled with the soft, sweet scent and the quiet sound of skin sliding against skin.

Throughout it all, Shane simply watched. His eyes, wide and soft, followed Ilya’s every movement with a kind of awed disbelief. He offered no resistance, his body moving wherever Ilya’s guiding hands directed him- a tilt of the chin, a lift of an arm. He felt like something precious, something being carefully restored.

Finally, Ilya went into his closet. He pulled out a pair of soft, grey sweatpants and a well-worn navy hoodie. He dressed Shane himself, guiding his legs into the pants, pulling the sweatshirt over his head, carefully threading his arms through the sleeves. The clothes swallowed him. The sweatpants pooled around his ankles, and the hoodie's shoulders dropped far down his arms, the cuffs covering his hands. He looked small, enveloped, swathed in Ilya's scent and Ilya's space. Ilya's gaze darkened with a possessiveness that was entirely separate from lust; it was a deep, primal satisfaction at the visual proof of Shane wrapped in his world. He said nothing, but the faint, approving curve of his mouth said everything.

Shane looked down at himself, at the oversized sleeves, and then back up at Ilya. The awe in his eyes had softened into something else, a profound, vulnerable gratitude that shimmered on the verge of tears. He had fought to keep such tight control in all things in his life, had managed his own life, carried his own weight for so long. He had never, not once in his adult life, been handled with such comprehensive, self-assured care. He hadn't known he could be, or that he would want to be.

He didn't have the words. Instead, he shuffled forward on the bed, the excess fabric whispering, and simply leaned his forehead against Ilya's neck. It was surrender, and it was thanks. Ilya's arms came around him, holding him in the fortress of his own clothes, and for a long moment, they just stood there, in the quiet morning light, with Shane feeling, for the first time, utterly and completely taken care of.

The quiet embrace lingered, Shane sinking into the warmth and the scent of Ilya's clothes. But after a moment, Ilya gently disentangled himself, holding Shane by the shoulders at arm's length. "I'm hungry," he declared, leaning in to press a quick, firm peck against Shane's lips.

"For what?" Shane replied, a slow smile spreading as he tried to chase the kiss.

Ilya dodged him with a soft laugh, giving his behind a light, familiar squeeze. "Food, you pervert." He steered them both out of the bedroom and into the kitchen's clean, morning light.

He guided Shane to a stool at the kitchen island. "Sit. Do not touch anything."

As Shane settled, watching with that same soft, captivated expression, Ilya's mind clicked into a different kind of focus. To the series of detailed, slightly exasperated texts from Laurent. He opened the refrigerator, his eyes finding the specific item immediately: a cans of ginger ale, so cold it was beaded with moisture. Very cold. Small cans only and they had to be imported from Canada. He'd had to go to three specialty stores. He set it on the counter with a satisfying clink.

Next, he retrieved the prepared ingredients from the deli drawer, each in its own container: the perfectly flaked albacore tuna mixed with just the right amount of light mayo and a precise pinch of celery salt, the thinly sliced dill pickles, the aged white cheddar already grated, the loaf of sourdough bread from the specific bakery Laurent had circled on a map.

He assembled the tools: a bowl, a spatula, the non-stick pan Laurent had insisted he buy. He moved with a concentration usually reserved for game tape, his brow slightly furrowed. He had practiced this over FaceTime with Laurent, who had sighed dramatically as Ilya nearly burned the first attempt and under-toasted the second. This was the third. It had to be perfect.

He couldn't make him coq au vin or beef stroganoff. Shane's diet was a famously limited landscape of familiar textures and plain flavors, a fact that had frustrated nutritionists and intrigued Ilya in equal measure. They would discuss it later- gently, without pressure. But for now, for this first meal together, Ilya wanted to give him something made by his own hands. Not a restaurant's impersonal order, but this. A tuna melt.

He buttered the sourdough slices with exacting strokes. He spread the tuna mixture, layered the pickles, then the cheese. He heated the broiler, waiting for the precise moment Laurent had described, so far everything looked right.

The kitchen smelled faintly of toasted bread and tuna.

Shane sat perched on one of the stools at the island, laughing.

The sound still did strange things to Ilya's chest.

He glanced over his shoulder.

Shane had one leg folded beneath him on the stool, looking entirely too comfortable in his kitchen.

Like he'd always belonged there.

Dangerous thought.

Ilya turned back toward the cutting board.

"So," he said casually. "Where are you next?"

Shane leaned forward.

"Chicago."

Ilya groaned. "Again?"

"You say that like you don't enjoy playing there."

"I enjoy winning there. Is big difference."

Shane snorted.

"Okay, fair." Ilya tossed vegetables into a bowl.

"Then Minnesota."

"That's not bad."

"Is cold."

"You grew up in Russia. Isn't it always cold there?"

"Exactly. I escaped."

That earned another laugh. Ilya found himself smiling before he could stop it.

"What about you?" Shane asked.

"Washington."

"Ovechkin still calling you pretty boy?"

Ilya looked horrified. "He called me that one time! One!"

"It was six years ago. I watched it on ESPN."

"He was drunk."

"I don't think so."

"He was singing."

Shane laughed so hard he nearly slid off the stool.

Ilya pointed at him.

"You are not allowed to laugh."

"I absolutely am. That's why it's funny." Shane wiped at his eyes. "I still have the video."

"You little menace. I must get microphone and tell everyone you are the asshole now."

The grin Shane gave him was entirely unrepentant.

Ilya stared for a second before shaking his head. "Brat."

"That's rich coming from you."

"Is accurate."

"It's annoying."

"It can be both."

Shane reached over and stole a piece of cucumber from the cutting board.

Ilya immediately slapped his hand away.

"Hey!"

"Wait."

"I was helping."

"You were stealing."

"Quality control."

"You are not quality control." Shane stole another piece anyway.

This time Ilya let him. The silence that followed settled comfortably between them, just easy.

Shane rested his chin in his palm.

"When do we play each other again?"

Ilya didn't need to think about it.

"Three weeks."

Shane blinked.

"You know that immediately?"

"Of course."

"You have the schedule memorized?"

Ilya shrugged.

"Only your games."

The words came out before he could stop them.

Shane's ears immediately turned pink.

Interesting, very interesting.

Ilya hid his smile by turning back toward the counter.

A few seconds passed.

Then quietly:

"That's kind of ridiculous."

"Yes."

"And slightly creepy."

"Probably, yes"

"And weirdly nice. I like it."

Ilya looked over. Shane was smiling softly.

The kind of smile that felt private.

Something warm settled in Ilya's chest.

Three weeks.

Three weeks until they would meet again.

For the first time in years, the thought didn't feel like a battle. It felt like something to look forward to.

They continued teasing each other until the oven beeped. Shane rested his chin in his hands, his oversized sleeves pooling on the granite, his gaze tracing Ilya's movements, the sure movements, the focused squint as he checked the cheese melt through the lid he'd placed on the pan. The fact that he didn't bother with a shirt was a very big bonus for Shane since he now felt he could look all he wanted.

Finally, Ilya slid the golden, perfectly crisped sandwiches onto a plate. He cut them diagonally, the cheese pulling in a long, satisfying string. He placed the plate in front of Shane, then popped another cold can of icy ginger ale and set it beside his meal.

He leaned against the opposite counter, arms crossed, trying to look nonchalant and failing utterly. His entire being was focused on Shane's face, waiting for the verdict.

Shane looked from the picture-perfect food up to Ilya, his eyes shimmering again. He picked up a half, took a bite, and closed his eyes. A small, almost imperceptible hum of pleasure vibrated in his throat. He swallowed. "It's perfect," he said, his voice thick. "How did you...?"

"I had a good teacher," Ilya said, the gruffness in his voice betraying his relief and pride. He pushed off the counter and took the stool next to Shane, picking up the other half of his own sandwich. "Eat. Is best hot."

And as they ate in the sunny kitchen, Shane in his borrowed clothes, Ilya in his quiet triumph, it felt like more than a meal. It felt like a promise, built not on grand gestures, but on cold ginger ale, melted cheese, and the profound willingness to learn the map of another person's heart, one simple, careful recipe at a time.

The food turned out surprisingly good. Shane wasn't about to lie. He would have to spend some extra time running off the cheese, but he wouldn't decline the incredibly sweet gesture that Ilya had made in cooking for him.

After lunch they migrated to the living room. A hockey game played quietly on the television, but neither of them paid much attention.

Somebody scored. The commentators got excited. Neither cared enough to figure out why. Shane had stretched out on one end of the couch while Ilya occupied the other. There were several feet between them, enough space to avoid feeling crowded, but close enough that the distance felt intentional rather than necessary, comfortable.

Normal. It was still strange how much he liked normal. This was the first time they were spending like this. Usually, their 'getting to know each other' time was over the phone via texts or a few calls.

"New York," Shane announced suddenly.

Ilya glanced away from the television. "What about it?"

"Best road city to spend some free time in."

"No!"

"It absolutely is."

"It is so common! Home of dinosaurs too."

"It has good restaurants."

"It smells like bad decisions."

Shane laughed. "That's part of the charm."

"There should not be charm."

"You sound eighty years old. Getting to be like your friend there."

"I am mature." Shane said with a raised eyebrow.

"You are twenty one. You should not be so mature and boring."

"You're impossible."

Ilya smiled. "You like me."

Shane rolled his eyes. "Debatable."

"Not very debatable."

The smile Shane tried to suppress gave him away immediately.

Ilya felt something warm settle in his chest. The ease between them still felt fragile, new.

Like something that could disappear if he moved too quickly.

But Shane was relaxing, he could see it- feel it.

Every hour he stayed. Every laugh. Every teasing comment. Every casual conversation.

It felt like another piece of foundation that they were building.

"What about you?" Shane asked.

"Favorite city?"

"Besides Montreal."

Ilya snorted. "I was going to say Montreal because you are there."

The words slipped out naturally.

Honest, Shane's ears turned pink.

Interesting, very interesting.

Ilya was filing that away for future use.

"Other than Montreal," Shane muttered.

"Boston, of course. Miami, Vegas, Houston." A small smile tugged at Ilya's mouth.

Shane suddenly became very interested in the hockey game.

On the television, somebody got into a fight.

Neither of them noticed.

Ilya opened his mouth to ask another question.

His phone rang. The sound shattered the comfortable atmosphere. He frowned. Svetlana wasn't supposed to call today. She was traveling with her father to meet another specialist.

The screen lit up.

Father.

Immediately, his mood soured. He declined the call.

Shane glanced over. "Everything okay?"

"Da."

A very obvious lie. The phone rang again three minutes later. And then again, and again.

Ilya's jaw tightened.

Finally Shane sighed. "Take it."

"I do not want to."

"It might be important."

"It is not." Another ring.

Shane gestured toward the phone. "You're making me anxious."

Ilya muttered something rude in Russian.

Then answered.

"What?"

His father's voice exploded through the speaker immediately. "Where the hell have you been?"

Ilya pulled the phone away from his ear, standing and going to the other room.

"I have been busy."

"Busy doing what?" The accusation was immediate. Suspicious, demanding. The familiar tone made something ugly twist in Ilya's stomach.

"I do not answer to you." A dangerous silence.

Then: "Don't speak to me like that."

Ilya felt his temper rise instantly. Years of conditioning, of resentment.

Years of swallowing every argument.

Not today. "You called me. What do you want because that would be the only reason you would call, wouldn't it be father?"

"I've been trying to reach you for weeks."

"I noticed."

"You are embarrassing yourself."

The insult landed out of nowhere. Ilya's expression darkened.

"What?"

"I hear things."

A humorless laugh escaped his father. "The drinking. The missed meetings with the Kremlin when they call you. You disappear to America and suddenly forget your responsibilities."

"The team is winning."

"That isn't the point."

"My business is profitable."

"Not the point."

"What exactly is the point then?"

His father didn't answer immediately. When he finally spoke, his voice was colder. Sharper.

"You are becoming weak. I knew it would happen but now it's a reflection on me."

Ilya's hand clenched around the phone. There it was.

The real reason for the call. Always the same reason.

Weak. Soft. Broken. Not enough. His father continued.

"I did not spend fifty years building my reputation so my son could waste his time chasing therapists and hockey players."

The room went completely silent.

Ilya froze. He stood very still. A dangerous kind of stillness.

"Do not." His voice was deadly calm. "Do not talk about him."

His father laughed. Actually laughed. "You prove my point."

Something snapped. Not the explosive, uncontrolled rage he used to know, something colder.

More dangerous. "You know what?" Ilya said quietly. "For the first time in my life, I think I understand why mama hated you."

Silence. Absolute silence. "Well, weak omega's do not last. Think about that while you fuck that boy." His father's breathing became audible. Heavy.

"What did you just say?" Disbelieving. Then furious. The shouting started immediately.

More cursing and yelling came out and Ilya ended the call.

Just pressed the button. The house fell silent except for the low sound from the tv.

His heart was pounding. His hands were shaking. Years of anger crawled beneath his skin.

For several seconds he just stood there staring at the dark screen.

Breathing. Trying not to throw the phone through a wall. Trying not to call back.

Trying not to become the man he used to be. When he finally looked up, he knew he needed to reign himself in. Shane couldn't see him like that.

The way someone waits for a wounded animal to decide whether it wants company.

And somehow that hurt worse than anything his father had said. He centered himself, holding his hand up to his mom's cross for a few seconds before walking back to the living room. He sat back close to Shane, pulling him to his side closely. The television flickered, a meaningless parade of colors and sound. Ilya's eyes were fixed on it, but his awareness was a narrow, hyper-focused beam directed entirely at the man curled against his side. Even through the chemical barrier of the scent patch on Shane's neck, Ilya could detect it- a subtle, sweetening of the air around him, a warmth that had nothing to do with the room's temperature. Pheromones, seeping through the filter. A quiet, unconscious offering.

He felt more than heard the low, contented vibration in Shane's chest, a near-silent purr of safety and satiation. Ilya kept his breathing even, his body deliberately relaxed, a statue to allow Shane to act however he wanted. He didn't dare move, lest he break the spell.

Then, the air shifted, intensifying. Shane's head tilted, and his lips, soft and warm, pressed a kiss to the center of Ilya's chest, right over his sternum. It was not a prelude to sleep. It was a question. His hand, which had been resting on Ilya's stomach, began to move, sliding down the firm plane of his thigh in a slow, exploratory stroke, then back up. The touch was tentative but deliberate, mapping the muscle through the soft fabric of his sweatpants.

Ilya remained still, a captive audience to his own awakening desire. Shane shifted lower, nuzzling his face against Ilya's abdomen, his breath hot against his skin. He moved lower, pressing a slow, open-mouthed kiss to the growing hardness there, a muffled, damp heat that made Ilya's hips jerk involuntarily. A soft, approving sound escaped Shane.

Suddenly, Shane pulled back and sat up. He swung a leg over Ilya's thighs, straddling his lap in one fluid motion. His eyes, when they met Ilya's, were glazed, his pupils so wide and dark they swallowed the deep brown almost completely. He looked drugged, blissed out, operating on a deep, instinctual level. Without breaking that hazy gaze, he grabbed the hem of the oversized shirt- Ilya's scent covered shirt, and pulled it up and over his head, tossing it aside. The morning light caught the dusting of freckles across his chest, the gentle heave of his breath.

Ilya stared, his own hands gripping the couch cushions. Do not intervene. Let him lead. See what he wants.

Shane's hands went to the waistband of Ilya's sweats, pushing them down just enough to free him. He wrapped his fingers around Ilya's length, giving a few slow, firm strokes that drew a ragged gasp from Ilya's throat. Then, still moving his hand, Shane rose up on his knees, shoved his own borrowed sweatpants down his hips, and sank back down.

The sensation was not penetration, but a breathtaking, full-body friction. Skin slid against heated skin, their erections pressed tightly together in the tight, slick channel of Shane's fist. It was a little clumsy, intimate and messy and desperate. Shane set a rhythm, his hips rocking, his fist pumping, creating a wet, syncopated friction that felt heavenly. He leaned forward, capturing Ilya's mouth in a deep, consuming kiss, swallowing his groans. Ilya's hands finally moved, gripping Shane's hips, not to guide but to anchor himself as the world narrowed to the slick, pounding heat between them and the taste of Shane on his tongue.

The climb was fast and steep, a wave building from the base of his spine. Control shattered. As the crest broke, tearing through him with blinding force, the word was ripped from somewhere deeper than thought, raw and guttural and true.

“Moi... istinnaya para,” he groaned against Shane’s mouth, the Russian ripped out of him, before it collapsed into the English, the claim absolute. “Mate.”

For a second, Shane stilled. The haze in his eyes swirled with a new, dawning intensity. He echoed, breathless, “Ilya...mate...” a dazed look in his eyes.

Then, like a film reel snapping, the dreamy clarity vanished. Ilya watched it happen in real time- the bliss shattering, replaced by a wave of cold recognition, then sheer, unadulterated panic. Shane’s eyes cleared, sharpening with horror. He looked down at their joined bodies, at the evidence of Ilya’s release slick on his hand and stomach, and flinched as if burned.

He scrambled back, yanking his sweats up, his movements jerky and frantic. “I- I’m sorry, I didn’t- I have to- ” The words tumbled out, fractured and breathless. “Team meeting. A video ch-. I forgot. It’s now. I have to go.”

He wouldn’t meet Ilya’s eyes. He snatched his discarded shirt from the floor, clutching it to his chest like a shield, and all but fled the room, leaving Ilya alone on the couch, exposed and cooling rapidly in the silent wake of the storm.

The word mate hung in the air, now toxic and accusing. It hadn’t been a request or a promise. It had been a confession. And Shane, hearing it, had run.

“Don’t do this, Shane. Not again.” Ilya stood up slowly.

“I cant. I cant do-” Tears rolled down his eyes, he was shaking, refusing to look at Ilya.

“Hollander, I’m telling you know not to do this. We can talk-” Ilya didn’t know what else to say. He thought

"I can't."

The words came out strangled.

Panicked.

"I can't do that. I can't do this."

Shane stood. Immediately putting distance between them. His breathing was uneven.

His eyes wide.

Like the word itself had reached inside him and grabbed hold of every fear he possessed.

"Ilya-"

"Stop, calm down."

"You can't just-"

"I know, please just ignore that. Come sit down."

The panic in Shane's voice was growing. And somehow that made Ilya's own panic worse.

Because he had done this. One stupid word, one selfish, unguarded moment.

One glimpse of a future he'd wanted for so long that he'd forgotten not everyone saw it the same way.

Shane grabbed his jacket from where it had been thrown over the chair.

"I think I should go."

Ilya stood there, watching Shane leave. Slowly, he crossed the room and entered the bathroom. The overhead light flooded the space. He stared at himself in the mirror. The reflection looking back seemed unfamiliar.

His hair was a mess. His eyes looked red rimmed. Older than they should have. There were dark circles beneath them from another night spent barely sleeping. His gaze dropped to the sink. Then to the medicine cabinet. His stomach twisted. He knew exactly what was inside. For months he'd ignored it. Pretended it wasn't there. Pretended he didn't occasionally think about it during bad nights. Pretended he wasn't the kind of person who kept things "just in case." But addicts always kept an emergency exit.

Always.

Even when they swore they were better. Even when they promised themselves they were done. His hand moved before he consciously decided to open the cabinet. The hinges creaked softly.

Behind bottles of aspirin and allergy medication sat an orange prescription bottle. Forgotten, The therapist at the hospital had given them freely, only warning to call him if a refill was needed. The pills inside had been prescribed after he'd broken several ribs the previous year. The injury had hurt, but of course Ilya was leary of any medication. That had been the problem. He'd taken them exactly as directed for three days before realizing how much he liked them.

Not the relief from pain, but how they gave him quiet. The blessed, impossible quiet.

No anxiety. No obsession. No constant need clawing at the inside of his skull. Just peace.

He'd flushed most of them down the toilet. Most, not all.

His fingers wrapped around the bottle. The plastic felt cold against his palm. He stared at it. Then opened the cabinet farther. The small baggie of cocaine was still there. Tucked behind everything else.

Hidden where nobody would find it. A stupid decision from a stupid night. One experiment. One moment of weakness. One reminder that he wasn't nearly as recovered as he liked pretending he was.

The sight of it made something inside him sag. Not temptation. Recognition. Because suddenly he could see the pattern stretching backward through his entire life.

His father drank. Ilya chased other things.

Attention. Approval. Victories. Sex. Competition. Anything that made people look at him.

Anything that made him feel important. Anything that made him feel wanted- less alone.

The realization settled heavily in his chest. When he'd been younger, scoring goals had been enough. The crowd cheering, the praise.

The interviews. The attention. For a little while, it filled the empty places. Then he'd needed more. More success. More money. More victories. More proof that he mattered. Nothing ever lasted. Nothing ever stayed. The feeling always faded. The hunger always returned.

Only Shane had ever mattered. Only he had ever made him feel whole.

His grip tightened around the prescription bottle. A horrible thought surfaced. Maybe his father had been right. Not about strength. Not about omegas. Not about control.

But about him. Maybe there really was something fundamentally wrong inside him.

Something broken. Something that couldn't be fixed. His eyes drifted closed. And suddenly he understood why Shane had consumed him so completely.

It wasn't just because Shane was an omega. It wasn't just because he was beautiful. Or kind. Or brilliant. Shane represented everything. Everything Ilya had spent his entire life chasing. Affection. Acceptance. Comfort. Trust. Validation. Love. Every need he'd ever had wrapped together into one impossible person.

And the worst part? Somewhere along the way it had stopped being about the need. It had become about Shane. The one who laughed at his terrible jokes. The one who stole vegetables while he cooked. The one who rolled his eyes every time Ilya called him a brat. The one who had stayed with him without expecting anything in return. Even after everything. A painful sound escaped him. Half laugh, half sob. Because that somehow made it worse. If Shane really left now, there would be no obsession left to hide behind. No excuse. No fantasy. Just grief. Pure and uncomplicated. His chest tightened until breathing became difficult. The bathroom suddenly felt too small. Too bright. He set both hands against the counter and lowered his head. His shoulders trembled. Not from tears. From exhaustion. He was so tired. Tired of fighting himself. Tired of being afraid. Tired of wanting things so badly they became unbearable. For one awful moment he couldn't see a future. Couldn't see what came after this. Couldn't imagine continuing to live if Shane ultimately decided he wasn't worth the risk. The thought hollowed him out. Because if Shane- with all his patience and kindness and understanding- couldn't love him, who could? The answer arrived immediately. Nobody. Nobody ever had. Not without conditions. Not without expectations. Not without wanting something in return. Never just Ilya. Never the broken, frightened man beneath everything else. The bottle rattled softly in his hand. His eyes fixed on it. The promise it offered was seductive in its simplicity. Not happiness. Just silence. Just a few hours without feeling this. Without hurting, without thinking, without wanting the impossible.

Shane didn't remember leaving. One second he had been standing in Ilya's living room. The next he was outside. Cool air slammed into his lungs. The front door clicked shut behind him. He kept walking, down the driveway. Past the security cameras. Past the carefully maintained landscaping. Past the expensive stone walls. Only when he reached the sidewalk did his legs finally give out. He crouched beside the curb. One hand pressed against the back of his neck. The other wrapped around his phone. His breathing wouldn't slow down. Every inhale felt too shallow, every exhale felt wrong. The world seemed tilted somehow. Like somebody had knocked everything a few degrees off balance. His thoughts spun in circles. Mate. The word echoed endlessly. Mate. Mate. Mate. His stomach twisted. For years he'd hidden what he was. For years he'd fought every instinct. Every biological impulse. Every stupid omega fantasy. Because fantasies were dangerous. Dreams were dangerous. Needing someone was dangerous. Until he met Ilya. And now Ilya had looked at him with so much love it had physically hurt and called him the one word Shane wasn't prepared to hear. Not yet. His hands started shaking. Hard enough that he almost dropped the phone. "Fuck." The curse came out breathless. He squeezed his eyes shut.

Think. Just think. He needed a ride. Back to the hotel. Back somewhere safe. Somewhere he could think. The realization immediately presented another problem. Most of the team was already in town. Tonight's game. Half the roster was probably scattered throughout Boston. The last thing he needed was somebody spotting him crouched outside an expensive gated property looking like he was having a nervous breakdown.

His parents were out. Absolutely not. His mother would somehow be on a plane before he finished explaining.

Hayden wasn't an option either. Hayden loved him. Which was exactly the problem.

Hayden would show up with backup. Possibly armed. Possibly JJ. Possibly both.

Coach? The thought lasted approximately three seconds.

Then what? Coach drives across Boston to pick him up.

His phone shook in his hand. He stared at the contacts list. For several long seconds.

Then pressed call. The line rang twice.

"Hey, Rook." Scott's voice. Calm. Familiar. Instant relief flooded Shane's chest so fast it almost made him dizzy, a sob escaped his throat.

Scott immediately paused.

"Whoa." The concern entered his voice instantly.

"What happened?"

Shane laughed weakly. Nothing funny about it.

Everything funny about how quickly Scott had figured out something was wrong.

"Scott?"

"Holz, whats wrong? Where are you?"

"Boston."

"You okay?"

No. The answer arrived immediately. No. Not even a little. Shane lowered himself fully onto the curb. The cold concrete pressed against his legs. "I don't know." The admission slipped out quietly.

There was a pause. Scott didn't rush to fill it. One of the things Shane liked most about him.

Scott never forced people to talk. He just waited. Eventually Shane spoke again.

"I think I panicked."

"Okay...are you alright? Are you safe?"

"I don't know."

"You're scaring me buddy. Where's Hayden? Can you get to JJ or Hayden from where you are?"

Despite everything, Shane almost smiled. "My bodyguards?"

"Exactly. Tell me where you are."

The silence settled uncomfortably between them.

Then Scott spoke again. "Did somebody hurt you?"

The question hit harder than expected. Because the answer was no. Absolutely not. Not physically. Not emotionally. Not intentionally. "No."

"Okay."

Scott's voice softened.

"A fight?"

"...kind of."

"A bad one?"

Shane stared at the pavement, at the cracks running through the concrete.

At the fallen leaves trapped against the curb.

"No." The answer felt ridiculous.

"I think I messed up."

"Hollander, tell me that you're safe first, okay?"

"Yea, I'm outside."

Scott went quiet. Waiting.

Shane scrubbed a hand over his face. Trying to find words. Trying to explain something he barely understood himself. A pause.

Then:

"...the alpha i've been seeing called me his mate."

"I am horrified by that. You're still a kid." Scott laughed softly.

The sound helped. A little.

"What happened?"

Shane hesitated. Not because he didn't trust Scott. Because he didn't know how to explain.

The way Ilya had looked standing in that living room. Like he'd been handed his own heart and wasn't sure what to do with it.

Scott waited. "And?"

"And I freaked out."

"Did he mean it?"

The question caught Shane off guard. He opened his mouth. Then closed it. Because yes.

That was the problem. Ilya had meant it.

Every word. Every look. Every confession.

Scott sighed softly. "Okay."

"What?"

"You're not calling me because somebody hurt you."

Shane frowned. "I'm not."

"No." Scott sounded almost amused.

"You're calling because somebody scared the hell out of you by being honest."

Shane groaned. "Oh my God."

"Pretty close?"

"Shut up."

A laugh. Then Scott's voice gentled again. "Hollander."

"What?"

"Do you want to leave?" The question settled heavily in his chest.

Simple. Direct. No hidden meaning. Just truth.

Did he want to leave? Shane looked back toward the gates. Toward the house hidden beyond them. Toward the man currently sitting inside probably convincing himself he'd ruined everything.

The thought made his stomach twist.

"No."

The answer came immediately. Without hesitation.

Scott hummed. "Okay."

"I just..." Shane swallowed. "I needed air."

"And now you did that."

"I did."

"Feel better?"

"...a little."

"Good." The silence stretched. Then Scott spoke again. "Go back."

Shane blinked. "What?"

"Go back."

"Scott-"

"You don't sound like somebody who wants to leave." His friend paused. "You sound like somebody who's scared."

The words hit squarely in the center of Shane's chest.

Because that was exactly what this was.

Fear. Terrifying, vulnerable fear.

Scott sighed. "You've spent years running from things that wanted something from you." His voice softened. "Maybe don't run from the person who's trying to figure out how to love you properly."

Shane stared at the gates. At the path beyond them. At the future waiting somewhere on the other side. His pulse gradually slowed. His breathing steadied.

For the first time since leaving the house, the panic loosened its grip. Just enough.

"I'm such a fucking idiot."

"I know."

"I hate it."

"I know that too. You'll be fine, kid."

Shane laughed despite himself. The sound felt odd. But real.

"Call me before the game. Just to check in." When the call ended, he remained sitting there for several more minutes.

Watching the clouds move overhead.

Listening to distant traffic. Breathing, thinking. Eventually he stood. His legs felt steadier now. The shaking had mostly stopped, but not completely. But enough.

He stared at the gates for a long moment. Then started walking. Back toward the house. Back toward what would be a hard conversation.

Back toward Ilya.

Because for all the things that terrified him, leaving suddenly felt far more frightening than staying.

A knock sounded against the bedroom door. Soft enough that he almost missed it.

"Ilya?" Shane.

The sound of his voice cut through everything.

Concern. Worry. Patience. No demands. No expectations.

Just concern.

Another knock. "Ilya?"

His throat tightened painfully.

Because Shane was still here. Even now. After the panic. After the misunderstanding, after every reason in the world to walk away. He was still here. Waiting.

The bottle suddenly felt heavy, like it weighed a hundred pounds. Like it represented every version of himself he was trying not to become.

His fingers loosened.

The prescription bottle slipped from his grasp and clattered into the sink.

The noise echoed through the bathroom.

Outside, Shane immediately went quiet. Listening, waiting. Giving him space. Trusting him.

The realization hurt almost as much as the rejection.

Because Shane was offering him exactly what he'd spent his entire life craving. Not approval or validation. Not obligation, but trust. And for the first time all afternoon, shame washed

over him.

Not because he'd been hurt. But because the moment things became difficult, Ilya's first instinct had been to run toward numbness instead of his person. He lowered his head. Pressed both hands against the counter. And breathed.

One breath. Then another. Then another. Trying to remember everything he'd learned. Trying to remember why he'd started therapy. Trying to remember why he'd chosen to fight. Trying to believe that maybe, just maybe, being loved wasn't something he had to earn.

Ilya quickly turned and went to open the door before Shane had time to reconsider. It wasn't relief. It was terrifying- Shane could just be coming back to end things for sure. A more profound, more disorienting terror than any he'd ever known. But he calmed. If he couldn't have Shane, he could be gone in less than an hour.

He opened the door and stepped into his bedroom, watching Shane wrap his arms around himself in a shy, self soothing gesture. They stood there, staring at each other. "I'm sorry for how I acted. I didn't mean to leave like that." he said quietly.

Ilya nodded, trying to find the proper words in English. "I didn't mean to call you that out loud until you were ready. It was my mistake. We can keep things simple."

"Is that what you want?" Shane asked, his voice breaking.

Ilya looked away, embarrassed when he felt his eyes tear up and he didn't want Shane to see him being so weak.

"I want whatever keeps you with me."

He felt Shane move in front of him, "I'm scared, Ilya. This is all a lot to take in and I'm trying to accept everything I'm feeling when we're together. I'm asking you to be patient with me."

Ilya slumped forward, his full weight coming to rest on Shane, who staggered slightly but held firm. Ilya buried his face in the hollow of Shane's neck, his tears hot and immediate against the skin where no patch blocked the scent. He inhaled in ragged, hiccuping gasps, drowning in honeysuckle and the salt of his own ruin.

"I do not know how," he gasped, the words muffled, wet, desperate. "I do not know how to live without you... To be worth... this."

Shane's arms tightened around him, not restraining, but enveloping. One hand cradled the back of his head, fingers splayed in his hair, a steady, unmoving pressure. The other rubbed slow, firm circles between his shoulder blades, grounding him in the physical world as his psyche fractured.

"You don't have to know," Shane whispered into his ear, his voice a low, constant murmur against the storm. "You're already doing it. Right now. This. Letting me see you? That's it. That's all of it."

"It is weakness" Ilya argued, the old programming firing desperately.

"It's the strongest thing I've ever seen," Shane countered, his voice gaining a fierce, tender conviction. "You think breaking down a door is strength? That's easy. This?" He held him tighter. "Letting someone hold you while you fall apart? That's courage, Ilya. That's trust. That's what you give me. Not a thing. This."

Ilya shook his head against Shane's shoulder, a child denying a truth too vast to comprehend. The tears kept coming, a ceaseless tide of grief for the lonely, transactional creature he'd

been, and of sheer, staggering fear for the unknown man he might have to become.

Slowly, Shane guided them. He didn't move toward the bed or the couch. He simply sank down, right there on the floor against the bedroom door, pulling Ilya with him. He arranged them so Ilya was half in his lap, his back against Shane's chest, Shane's arms locked around his torso, holding the pieces of him together. They sat in the dim light of the hallway, amidst the quiet wreckage of the morning.

"I have nothing else," Ilya confessed again, the mantra of his worthlessness. "Only this. This... need. It is a black hole. It will consume you. It will ask for everything and give only hunger in return."

Shane rested his chin on top of Ilya's head. "Then let it," he said, so simply it stole the air from the room. "Let it ask. I'm not afraid of your need. I'm afraid of you hiding it. Of you thinking you have to buy me with something else. Give me the hunger, Ilya. I can work with that. I can't work with a closed door."

The confession was so utterly disarming it finally broke the spiral. The sobs began to quiet, leaving behind a deep, trembling exhaustion. Ilya went boneless against him, utterly spent. The panic receded, leaving a raw, scraped-clean ache. Shane's scent, his warmth, his unwavering hold, were the only real things in the universe.

For a long time, they just sat on the floor. Ilya's breathing evened out, syncing with the rise and fall of Shane's chest behind him. The silence was no longer hollow. It was full. Heavy with the weight of a truth that had been spoken, and a fear that had been met, not with flight, but with an embrace.

"I do not deserve you," Ilya whispered, the last bastion of his old self.

"That's not your decision to make," Shane replied, his lips brushing Ilya's hair. "It's mine. And I've made it. I won't leave you, but we have to be careful. And give me some time."

And there, on the hard floor, wrapped in the arms of the man he'd hurt and who had seen the monster in him and called it courage, Ilya began, for the first time in his life, to learn how to let himself be really seen. Where the ugly and broken pieces of himself didn't need to be pushed back, to be held gently in another's hands, could somehow make him whole. It felt impossible. It felt like the only truth that had ever mattered.

Chapter End Notes

Well...THAT went better than it could have.

And significantly worse than it should have.

I think one of the biggest things about this chapter is that neither of them is really fighting the feelings anymore. Shane isn't confused about loving Ilya. Ilya isn't confused

about loving Shane. The problem now is that love doesn't magically erase fear, trauma, insecurity, addiction, or twenty-plus years of bad programming.

Shane heard the word he's secretly wanted for years and immediately panicked.

Ilya heard that panic and immediately assumed the worst possible outcome.

Very on-brand behavior from both of them.

The bathroom scene was probably one of the hardest sections I've written in this story because it isn't really about drugs. It's about coping mechanisms. About what happens when someone's entire emotional foundation is built on external validation and suddenly the one thing holding them together feels threatened.

And then Shane came back. Because for the first time, neither of them ran all the way away.

💙 And how worried were you when Ilya opened that medicine cabinet?

I read every comment, even when I'm slow to reply, and I genuinely love seeing everyone's theories.

Thank you for being here. Seriously.

(And yes, before anyone asks, these two still have approximately seventeen million issues left to work through.) ❤️

Chapter 27: Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

The comments on the last chapter absolutely destroyed me (in the best way possible). Some of you made me laugh, some made me cry, and a concerning number of you have become entirely too good at predicting my emotional damage.

Please enjoy a chapter where these two disasters are allowed approximately five minutes of peace before I start making questionable life choices as an author again.

As always, thank you for reading, commenting, screaming, theorizing, and coming along for this ride with me. I read every single comment and they genuinely make my day. 

Chapter Notes

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

For the first time in days, Ilya slept without waking. When consciousness finally returned, it did so slowly. The room was darker now. Early evening sunlight stretched across the far wall in long golden bands, painting everything in warm shadows. The air had cooled slightly. Somewhere downstairs the refrigerator hummed quietly.

Ilya's eyes remained closed. For several blissful seconds he simply existed. No nightmares, no panic. No desperate need clawing through his chest.

Just warmth. Warmth and the steady rise and fall beneath his cheek. His eyes opened.

Shane.

The realization settled over him immediately. Shane was still here. Not a dream, or a memory. Not another cruel trick his mind had decided to play. Still here. Ilya remained perfectly still, unwilling to risk disturbing him.

The omega was sleeping deeply now, one arm draped across Ilya's shoulders. At some point during their hours in bed they had shifted positions. Ilya was no longer sprawled across him. Instead, Shane had rolled partially onto his side and somehow pulled Ilya with him. One of Shane's hands rested in his hair, fingers tangled loosely in the strands near the back of his head.

The position should have been uncomfortable.

It wasn't.

Ilya couldn't remember the last time he'd felt this peaceful. Perhaps never.

His gaze drifted over Shane's face. The freckles across his nose. The faint crease pressed into one cheek from the pillow. The way his lashes rested against his skin. He looked younger when he slept, softer. More vulnerable.

Beautiful. Always so beautiful.

The thought came so naturally now it barely registered.

He loved Shane. That wasn't the revelation anymore. The revelation was that Shane knew. Somewhere in his mind, he had to know.

Shane knew and hadn't run.

A sharp ache settled in his chest.

Good. The ache meant he was alive.

Eventually Shane stirred. His nose scrunched first. Then one eye opened. Immediately narrowing. "You are staring at me."

Ilya considered lying. Then decided against it. "Da."

Shane groaned and buried his face into the pillow. "You are so weird."

"You are beautiful. Is difficult not to stare."

A muffled sound came from the pillow, Ilya suspected it was a curse. His smile widened.

After a moment Shane lifted his head again. His hair had become a complete disaster sometime during their nap. One side stuck straight up.

Ilya was instantly obsessed.

Shane noticed. "No."

"What?"

"I know that look."

"What look?"

"The one where you're about to say something annoying."

Ilya reached over and flattened the offending section of hair. It immediately sprang back up. His smile grew.

Shane sighed heavily. "I hate you."

"No."

"I do."

"No, you don't."

"I absolutely do." Ilya leaned forward and kissed the end of his nose.

Shane's expression became deeply offended. Then his ears turned pink.

Interesting. *Very* interesting.

The silence that followed felt comfortable, easy. The sort of silence neither of them had much experience with. Shane shifted onto his back, staring up at the ceiling. After a few moments his expression grew thoughtful.

"I don't really know what we're doing."

Ilya's stomach tightened. Not because the statement was negative. Because it wasn't. It was honest. "I know."

Shane glanced sideways. "What happens next?"

"Not sure." The answer surprised a laugh out of him.

"Really?"

"Shane." Ilya rolled onto one elbow. "I have spent years being disaster. Why would I suddenly know how relationship works?"

Another laugh. God, that sound.

It was becoming dangerous.

Shane shook his head.

"I've never done this."

"Neither have I."

"You have definitely dated people."

"I have slept with people. Big difference."

"That's dating."

"No."

The immediate response made Shane snort.

Ilya continued. "Dating requires emotional vulnerability. I avoided that part."

"Of course you did."

"I was very successful at avoiding it."

"Until me." The words slipped out before Shane could stop them.

Both froze. Something warm settled between them.

Not awkward or uncomfortable.

Just true.

"Da," Ilya admitted quietly. Until you.

Shane looked away first. His chest felt strangely tight. The conversation drifted after that. Neither of them seemed eager to leave the moment behind.

They talked about stupid things. Their first hockey fights. The worst hotels they'd ever stayed in. The time Shane had gotten food poisoning in Sweden and spent twelve hours convinced he was dying.

Ilya laughed so hard he nearly fell off the bed. Then retaliated by telling the story of accidentally breaking his own nose during practice and pretending nothing happened because he didn't want his father to call him weak. Shane laughed even harder.

The sound filled the room.

The house.

Something inside Ilya.

At some point they began inching closer together again. Neither acknowledged it.

Shane shifted first. Then Ilya. Then somehow they were shoulder to shoulder.

Then hip to hip. Neither remembered exactly how it happened.

Neither cared.

"What was your first impression of me?" Shane asked eventually.

Ilya didn't hesitate. "Pretty."

Shane groaned immediately. "No."

"Da."

"No."

"You were."

"I was sixteen."

"You were pretty sixteen year old."

Shane covered his face with both hands.

Ilya looked delighted.

"My first impression of you was asshole, smoking right in front of the no smoking sign. I knew you would be trouble."

"That is fair."

"You kept smirking."

"I was charming."

"You were obnoxious."

"Correct, but it got me you." The laughter faded slowly. Comfortably.

The room darkened another shade. Outside, the sun was beginning to disappear.

Eventually Shane's phone buzzed. Both of them ignored it. A minute later it buzzed again. Then again.

Shane sighed.

Reality, unfortunately.

He looked at the screen. Hayden.

Of course.

"Uh oh."

Ilya immediately frowned.

"What?"

"I think my babysitter found me."

A look of profound offense crossed Ilya's face. "He is not babysitter."

"He kind of is." Another text arrived.

Then another.

Then a call.

Shane laughed.

"Yep. Definitely babysitter."

Ilya stole the phone before Shane could answer.

"What are you doing?"

"Research."

"You can't research Hayden."

"Yes, I can. You are my partner now so I must know everything."

He absolutely could not. Should not. Shane watched him scroll through the messages.

His expression became increasingly amused, then annoyed. Then deeply suspicious.

"What?"

"He called seven times."

"I know."

"He thinks I kidnapped you." Ilya narrowed his eyes. "You told him where you were?"

"No." A pause. "Mostly."

Ilya stared.

Shane smiled innocently. The effect was ruined by the fact that he was already laughing.

"You are menace."

"You like me." The words escaped before he could stop them. Silence. Immediate silence. Neither moved. Neither looked away. The statement hovered between them.

Shane's heart skipped. Then stumbled and attempted to leave through his throat.

Ilya's expression softened.

Completely. Like somebody had reached into his chest and wrapped a hand around his heart.

"Da," he said quietly. "I do. I like you very much." Neither spoke after that. Neither needed to. Because for once, there was nothing left to explain.

The moment lasted longer than it should have.

Shane was still close enough that Ilya could feel his breath when the phone buzzed again between them. Neither moved immediately. The sound seemed absurdly loud in the quiet bedroom, dragging reality back into a space that had somehow existed outside of it for the last several hours.

Another vibration followed almost immediately.

Then another.

Shane sighed and let his forehead fall briefly against Ilya's shoulder. "That's probably Hayden."

"Ignore him."

A muffled laugh escaped Shane. "I don't think that's an option."

"Come on, just for a little while longer." Ilya attempted to pull him to another kiss, but Shane resisted.

Shane finally reached for the phone. The screen lit up in the growing darkness of the room, illuminating the familiar string of increasingly frantic messages. The further he scrolled, the harder it became to suppress his smile.

Across from him, Ilya was watching with open suspicion.

"What?"

"It's Hayden. I have to answer."

"What does babysitter want?"

Shane rolled his eyes automatically. "He's not my babysitter."

"He has called nine times."

"That doesn't make him a babysitter."

"Why does he call so many times?"

Despite himself, Shane laughed. The sound eased something tight inside Ilya's chest. He had discovered over the last day that there were very few things in the world he liked more than making Shane laugh.

Unfortunately, the smile faded almost immediately when Shane reached the newest message.

His expression changed slightly. But enough.

Ilya noticed. Of course he noticed. The atmosphere shifted instantly.

"What happened?"

Shane looked back at the screen before exhaling heavily. "Mandatory team meeting Like right now. I'll be lucky if I'm only late.."

The words settled between them.

Reality. The game tonight.

The arena.

The flight tomorrow.

All the things waiting patiently outside the walls of this house while they pretended the rest of the world didn't exist. For a moment, neither spoke.

Then Ilya groaned and dropped backward onto the mattress dramatically, throwing one arm over his eyes. "No."

The response was so immediate that Shane laughed. "I have to go."

"No."

"Ilya."

"No."

The mattress dipped as Shane shifted closer. He could see the exact moment genuine disappointment settled over Ilya. It wasn't dramatic. It wasn't manipulative. It was simply honest.

For all the progress they'd made today, for all the conversations and reassurances and promises to try, neither of them wanted this part.

Leaving still sucked.

"You'll see me in an hour."

The arm moved just enough for one blue eye to appear.

"That is long time."

"We are literally playing each other."

"You will be wearing wrong jersey."

Shane snorted.

"That's your concern?"

"It is terrible jersey."

"It's the Montreal Voyageurs. We're at the top of the league. We're going to the playoffs this season.."

"It is ugly. Terrible colors"

"It absolutely is not."

"It is."

The argument was ridiculous. Both of them knew it, but neither cared. Because arguing about hockey jerseys was easier than acknowledging the uncomfortable truth sitting underneath everything. Shane was leaving. Not even for very long, but leaving all the same.

Eventually he pushed himself upright. The movement seemed to break whatever spell had settled over the room. The moment his weight shifted away, Ilya's hand immediately closed around his wrist.

Not enough to stop him, just enough to delay him. Shane looked down.

For a second neither spoke. The vulnerability in Ilya's expression touched him harder than any grand declaration ever could.

Yesterday, Shane would have thought it was clinginess. Today he knew better. Ilya wasn't trying to keep him there. He was checking. Making sure. One last confirmation before Shane walked out the door. The realization made something ache inside his chest.

Slowly, Shane threaded their fingers together. "I'll see you at the arena."

Dark eyes searched his face.

"The arena."

"And after."

A small pause. "After." The tension eased fractionally. Not disappearing. Loosening just enough.

Shane lifted their joined hands and pressed a quick kiss against Ilya's knuckles. The surprise on his face was immediate and honestly a little hilarious.

The great Ilya Rozanov, terror of the NHL, looked completely blindsided.

Shane smiled.

"See?"

"What?"

"You will survive me leaving for a few hours."

Ilya stared.

Then narrowed his eyes.

"I have not survived anything yet."

The smile widened despite himself.

"You're impossible."

"Da."

This time the answer came with a smile.

A real one.

And somehow that made walking out the door a little easier.

Eventually, reality won.

Neither of them wanted it to.

Shane had managed to get as far as putting his shoes on before realizing he was being followed.

At first, he hadn't thought much of it. Ilya had come downstairs with him while he grabbed his jacket from the back of a dining room chair. Then he'd wandered into the kitchen while Shane rinsed out his coffee mug. Then he'd followed him into the foyer while he checked his phone and answered another increasingly irritated text from Hayden.

By the time Shane reached the front door, Ilya was still there.

Watching, hovering. Pretending he wasn't doing either.

Shane slipped his phone into his pocket and leaned back against the door, crossing his arms over his chest. "Are you escorting me out?"

Ilya frowned immediately. "No."

"Really."

"Da."

Shane raised an eyebrow. For a moment, neither moved. Then Ilya looked away.

"You've followed me through three rooms."

"It was coincidence. I have to leave soon too."

"And you had to leave while being so close to me?"

"A very unfortunate coincidence."

Shane laughed. The sound echoed through the foyer.

Something warm flickered across Ilya's face at the noise. Not amusement, but relief. Like every laugh Shane gave him was still being catalogued as evidence that everything was okay.

The realization hit Shane right in his chest, harder than expected. Yesterday, that would've scared him. Today, it just made his chest ache, he would miss him- even though they'd be in the same building together, neither would be able to just talk or touch each other.

He stepped closer, closing most of the distance between them. "It'll be fine."

The words slipped out before he could stop them.

Immediately, Ilya's eyes snapped back to his. Shane saw it then.

The tiny shift, the almost imperceptible relaxation of his shoulders.

The way his jaw unclenched, the way he exhaled. Like he'd been holding his breath.

Not because he didn't believe Shane. Because some deeply damaged part of him still expected people to leave.

"I know," Ilya said quietly. The words sounded honest. That was the difference. A few weeks ago, he would've said them while clearly not believing them.

Now? Now he was trying.

The realization settled warmly somewhere beneath Shane's ribs.

Growth, real growth. No guilt trips, or manipulation. No desperate attempt to keep him there by force.

Ilya wanted him to stay. Desperately, but he was letting him go.

Shane wasn't sure he'd ever seen anything more impressive.

The thought must have shown on his face because Ilya narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "What?"

"Nothing."

"You are looking at me strange."

"I'm not."

"Christ, Hollander. You are so boring."

Shane grinned at that. "Such an asshole." he said softly, bringing his hand to cradle the best of

"You are smiling."

Shane sighed dramatically. "I hate that you notice everything."

Ilya's expression softened. "No." His hand came up, brushing briefly against the back of Shane's neck. "You don't."

The touch lingered for only a second, then disappeared. But somehow that felt more intimate than half the things they'd done in the last twenty-four hours.

Slowly, Shane leaned forward. The kiss was brief.

Not desperate. Not hungry, just warm touch.

When they separated, neither moved very far.

Foreheads touching, breathing the same air. For one impossible moment, Shane found himself wondering if this was what normal people felt like.

Not terrified or overanalyzing everything, not hiding to conform to what was socially acceptable.

Not waiting for disaster. Just... happy. The thought was interrupted by another text.

Hayden. Again.

Shane groaned.

Ilya looked deeply offended at Hayden for interrupting their last few minutes together.

"I think he may actually come here."

"How would he know where you are?"

Shane looked at him.

Ilya paused.

"We all have Life360 on our phones now. Its not activated, but we have the option in case something happens."

That wasn't reassuring.

Not even a little.

Laughing despite himself, Shane finally stepped backward and opened the door.

Cool evening air immediately rushed inside.

For a second neither moved.

Then Shane stepped outside. And Ilya stayed where he was.

This was now a different dynamic. No chasing, no panic.

No last minute emotional breakdowns.

Just trust- Ilya needed to trust that Shane would come back to him. It was all new still. The kind of trust they were still learning, The kind neither of them were very good at.

But they were trying.

"See you in an hour."

Ilya leaned against the doorway. "You better."

Shane smiled. Then turned and headed toward the waiting car. He didn't look back. Mostly because he knew exactly what he'd find. Ilya standing there, watching him leave.

But letting him go anyway.

The second Shane opened the back passenger door, Shane pulled out his phone to call Hayden. Not a greeting, not a hello.

Just immediate suffering. "Oh, you owe me big time. Do you know how much I had to cover for you today?"

Shane blushed, he felt like he was being scolded by a parent. "Sorry?"

Hayden sighed. Long and hard.

"Are you okay? You can't just leave like that." The accusation was immediate.

Shane blinked. "I am fine. Heading back to the hotel right now."

"You should have touched base with us last night."

"I don't understand the problem."

"The problem," Hayden informed him as the car pulled away from the curb, "is that you have a group of people looking out for you and we worry when you do unpredictable things. You're the sane one in this whole place and when you start going off script we lose our heads."

A laugh escaped before Shane could stop it.

Hayden pointed immediately. "There. That."

"What?"

"That laugh."

"What about it?"

"I don't like it." Shane was still smiling. Which apparently wasn't helping.

Hayden groaned again. "I knew this would happen."

"What would happen?"

"You start having sex and all of a sudden we now have to parent you and make sure you're being safe. Might be good for Hunter and Rose, but I'm too young for this."

Shane looked out the window, Boston rolled past outside. For a moment, he considered denying it.

Instead he surprised himself.

"I'm happy, Hayd. I think I'm really happy right now."

Hayden's breath hitched over the phone. The answer seemed to catch Hayden off guard.

Because it was true.

That was the strange thing.

Nothing was fixed.

Nothing was magically healed.

The tracker still happened.

The lies still happened.

The fear still existed.

But for the first time, Shane could see the person behind all of it.

The broken, terrified person trying desperately not to become the worst version of himself.

The silence stretched.

Finally Hayden sighed.

"Then I'm happy for you, Holz. I really am but I'm just looking out for you."

"Thanks."

"Plus, you do play better after sex. Everyone knows."

"Oh God! Hayden!."

Hayden cackled over the phone. Then, after a moment: "Are you okay?"

The question landed differently than it would've yesterday.

Shane thought about it. Really thought about it.

The breakdown.

The panic.

The mate conversation.

The hours in bed.

The promises.

The fear.

The hope.

Everything.

Then he smiled softly.

"Yeah."

For the first time in a very long time, the answer felt honest.

"Yeah. I think I am."

Back at the house, the silence felt different. Not empty anymore.

Just quiet.

Ilya stood in the kitchen for a long moment after the door closed. The house still smelled like Shane. Vanilla. Honeysuckle. The faint trace of his shampoo lingering in the air.

A coffee mug sat beside the sink. The blanket they'd shared was still twisted on the couch.

Little pieces of evidence. Proof. Normally, this would've been the point where the panic started, the obsessive thoughts.

The need to call. To text. To confirm that he was okay, to make absolutely sure Shane hadn't changed his mind during the drive.

Instead, Ilya found himself smiling.

Small.

Private.

A little disbelieving.

Because Shane was gone.

And somehow everything still felt okay.

Not good or perfect. But okay.

His phone buzzed. The smile widened immediately.

Shane.

Shane- I managed to calm Hayden down.

Ilya laughed. Actually laughed. Then typed back.

IGR- Have you?

The response came less than ten seconds later.

Shane- Probably.

The smile lingered. Warm. Dangerous. Wonderful.

For the first time since Shane walked out the door, the house didn't feel empty anymore.

For the first time in years, getting ready for a game felt easy. No alcohol, no pills.

No staring at his phone every thirty seconds. No wondering if Shane would answer.

No wondering if Shane would discover everything he'd done over the past three years. No wondering if he'd gone too far.

Just routine.

He'd shower, put on a charcoal suit that Shane had complimented when they had to grab clothes from his closet. He blasted Eminem during the drive to the arena, getting into the right headspace to play. The realization hit halfway to the arena.

He wasn't cured. He wasn't fixed or suddenly healthy.

But Shane had left. And Ilya had survived.

That felt important.

The arena had the hyped energy that it usually had when they were playing Montreal. He had done the pregame interviews, of course he'd been asked about Shane. They were getting ready for warmups but he needed to talk to Shane. Of course that would be hard. They were surrounded by their respective teammates.

Everybody moving, everybody talking with purpose. The familiar chaotic energy wrapped around him the second he entered the building.

Tonight it barely registered.

His phone buzzed.

The smile appeared automatically.

Shane.

Shane- Made it.

Three simple words.

They somehow felt better than any drug he'd ever taken.

IGR- Good.

Shane- That's all I get?

IGR- I am busy professional athlete.

Ilya stood in the locker room, his heart pounding in his chest, his body humming with a familiar, dangerous energy. The game against Montreal was in an hour, and he was already wound tight, his muscles coiled like a spring. He pulled out his phone, his fingers moving over the screen with a mind of their own.

IGR- I wish you were here. I could use your... calming presence.

He hit send, watching as the the delivered tick turned into 'read'. He waited, his heart pounding in his chest, his body trembling with the effort of not moving. The three dots appeared, then disappeared. Then, they appeared again.

Shane- I wish I was too. But... I'm there in spirit. What do you need?

Ilya smiled, a small, satisfied smile that felt like a victory. He looked around the locker room, ensuring he was alone. Then, he walked towards the back, to the sinks. He stood in front of the mirror, his reflection staring back at him, his eyes filled with a dark, hungry intensity. He reached down, his hands gripping the waistband of his hockey pants. He pulled, the fabric stretching, then giving way, the pants sliding as low as was indecently possible, show the trail of hair down his navel to his pubic bone.

He looked at himself in the mirror, his body hard, his muscles taut, his cock already half-hard at the thought of Shane. He reached down, putting his hand into his underwear, his hand very obviously brushing against the sensitive head. He took a picture, the flash blinding, the image capturing the raw, primal hunger in his eyes.

He sent it and waited, his heart pounding in his chest, his body trembling with the effort of not moving. The three dots appeared, then disappeared. Then, they appeared again.

Shane- Ilya... what are you doing?

Ilya smiled, a small, satisfied smile that felt like a victory. He knew Shane was blushing, was imagining him, hard, in the locker room, in front of the mirror. He knew Shane was turned on, was thinking of him, of them, of what they could be.

IGR- I'm just... giving you something to think about. Something to... to remember me by. Until tonight. Until the game. Until I see you.

He hit send, then pulled up his pants, his body still humming with desire, with anticipation. He was playing with fire. He knew it. But he didn't care. Not tonight. Not with Shane. Not with the man he loved.

He walked back to his spot, his body still trembling, his heart still pounding. He looked at his phone, at the last message from Shane.

Shane- You asshole! How can you do that to me right before the faceoff.

Then:

I'll be thinking of you too now, obviously.

Shane looked at the picture, his eyes wide, his cheeks flushing a soft, embarrassed pink. He was alone in the locker room, huddled in a corner by the sinks, his heart pounding in his chest. He had never sexted before. He had never even considered it. But here he was, looking at a picture of Ilya, looking as if carved from marble. He took a deep, shuddering breath, his

body trembling with a sudden, sharp desire. He looked around, ensuring he was alone. Then, he typed out a response, his fingers moving slowly over the screen.

IGR- I have an idea. A bet.

He hit send, the message disappearing into the digital void. He waited, his heart pounding in his chest, his body trembling with the effort of not moving. The three dots appeared, then disappeared. Then, they appeared again.

Shane- A bet? What kind of bet?

Ilya smiled, a small, satisfied smile that felt like a victory. He knew Shane was intrigued, was thinking of him, of them, of what they could be. He typed out a response, his fingers moving slowly over the screen.

IGR- If my team wins tonight, you have to stay at my house again. Like last night.

He hit send.

Shane- And if my team wins?

Ilya's heart skipped a beat. He hadn't thought of that. He hadn't thought of a scenario where Shane would win. He typed out a response, his fingers moving slowly over the screen.

IGR- You... you can ask anything of me. Anything you want. I will do it. No questions asked.

Message sent, he leaned back against the locker, his heart pounding in his chest, his body trembling with anticipation. He had just given Shane the power to ask for anything. And he had no idea what Shane would ask for. But he was ready. He was ready to give Shane anything. Anything he wanted.

The Uber had barely pulled away from the curb before Shane pulled out his phone.

For several seconds he simply stared at it.

The city moved around him in a blur of traffic lights and evening commuters. Boston was settling into rush hour. The streets were crowded. The sidewalks packed. The driver had some sports radio station playing quietly through the speakers.

Shane barely noticed any of it.

Instead, he scrolled through his contacts. Then pressed call.

The line rang twice. "Hey, kid."

Relief hit immediately. Scott always calmed him down.

Made everything feel a little more manageable.

"Hey."

There was a pause.

Then:

"You sound better."

Shane laughed softly.

"Is it that obvious?"

"Very much so. Everything good?"

The answer made something warm settle in his chest.

Outside the window, the city continued moving past. Shane rested his head against the cool glass, he could see the hotel a few blocks away.

For a moment neither spoke. Then Scott sighed dramatically.

"Okay."

"What?"

"Tell me everything."

Shane laughed. "I can't tell you everything."

"Then tell me the important part."

The smile slipped onto his face before he could stop it.

Scott immediately groaned.

"Oh no."

"What?"

"You're smiling."

Shane covered his eyes with one hand.

"I hate that everyone keeps saying that."

"Because everyone is right maybe? We want you happy kid, you're so highstrung all the time."

The smile refused to leave. No matter how hard he tried.

A few weeks ago he hadn't been sure he would ever feel normal again.

Now he was sitting in the back of an Uber smiling like an idiot.

Scott made a thoughtful sound. "You went back."

It wasn't a question. Shane looked out the window, the city lights blurring together.

"Yeah."

"And?" The single word held no judgment, just curiosity. Concern, friendship.

Everything Scott always seemed to offer without making a big deal about it.

Shane thought about how to answer. The problem was there wasn't a simple answer.

How did he explain today?

The panic.

The confession.

The crying.

The hours spent tangled together in bed.

The feeling of watching someone trust him enough to fall asleep.

The realization that Ilya wasn't just obsessed.

He was scared.

The answer came out quietly.

"It was good." The silence that followed stretched longer than expected.

Then Scott laughed, actually laughed. "That's it?"

"What?"

"Good?"

Shane smiled.

"It was."

"Jesus Christ."

"What?"

"You sound happy."

Because he did. Didn't he? The realization settled slowly. Like trying on a jacket that somehow fit perfectly. His mind was calm, not like the high alert-fight or flight mode that he had been operating under for the past few years.

Shane looked down at his hands.

"I think I am."

The confession felt bigger than it should have.

Scott immediately noticed.

"You think?"

Shane sighed.

"It's complicated."

"Of course it is."

A laugh escaped him. Because yes, of course it was.

Nothing involving him was ever simple. Nothing involving Ilya was ever simple.

Together? They were practically a natural disaster. The smile faded slightly. Not disappearing. Just softening. It was still worth it.

"I still don't know what we're doing."

"Relationship stuff?"

Shane groaned. "I hate that phrase."

Scott sounded delighted.

Shane hated him a little. "You're impossible."

"So I've been told."

The car slowed at a red light.

Shane watched pedestrians cross the street.

Normal people.

Living normal lives.

Not secretly dating rivals.

Not hiding omega status.

Not trying to untangle years of trauma.

Lucky bastards.

Scott's voice softened. "Do you trust him?"

The question caught him off guard. Not because he didn't have an answer.

Because he did. Immediately, completely. The answer arrived before he'd even finished thinking about it.

"Yeah." No hesitation. No uncertainty. Just the truth.

Scott hummed. "Okay."

The simplicity of the response surprised him.

"That's it?"

"What do you mean?"

"That's all you have to say?"

Scott laughed. "What else do I need to say? I want to meet him soon though."

Shane frowned. "I don't know."

"You trust him." The statement was matter-of-fact. Simple.

Like it solved something. Maybe it did. Scott continued. "You don't forgive him."

The certainty in his voice made Shane blink. "No."

"Good."

The response surprised him.

Scott sighed. "Forgiveness isn't a light switch, kid. Make him work for it."

The city rolled by outside.

Shane listened.

"People always act like you either forgive someone or you don't."

"Yeah."

"That's bullshit."

Shane smiled faintly.

That sounded exactly like Scott. "You can be angry and still love someone." The words settled heavily inside the car. "You can still be hurt."

A pause. "You can still trust them." Another pause. "You can even want a future with them."

Shane stared out the window. Something tight in his chest loosened. Because maybe that was it. Maybe he'd been looking at it wrong.

Maybe forgiveness wasn't the first step. Maybe it came later. After the work, after the rebuilding.

After the trust.

Scott spoke again.

"Do you know what you sound like right now?"

Shane immediately regretted asking.

"What?"

"Someone in love."

The silence was immediate. Total.

Scott burst out laughing. "Oh my God."

"Scott."

"You didn't even deny it."

"Scott."

"You didn't!"

Heat flooded his face. "Shut up."

The laughter only got worse.

By the time it finally stopped, Shane was smiling despite himself.

Outside, the hotel appeared ahead.

Scott's voice softened one final time.

"You sound good, Shane."

Not happy. Not fixed. Not even healed.

Good. Like someone who was finally beginning to breathe again.

The Uber pulled to the curb.

Shane looked up at the familiar entrance. Then smiled. "Yeah." For the first time in a long time, he meant it.

"Yeah. I think I am."

Hayden was waiting in the lobby. The second Shane walked through the doors, his friend narrowed his eyes.

Suspiciously, like a bloodhound catching a scent.

Shane sighed.

"What?"

"You look different."

The accusation came instantly.

"Different how?"

"I don't know. It's not just sex though."

The words sounded vaguely offensive. Shane rolled his eyes. "I'm allowed to be...happy."

"Are you?" Hayden fell into step beside him as they headed toward the elevators.

"Because last time I checked, you disappeared for most of the day."

"I was busy."

"Doing what?"

Shane pressed the elevator button. The doors opened.

He stepped inside, Hayden followed closely. The doors slid shut.

For a few seconds neither spoke. He felt Hayden lean down a bit closer to him, inconspicuously sniffing him.

Then Shane smiled despite himself.

Hayden saw it.

Immediately.

"Oh no."

"What?"

"You have Alpha scent all over you."

Shane leaned back against the wall.

Slowly.

Carefully.

He nodded.

The reaction was instant.

Hayden's entire posture changed.

Not relaxed.

But hopeful.

Like he'd been carrying a weight he didn't realize was there.

"Good."

The simplicity of the answer surprised him.

"No interrogation?"

"Oh, I desperately want to interrogate you. But you need a shower and a new scent patch."

Shane laughed.

The elevator climbed.

Hayden watched the numbers above the door.

The elevator doors opened.

For a moment neither moved.

Then Hayden clapped him once on the shoulder.

"Whatever happened today."

His voice was quiet.

Steady.

"Don't screw it up."

Shane's chest tightened. Because for the first time in a very long time, he actually wanted to get it right. "Yeah." The smile returned, small.

Private.

Hopeful.

"That's the plan."

Warmups should have felt normal.

They didn't.

Shane had spent years sharing ice with Ilya. Dozens of games, practices, tournaments, all-star appearances, media events, and international competitions. He knew exactly how the man moved. The angle of his stride. The way he rolled his shoulders before a faceoff. The habit of tapping his stick twice against the ice before receiving a pass.

None of that was new. What was new was the way his eyes kept finding him. Because the second he noticed himself doing it, he realized Ilya was doing exactly the same thing.

Boston spilled onto the ice several minutes after Montreal. The crowd roared. The arena lights reflected off helmets and plexiglass. Players scattered across the sheet, beginning their routines.

And somehow, despite the chaos, Shane spotted him immediately. The realization annoyed him.

Because it wasn't even difficult. Ilya emerged from the tunnel laughing at something one of his teammates said. Then his head turned. And locked onto Shane. Immediately. Like a compass needle finding north.

Like breathing, like instinct.

The smile that appeared on his face was small, private.

Shane's stomach flipped. Across the rink, Ilya's grin widened.

Shit. Without realizing it, Shane had unconsciously been slowly skating towards the Boston side of the rink, towards Ilya. Until JJ called him over to go through the line.

Shane looked away first.

It didn't help.

Shane stared at the messages, a furious blush spreading across his face.

Then typed back quickly for a few minutes then put his phone away. He needed to get his head focused.

The game itself was vicious. Exactly what everyone expected from Montreal and Boston.

Every hit was solid, every inch of ice earned. By the middle of the second period, Shane had been checked into the boards three separate times, but only by Ilya.

From how the crowd had roared, one would think that it would have laid Shane out for the rest of the game, but it was mostly noise. Other than the jostle, Shane hadn't felt a blow.

Shane knew it. Ilya knew it. The smug grin he'd flashed afterward confirmed it.

Asshole.

Montreal answered with a goal late in the second. Boston tied it midway through the third. The tension inside the arena became electric. With less than four minutes remaining, Boston broke through. The puck found the back of the net. The crowd exploded. The arena shook. And just like that, Montreal was chasing. They pulled the goalie, pressed harder.

Created chances. Nothing. When the final horn sounded, Boston had won by one.

Shane hated losing. Always had. Tonight, though? It was worse because he had wanted to impress Ilya. wanted to show him why he hid being an omega for a chance to play this game that he loved so much.

Because as players gathered for the handshake line, a familiar pair of blue eyes met his.

And immediately lit up. The bastard looked delighted. Not because Boston had won. Well. Not only because Boston had won.

Because Shane had lost the bet.

Ilya practically floated into the locker room. The victory was nice.

Beating Montreal was always great.

Beating Shane was even better.

Not because of hockey. Because of what would come after, later tonight.

His phone buzzed in his pocket.

The smile that had been living on his face since warmups returned immediately.

Probably Shane.

Probably already complaining.

Probably pretending he wasn't secretly pleased.

The screen lit up.

His smile disappeared.

Chastnyy Sledovatel.

Six missed calls.

His brow furrowed. He recognized the number. The former investigator.

The one he'd fired after the tracker disaster. The man who enabled one of the biggest mistakes of Ilya's life. The phone buzzed again. Then immediately again. Around him, teammates laughed and talked and peeled off equipment. Ilya stared at the screen. Something unpleasant settled low in his stomach. The third call came through.

This time he answered. "Da?"

The voice on the other end sounded older than he remembered. Tired, nervous. "Mr. Rozanov."

Ilya's expression darkened immediately. "What do you want?"

A pause. Then: "I have information."

Ilya continued unlacing a skate. "I am not interested."

"You should be." The certainty in the man's voice made him stop.

Slowly, Ilya stood. Around him, nobody paid attention.

The investigator continued. "You made me a very rich man."

That wasn't a compliment, it sounded guilty. The feeling in Ilya's stomach worsened.

"What information?"

Another pause. Then: "I spent months trying to understand what happened." The man's voice dropped lower. "Trying to understand how my team failed."

Ilya grabbed his phone tighter.

Without a word, he walked from the locker room.

The hallway outside was quiet.

Empty.

The door closed behind him. "What did you find?"

The answer came immediately. "Money."

Ilya froze. His pulse accelerated.

"What?"

"We traced transfers." The investigator sounded grim. "Payments."

Every instinct inside Ilya sharpened. "To who?"

"The doctor." Silence. Cold.

Absolute. Morozov.

The one who had implanted the tracker. The one who had sworn confidentiality.

The one who had insisted everything was secure. The one who had disappeared shortly after the payment went through.

Ilya felt something dark and ugly begin to unfold inside his chest.

The investigator continued. "There were deposits." A pause. "Several."

"From who?" The answer took too long. Far too long. Finally: "Christopher Hill."

Everything stopped. "And I traced where he received money from. His own breathing. The noise from the arena. All of it.

Gone.

Ilya stared at the opposite wall. Not seeing it. Christopher Hill. The name echoed through his head. The investigator spoke again.

"We found more."

Ilya's voice sounded strange to his own ears. "What more?"

"The trade request." A long silence. Then: "It wasn't about hockey."

Ice flooded his veins.

"He specifically requested Montreal."

The words almost made him fall to the floor. This had all been planned?

Controlled.

Precise.

Brutal.

"He forfeited nearly half his remaining contract value." Another pause. "He was willing to lose millions to get there." Shane. The realization hit instantly. Not Montreal.

It had been to get to Shane.

The investigator didn't need to say it. Both of them understood. The hallway suddenly felt too small, too warm. too difficult to breathe inside. He needed to get to Shane. Needed to make sure he was okay, safe.

The investigator exhaled heavily.

"There is more."

Ilya's jaw clenched.

"Tell me."

"I can't."

Danger entered his voice immediately.

"You can."

"No." The answer came surprisingly firm. "We need to meet."

The silence that followed stretched.

Long.

Uncomfortable.

Then:

"In Russia, not Moscow though. We need to meet in St. Petersburg."

Ilya's eyes narrowed.

"What?"

"There are things I don't trust over the phone."

The investigator sounded genuinely frightened now.

Not cautious.

Frightened.

And somehow that was worse.

"Come to Petersburg."

The request hung between them.

Heavy, unwelcome. Terrifying. "There are things you need to know about Christopher Hill and how everything developed."

Another pause.

Then, very quietly:

"And about Shane."

The line went silent. For several seconds, neither spoke. Ilya stared down the empty hallway. His victory suddenly forgotten. The bet forgotten. The game forgotten.

Somewhere inside the locker room his teammates were celebrating. Somewhere else in the building Shane was probably waiting to collect on their wager.

For the first time all day, unease crawled beneath his skin. Not panic.

Not yet.

Something colder.

Something sharper.

The feeling that the story wasn't over.

The feeling that he'd only just found the beginning.

Slowly, Ilya lowered the phone from his ear.

His reflection stared back at him from the dark screen.

And for the first time since Shane had walked back into his life, he felt afraid again.

For several minutes after the call ended, Ilya remained standing in the hallway.

The phone felt strangely heavy in his hand.

Christopher Hill.

The doctor.

Money.

Montreal.

The words continued circling through his head.

None of it made sense.

At least, not completely.

Enough pieces fit together to make him uneasy. Enough pieces fit together to make him want answers.

But not enough pieces fit together to understand why.

His phone was already in his hand before he realized what he was doing.

Shane.

The contact sat at the top of his messages.

Without thinking too hard about it, he typed.

IGR- Meet me at player parking lot after media.

The response came less than thirty seconds later.

Shane- This is kind of a prize for the both of us so doesn't that mean I won too?

Despite everything, a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.

IGR- Yes, you did.

Shane-Then why are you ordering me around?

IGR- Because I am winner.

Shane-That's not how bets work.

IGR- I disagree.

A pause.

Then: **Shane-** Give me twenty minutes.

The knot in Ilya's chest loosened slightly.

Twenty minutes. Enough time to see him. Enough time to decide whether he should say anything. Enough time to figure out if he was overreacting.

The locker room felt louder when he returned.

The celebration was winding down. Players were changing. Reporters were being filtered through. The familiar post-game routine had resumed. Ilya barely noticed any of it. His thoughts remained fixed on Russia. On money trails. On Christopher fucking Hill.

The waiting became unbearable.

Fifteen minutes later, Shane called instead of texting. He heard as he explained that his coach put the team on lockdown immediately. The conversation lasted less than three minutes. By the end of it, his mood had somehow gotten worse. A rookie had shown up hungover. Again. This time he'd taken a nasty hit during the game and the coaching staff had apparently decided they were done being patient. Team lockdown.

Mandatory recovery meetings. Curfew checks. Nobody leaves. Nobody disappears. Nobody makes the organization look stupid. They would fly back together in the morning.

Ilya pinched the bridge of his nose. Of course. Of *fucking* course.

The timing was almost impressive. A few moments later, Shane's text arrived.

Shane- I'm sorry.

IGR- Not your fault sweetheart.

He watched as the text bubbles start and stop several times.

Shane- wow.

IGR- Don't be so boring, Hollander. Get used to me calling you sweet names.

Shane- Ok.

Another message appeared.

Shane- Kinda pissed that our plans are getting delayed.

Ilya stared at the screen. Oddly enough, disappointment wasn't the strongest emotion. Relief might have been.

Because now he didn't have to decide whether to tell him. Didn't have to decide how much. Didn't have to watch concern appear in Shane's eyes after everything they'd survived over the last two days.

And for the first time in his life, Ilya wanted facts before he acted.

IGR- I'll fly out to you on your next few days off.

Shane- Really? I'd really like that.

The simple certainty of it settled something inside him.

Soon.

The word felt safe, reliable. Something neither of them had trusted for a very long time.

The decision was made before he reached his driveway. The moment the front door closed behind him, he opened his laptop. Flights.

He'd have to land in Moscow but a few minutes later the charter flight to St. Petersburg would take off. He needed to leave in two hours to catch the first flight.

Perfect.

His finger hovered over the booking confirmation for less than a second.

Then he clicked it. Done. The email arrived immediately.

A strange calm settled over him. Movement, action.

Answers. He could work with those.

The uncertainty had been worse.

His phone rang once, twice.

Three times. Before his coach answered. "Rozanov."

"Coach."

A pause. Then: "What happened?"

Because coaches always knew. The answer came easily. "There is family emergency in Russia."

Not entirely a lie. The silence stretched.

Then: "When do you leave?"

"Morning."

Another pause, longer this time. Finally: "Get everything handled, then. Let me know if we can help in any way. Hope you can hurry back."

Relief loosened his shoulders.

"Thank you."

"Be ready when you get back."

"I will."

The call ended. The house fell silent again.

For a long moment, Ilya sat alone in the darkness.

The flight confirmation remained open on his screen. Moscow.

Less than twelve hours away.

His phone buzzed.

A message from Shane.

Shane- Text me when you get back to your place. A smile appeared immediately.

Shane was probably falling asleep waiting for the response.

The thought was strangely endearing.

IGR- Go to sleep, Solnyshko. I'll call you tomorrow.

Three dots appeared.

Shane- You too. If I need rest, you need it too.

Ilya stared at the message. Then looked toward the darkness outside the windows. He only ever have his mother and Svetlana worry about whether he slept enough or not. Whether he was taking care of himself.

Tomorrow, he would tell Shane. Once he understood what he was telling him, once he knew how worried he should be.

Once he had facts instead of fear. For tonight, he wanted Shane to sleep. He wanted one more night where neither of them were afraid. The thought lingered long after he shut off the lights.

Long after he climbed into bed. Long after exhaustion finally began pulling him under.

Tomorrow, he would board a plane. Tomorrow, he would find answers. Tomorrow, he would call Shane. And somehow, for the first time in years, that promise felt certain.

Chapter End Notes

And there it is.

For everyone who has been begging for softness, domesticity, cuddling, communication, emotional growth, and these two acting like actual people instead of catastrophes in hockey gear... congratulations. You won.

For everyone who got comfortable...



A lot of you caught little details over the last few chapters that seemed insignificant at the time. Some of those details may be becoming important sooner than expected.

Also, can we take a moment to appreciate that Ilya survived Shane leaving the house for a few hours without committing a felony? Character growth.

I'd love to hear everyone's thoughts and theories after this one. What do you think the investigator found? What was Christopher Hill hiding? And how worried should we be about a sudden trip to Russia?

(Answer: yes.)

Also, a little housekeeping note: over the next few updates I'll be slowly going back through earlier chapters to clean things up. Some of you have pointed out a few continuity issues, and honestly, I think I've found a much better rhythm and voice as this story has gone on. I've gotten better at translating the absolute chaos in my head into actual words on a page, so there will be small edits, tweaks, and continuity fixes sprinkled throughout the older chapters. Nothing major will change, but if you notice a sentence here or a scene there getting polished up, that's why.

Thank you all for the comments, kudos, bookmarks, and emotional support. You have no idea how much they motivate me to keep writing. 

Chapter 28: Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Hello, friends. 💙

First things first: thank you for the comments on the last chapter as always-love y'all. A few of you were suspiciously good at catching details I thought I was being subtle about. I see you. 🙄

This chapter is... a lot.

Please mind the tags and take care of yourselves. We're diving headfirst into Ilya's past, his family, his choices, and the consequences of all of them. He's not okay. In fact, he may be the least okay he's ever been.

As always, thank you to my amazing beta reader for helping me wrangle the chaos in my head into actual words.

Now come suffer with me. ❤️

Chapter Notes

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

The notification from the encrypted messaging app buzzed against the nightstand at 3:17 AM. Ilya, who had been packing his bag since he'd gotten home from the arena, did not startle. He simply turned his head, the movement slow and heavy with a bone weary fatigue. The light from the screen was too bright- everything was filling him with a sense of impending doom.

It was an email from Anatoly, the ex PI. The message was terse, devoid of the usual Cyrillic pleasantries.

Rozanov. New data. I will have a car waiting for you in your city. We need to meet immediately when you land.

Your city. Moscow. When he was 10 years old, his mother had tried to leave with him. They'd made it as far as St. Petersburg, waiting to meet up with her brother, before the police

caught them. A runaway omega with her alpha son in a country like Russia. They'd both been so hopeful for a few days-now Ilya could see the impossibility of their escape. The distinction was a spike of ice in his gut. Anatoly was based in Prague. If he was coming to St. Petersburg, it was because the trail had led back to Russia. The news must be big.

Ilya settled into the reclining seat, pulling out the hoodie Shane had borrowed and inhaling the sweet scent. He typed a reply, his fingers stiff. When?

Flight lands Petersburg, 14:30. The car will take you to Vyborg where we'll meet.

He would be missing the next 2 games at the very best. He pulled up the schedule for Montreal and saw that he and Shane would both have an off day that they could spend time together if he caught the right flight next month. A whole 28 days without seeing his omega. He looked back down at the NHL calendar and mapped out the next few months for when they could see each other. The off season couldn't come soon enough. Montreal had a back-to-back against Florida, then a three-day break. Shane would be exhausted, buried in video review and physio. Boston again was after that. Then a West Coast road trip. He scanned forward, weeks bleeding into each other. There was a potential window. A tiny, fragile crack of light. After Montreal's game in Vancouver, before Ilya's own game in Seattle. If flights aligned perfectly, if no one got injured, if Shane wanted to... they could steal thirty-six hours. In a month. A full, grinding, desolate month.

He opened up a new email and want write to Shane but decided against it. He needed all the information before seeing what he told Shane. No need to worry him or cause him stress. It sounded like agony. He wondered if Shane would ever entertain the option of playing for Boston when his contract was up. Would they ever be able to play on the same team? Where would they end up? All he knew that this would be a discussion that they'd need to have soon-it was impossible for them to have so little time together. He had enough pull with the league but that any team would bend over backwards to have him, or even better both of them in one team.

A visceral need, sharp as a cramp, seized him. To call. To hear Shane's voice, sleep-rough and confused. To say *Ya skuchayu po tebe* until the words lost all meaning. His thumb hovered over Shane's number, before he clenched his hand into a fist, the nails biting into his palm. The pain was a grounding wire. Shane was asleep, his omega needed rest. He'd ensured that himself. Their last night...plus he shouldn't be making calls on the plane.

He hadn't let him sleep. He'd traced the lines of Shane's face in the dark, committed every sigh, every shift of weight, to a new and desperate memory. Sleep was a thief he refused to accommodate.

And then, cruelly, morning had come and life pulled them apart again. He had to think on a solution. Ilya didn't think he wanted Shane to continue playing hockey after they were mated, but that was the more baser instinct. He couldn't really see asking Shane to give up something that he loved so much, so Ilya would have to figure out a way to fix that.

The plane cut through the night sky over the Atlantic. Ilya ignored the plush seat, standing instead at the small window, watching the endless black below. The meeting with Anatoly had been as clinical and grim as he'd feared. He landed in St. Petersburg and as promised, he had a driver waiting for him by the doors-but also two armed security guards.

He climbed into the car and checked his phone. It would be seven in the morning in Montreal. He could technically call, but hopefully Shane would be sleeping still. He wished he still had access to the camera's in his apartment. Just to see him for a few seconds. With one quick phone call he could, but they had worked so hard to build trust again that he didn't want to break that without a better cause than that he missed Hollander.

They drove for about 30 minutes, and Ilya noticed that they had entered Vyborg, stopping in front of a non-descript building. He was escorted out of the car and walked into the building and the hostess escorted him towards the back.

"Thank you for meeting me, Mr Rozanov," Anatoly had said, sipping tea in a back room of the members-only club that smelled of old leather and older money. "How we left things never sat right with me, so to make up for the errors we had I did some more research. I mean, a man like Hill, with such a mediocre career, no prior problems. It was all just strange. Then we started to dig up things. It's about the financing. Hill was traded for a bargain. He was not a rich man. His operation- the kidnapping, the house where Mr. Hollander was taken to, the drugs, it had a patron. The money was laundered through a shell corporation registered in Cyprus. We traced the signatures."

He'd slid a grainy, printed photograph across the table. It showed a man in his late fifties, getting into a black Mercedes outside a steel-and-glass office building in Moscow. The face was familiar to Ilya from newspaper political sections and, more distantly, from his father's bitter, drunken rants about powerful men who looked down on him.

"Dmitri Vasin," Ilya said, the name tasting like ash.

"He is an associate of your father's... Seems like when Vasin got into some trouble with underaged omega's 8 years ago, your father covered it up. Vasin owes a great debt to your father. A major one, enough to exchange for several favors throughout the years. Including," Anatoly paused, "blocking your mothers family from being able to see you."

Ilya frowned. The only living family left was an uncle and some cousins from his mothers side. Everyone else had passed away or he just didn't know about them. Russian culture had been to leave the Omega's family behind once mated but his mother did make an effort to keep in touch with them. He remembered going to his grandparents funerals. Some quick conversations with aunts or cousins.

The connection was a sickening, logical spiral. Chris's 'patron' wasn't just random. And he was connected to the world Ilya had been born into, the world he'd fought his entire life to escape.

"Vasin viewed Chris as an unstable ally to return a favor, to pay off the debt. He was not pleased with the attention the incident brought. But he is a businessman. He sees opportunity in the aftermath. Specifically, in the omega who survived and the alpha who burned his asset to the ground. He is... curious. He has made inquiries."

"What kind of inquiries?"

"About Shane Hollander's had attracted the notice of Grigori Rozanov. What can a Canadian hockey player be of such interest to a retired Russian police chief. Imagine the shock when he found out a connection to a doctor in the Omega community and what his son had done? About your... attachment. Money that you had sent for your fathers expenses was being used in part to pay off Hill. Moronov wasn't as discrete as one would expect him to be." Anatoly's gaze was flat. "You are a high-profile Russian asset. Shane Hollander is a high-profile

Canadian asset with a secret. This is not just personal for him. It is a potential investment. Or a potential lesson.”

Ilya sat back in his seat with a cold, clear understanding. The nightmare wasn't over. It had just put on a better suit. Shane had been targeted because of him. Shane had almost been raped because of the stupid choices he had made. He had to stay in Russia, use his own name and his father's tainted legacy as a shield. He had to be visible, draw Vasin's attention, keep it firmly on himself and away from Montreal. Away from Shane.

“Mr. Rozanov. One other thing.” Anatoly paused, as if trying to find words. “Your mother. Were you aware that she was seeking counseling? She was getting better. The pills that had been prescribed for her use...they were not what she had access to. We have the notes and tapes from her therapy sessions if you ever wanted to listen to them. But if that were my mother, and I had to make a bet, I would not believe she had willingly killed herself.”

The air in the private room, already thick with the scent of old smoke and dread, seemed to solidify in Ilya's lungs. It was no longer breathable. It was information, heavy and poisonous. Dmitri Vasin. His fucking father.

His mother's pills.

“I need the copies. Of everything,” Ilya said, his voice a low, vibrationless thing. Anatoly nodded, sliding a sealed envelope across the table. Ilya took it, the paper feeling like a live wire against his fingertips. He stood, the motion too sharp, and the two bodyguards by the door straightened. “The car will take you back to the airport. Your flight to Boston is in four hours.”

“I am not going to Boston.”

Anatoly's eyebrows lifted. “The schedule- ”

“Change it. I am staying in Russia. For a week. Maybe two.” The decision crystallized as he spoke, cold and absolute. He had to be the visible target. A Rozanov on Russian soil, flashing

his teeth in the media lights, was a far more interesting toy for a man like Vasin than an omega across an ocean. He would be the lightning rod.

He didn't wait for Anatoly's agreement. He turned and walked out, the guards falling into step behind him, a silent, grim procession through the hushed, opulent hallways. He didn't stop until he was outside, the door of the club shutting with a final, muffled thud behind him. The drivers stood by the car, waiting.

"Drive," Ilya commanded, his voice rough. "Anywhere. Just drive."

The city of Vyborg passed in a blur of grey stone and slush. He told the driver to stop outside a cramped, brightly lit convenience store that sold everything from vodka to electrical tape. "Wait here," he said, and got out, needing space that wasn't moving, that wasn't watched.

The store was overheated, the air smelling of fried dough and cheap cleaning fluid. He stood in an aisle staring at a shelf of batteries, seeing nothing. The envelope burned a hole in his inner jacket pocket. His mother's voice, on a tape. Her truth, held by a stranger. His fault. Shane's face, pale and terrified in a barren room. His fault. A powerful man with a debt to his father, now looking at Shane with calculating eyes. It had all been his fault for not thinking things through.

The walls of the store pressed in. The fluorescent lights buzzed like a swarm in his skull. He couldn't get enough air. He fumbled for the door handle and stumbled back out into the biting cold, gulping in deep, ragged breaths that seared his throat. He braced his hands on his knees, head down, fighting the dizzying rise of a panic that felt like freefall.

Protect him. You have to protect him. You promised.

But he was here, and Shane was there. An ocean away. He was one man. The old Ilya would have gotten on a plane, would have broken into Shane's apartment, would have installed new cameras, hired a ring of unseen guards. The old Ilya's protection was a cage. Shane had taught him that. The new Ilya, the one who was surviving now rather than healing, had to do it differently. He had to ask.

His fingers were numb, but he pulled his phone out. The first call was to the one person he trusted implicitly on the ice, and whose judgment off it he respected, even when it was blunt.

Marlow, his assistant captain in Boston, answered on the third ring. “Roz? Do you know what time it is?”

“I need a favor,” Ilya said, bypassing all greeting. The words tumbled out. “Is important. I need you to go to Montreal for a few days.”

A long pause. “Montreal? Are you drunk? We have a game in-”

“I know the schedule. This is more important than a game.”

“What the hell is in Montreal that’s more important than clinching the playoffs? Where are you?” Marlow’s voice was wary, confused.

Ilya closed his eyes. The truth was the only card he had left to play. “Hollander. Shane Hollander.” He forced the next words past the knot in his throat. “He is my mate. And I have... I have enemies. I am in Russia handling it, but I need eyes on him. I need an alpha there, someone I trust, to just... be a presence. To make sure he is safe until I can get back.”

The silence on the other end was profound. Ilya could picture Marlow’s face- the shock, the slow dawning of a hundred puzzle pieces clicking into place. The rivalry, the intensity, the strange disappearances.

“Jesus, Ilya,” Marlow finally breathed. “Your *mate*? Hollander? Is he...?”

“He is an omega,” Ilya confirmed, the secret feeling both terrifying and relieving to share. “It is not public. It cannot be. For his safety, this has to stay secret. Please, Marlow. I am asking. Not ordering. I need your help.”

Another pause, then a resigned, gritty sigh. “Alright. Alright, you crazy bastard. I’ll call the coach, say it’s a family emergency. Which I guess it is. Text me his address and his schedule. I’ll be on the next flight.”

The relief was so acute it felt like a blow. “Spasibo.”

“Just don’t get yourself killed in Russia. The team needs you.”

Ilya hung up. One layer of protection. But not enough. Vasin was connected, ruthless. He needed someone who understood the shadows, who knew the world Shane had been dragged into. The next call tasted like bile, but it needed to be done. He scrolled and pressed the name he hated to see.

Scott Hunter answered with a guarded, “Hello?”

“Hunter. This is Ilya Rozanov. I need you to go to Montreal,” Ilya said, repeating the script, though it felt filthier this time. Hunter was Shane’s friend. He was the healthy alpha, the one with the pregnant omega mate, the living benchmark of everything Ilya had failed to be. “Shane is in potential danger. I am... dealing with the source. But I need someone he trusts to be with him. To stay with him. I have my teammate Marlow going as well, for an alpha presence, but Shane... he will listen to you.”

“Danger,” Hunter repeated, his voice hardening. “What kind of danger? Is this more of your shit, Rozanov? Because if you’ve dragged him back into-”

“It is my shit!” Ilya snapped, the control fraying. “It is my past, my family, my mess. It found him because of me. I am trying to fix it! But I cannot be in two places. I am calling you because I know you care him. I am calling you because I am desperate. Please. Go to him. Do not let him out of your sight. I am begging you.”

The word hung in the static-filled air between continents. Begging. Ilya Rozanov did not beg.

Hunter was silent for a long moment. “Where are you?”

“Russia.”

A sharp intake of breath. “God damn it. Alright. I’ll go. Kip will understand. But Rozanov... you explain this to him. You tell him everything. No more secrets.”

“I will. I promise.”

He ended the call. Two alphas. Two guards. It was a plan. It was logistics. But it was noise. Beneath it, a raw, screaming need was tearing him apart. He needed to hear his voice. Just for a second. Just to know he was still real, still there, still *his* before the fear swallowed everything.

He dialed Shane’s number. It rang, and rang, and each tone was a hammer blow to his sternum. *Pick up. Please, solnyshko, pick up.*

A sleep-thickened, confused voice answered. “...Ilya?”

The sound of it unraveled him. He leaned his forehead against the cold brick wall of the store, eyes squeezed shut. “Shane. Where are you?”

“Home,” Shane mumbled, the sound of sheets rustling. “In bed. What’s... what’s wrong? It’s so early.”

Home. In bed. Safe. For now. Ilya’s breath hitched. “Listen to me. I need you to listen and not to panic. I am sending two people to you today. Marlow and Scott Hunter. They are going to stay with you. For a few days.”

“What? Why? Ilya, you’re scaring me.” Shane was awake now, the sleep replaced by rising alarm.

“I need you to trust me. I will explain everything, I swear on my life, but not now. Please. Let them in. Let them stay with you. Do not go anywhere alone.”

“Ilya, where are you?” Shane’s voice was sharp, cutting through the line.

“I had to come to Russia. Some... business with my father. It is more complicated than I thought. I will be here a few days. A week, maybe. No more.” The lie was ash in his mouth, but the truth would be too much to say over the phone.

“Russia? *No*. No, you can’t be there, not after... Ilya, come home. Please.” The plea was pure, undiluted fear. It mirrored his own.

“I am coming home. To you. This is me making sure of that. Do you really think I wouldn’t come back to you after we finally start to figure things out?” Ilya said, forcing his voice into a semblance of calm, a low, steady alpha rhythm meant to soothe. “This is me protecting what is mine. The only way I can from here. Do you trust me, Shane? Even a little?”

A choked sound, then a whisper. “Yes.”

That single word was a lifeline. It was everything. “Good. Marlow and Hunter will be there soon. Do what they say. I will call you when I can. Ya ochen' tebya lyublyu .”

Shane gave a huff. “What does that one mean?”

“I’ll will tell you when I see you soon.” He didn’t wait for a reply. He ended the call, sliding down the brick wall until he was sitting on the frozen pavement, the phone clutched in his white-knuckled hand. He dropped his head between his knees, his whole body trembling with the aftershock of the calls, the confession, the plea.

He had mobilized a defense. He had cast his net of protection from five thousand miles away. He had heard Shane's voice and planted the seed of a lie to keep him from shattering.

The old obsession had been a silent, controlling shadow. This new devotion was a roar, a series of brutal, calculated actions that left him exposed and utterly alone on a cold street in Russia. It felt like holding a live grenade with the pin already pulled, waiting for the moment he could throw himself on top of it to spare the one person who mattered.

He took one deep, shuddering breath, then another. The panic receded, not gone, but banked, transformed into a cold, hyper-focused resolve. He stood up, brushing the grit from his pants. He looked at the waiting car, then towards the east, where the real battle lay.

He had work to do.

Entering the high end nursing home was a struggle. The nurse had tried to warn him. 'It's not a good day. The memories... they come and go. Sometimes he's in the past. He gets confused, aggressive.' Ilya had brushed past her, a man on a mission, armed with Anatoly's envelope and a need to look into the eyes of the man who had possibly condemned his mother. Had tried to take his mate away from him.

He hadn't expected a confession. He'd expected denials, rage, the usual labyrinth of lies. He hadn't expected the simple, horrifying clarity of dementia's unburdening.

'...made sure she took them all. The doctor, he understood. A grieving husband, a distraught omega... no one looked twice. It was cleaner this way, Aleksandr. Cleaner.'

Aleksandr. His uncle. His mother's older brother, who had died in a police raid a few years ago. In his father's crumbling mind, Ilya remembered being told they looked similar.

His father, propped up in a sterile bed, the room smelling of antiseptic and decay, had peered at him with milky, unfocused eyes. A slow, terrible smile had spread across his withered face. “Alexsander. You came! I told you if your family gave me a faulty Omega this would happen. She was becoming a problem. Talking to that therapist... about leaving. About taking my son. My asset. My legacy. But I at least am trying to do right by her now. We need to plan a proper funeral. She will be buried according to our customs and we won’t speak of this ever again.”

Ilya had to leave. The cold air of the afternoon hit Ilya’s sweat-dampened face like a physical slap. He braced himself against the rough brick wall beside the trash can, his body convulsing one last, dry heave that brought up nothing but acid and shame. The taste of bile was a cheap, familiar penance. His father’s words, slurred and matter-of-fact, looped inside his skull, a corrupted recording on endless playback.

Ilya had stood frozen, the envelope of his mother’s stolen peace feeling like a lead weight in his hand. He closed his eyes, remembering the bit he had managed to ask before he had to leave the room. “What did you do?” he’d asked, his voice barely a whisper.

“The pills. I switched them. The ones from the quack made her talk. The ones I gave her made her sleep. Forever. A tragedy.” His father had nodded, as if recounting a clever business deal. “The Rozanov name was preserved. No scandal. No runaway omega tarnishing my reputation. The boy stayed. He learned his place.”

A place built on a murder. A life built on a lie. Every memory Ilya had of his mother’s final months—her increasing quiet, her distant eyes, the way she’d sometimes hug him too tight as if memorizing the feel of him, reconfigured itself into something sinister. Not depression. Not a surrendering omega. A woman being systematically poisoned by the alpha who was supposed to protect her, erased for the crime of wanting freedom for her son.

The vomit had risen then, unstoppable. He’d stumbled from the room, a hand clamped over his mouth, the nurse’s concerned voice a distant echo, and made it to the trash can in the stark, tiled hallway before his body rebelled.

Now, shivering in the alley, the reality cemented itself, cold and absolute. Dmitri Vasin owed a debt to a murderer. The man who had looked at Shane with “interest” was the business associate of the man who had killed Ilya’s mother. The threads were no longer just connected; they were the same fucking thread, pulling tighter around everything Ilya loved.

He fumbled for his phone, his fingers clumsy with shock. He had to know Shane was safe. He had to hear it. The screen showed two new messages.

Marly- Landed. At his building. He let me in. Looks okay, just confused. Hunter's her too. We've got this.

Scott Hunter- I'm with him. He's safe. We're talking. He's scared. Call him when you can.

The relief was so profound it weakened his knees again. They were there. They were a barrier. For now. He leaned his head back against the brick, staring at the grey, indifferent sky. He's scared. Of course he was. Shane, who needed order, predictability, who had spent a lifetime building control, was now surrounded by it again- guards, secrets, an alpha across the world making terrifying decisions. The old Ilya would have reveled in this level of control. He was replicating the dynamics of fear, just with a different cast of jailers.

But what was the alternative? Leave him unprotected while he figured out how to remove the external threats? While the rot from his father's world seeped across the ocean?

His phone buzzed. A new email from Anatoly.

Mr. Rozanov. Tracking Vasin and his people. No action recently. Your visibility on the other hand is having an effect. He is watching you. Stay visible.

It would be nice if the night shift nurses that I've outsourced for tonight can say that he visited his old friend in the nursing home-wouldn't it be? Their shift starts this evening at 19:00. I particularly like how they leave the rooms so clean, no traces of messes from our dear old seniors.

He pushed himself off the wall. The physical sickness had passed, leaving a hollow, ringing calm in its wake. The grief and rage were still there, but they were being compressed, folded into a dense, cold core of purpose. He had two weapons now: a confession and a debt. His father's sin, and Vasin's obligation to the sinner.

He walked back to the waiting car, his steps measured. The driver glanced at his pale face in the rearview but said nothing. “The city center,” Ilya said, his voice flat. “Somewhere with photographers. A restaurant. A club. Somewhere I will be seen.”

“Yes, sir.”

The man who had burned Chris Hill alive in a shack to save Shane was still in him. That man had been fueled by a possessive rage. This new resolve was colder, clearer. It was not about possession. It was about eradication. He would burn down the entire rotten structure of his father’s legacy if it meant Shane could stand in the sunlight, safe.

This was all too much for him, but he would not back down. He would protect Shane, no matter who stood in the way.

The sterile quiet of the nursing home hallway felt like a held breath. The squeak of Ilya’s shoes was the only sound, a metronome counting down to an inevitable, violent measure. The door to Room 114 was just a slab of painted wood, but it felt like the entrance to a crypt he was about to desecrate. He pushed it open.

The room was a tableau of slow decay. The green glow of the heart monitor painted his father’s sunken face in ghastly relief. The old man’s eyes were open, and this time, they were not clouded by dementia’s fog. They were sharp, calculating, and utterly aware. They tracked Ilya’s entry with a weary, contemptuous triumph. It was as if God was permitting what was about to happen. Like He wanted Ilya to have the satisfaction of real vengeance.

“The prodigal son returns,” Grigori Rozanov rasped, his voice a dry leaf scraping stone. “Come to have another tantrum? Did you tire of the comfortable life in America?”

Ilya said nothing. He let the door sigh shut behind him, closing them in together. Words were done.

“You always were too emotional. Weak. Like her.” His father’s gaze was a physical probe, poking at old wounds. “It is why you cling to that... that thing in Montreal. That omega. He is a symptom of the sickness she put in you. Making you soft, weak.”

“You murdered her,” Ilya stated, his voice low and flat, a stone dropped into a still pool.

“I cured a problem,” Grigori corrected, his lips peeling back from yellowed teeth. “She was a leaking vessel, poisoning my legacy. Talking of leaving. Of taking you to become some... some soft Western pup.” He shifted slightly, a rustle of starch sheets. “And now you prove her failure. You run to him. You risk everything- your career, your name, your position, for a scent, for a moment of weakness. It is pathetic. How did you finally find out?”

Ilya took a step closer. The air grew colder. “You spoke to Vasin about him.”

A slow, malignant smile spread across the old man’s face. “Dmitri is a practical man. He understands investments. And liabilities. I merely pointed out that your... distraction... was affecting your value. That a focused Ilya Rozanov, unburdened by sentimental garbage, is a more valuable asset to everyone. To Russia. To the family name. He agreed that removing the distraction would be a wise favor. A father’s guidance, even from this bed, is still a powerful thing.”

The confession was not a slip of a fading mind. It was a boast. A final, twisted lesson in realpolitik from a man who viewed love as a tactical flaw and people as disposable assets. He had not just killed Ilya’s mother; he had, with a few whispered words, aimed a predator at Shane.

The last thread of Ilya’s restraint snapped.

It was not a roar, but a silence that swallowed the room. He moved, not with the calculated purpose of before, but with the terrifying, efficient violence of a predator unleashed. His hand shot out and ripped the glass pitcher of water from the bedside table. With a backhanded swing of shocking force, he brought it crashing across the side of his father’s head.

The sound was a sickening *crunch-thud*, glass splitting, water exploding across the pillow and wall. Grigori's head snapped to the side with a grunt of shock, a deep gash opening on his temple. Blood, shockingly vivid against the white linen, began to well and seep.

The old man's lucid eyes flew wide, not with fear, but with a kind of furious disbelief. "You-!"

Ilya didn't let him finish. He dropped the shattered pitcher and grabbed the front of his father's medical gown, hauling the frail body partway off the bed. The monitors screamed in protest, lines spiking. With his other hand, Ilya grabbed the metal bedpan from the nearby stand. It was cold, heavy, utilitarian.

"This is for her," Ilya growled, his voice a guttural thing from a deep, dark place.

He brought the bedpan down on his father's face.

The first blow smashed his nose with a wet, cracking pop. More blood sprayed, painting Ilya's knuckles, his wrist, flecking his own shirt. Grigori cried out- a short, choked sound of pure animalistic pain- and his hands came up, clawing weakly.

"This is for every lie," Ilya whispered, and struck again. The metal edge caught the old man's mouth, splitting his lip against his teeth, chipping a tooth with a tiny, sharp *click*. More blood, darker now, mixed with saliva.

"And this," Ilya said, his breath coming in harsh pants, his vision narrowing to the bloody ruin beneath him, "is for even *thinking* his name."

The third blow was to the forehead. A solid, blunt *thunk*. The clawing hands fell away. The furious light in his father's eyes glazed over, swimming with pain and a dawning, terminal understanding. He was not dealing with an angry son. He was facing the final, brutal consequence of a lifetime of tyranny.

Ilya dropped the bedpan. It clattered to the floor, its concave bowl now smeared with red. He released the gown, letting his father slump back, a broken doll against the blood-soaked pillow. But it wasn't enough. The rage was a living thing, demanding more.

He saw the medical tray. The scissors. Long, sharp, made for cutting bandages.

He seized them.

His father, through the blood and brokenness, saw them. A final, coherent terror flashed in his eyes. "Ilya... son..." he gurgled, the word- a bloody bubble on his lips.

It was the wrong word. It was the ultimate lie.

Ilya leaned over him. He didn't aim for the heart. That was too quick, too clean. He placed the point of the scissors low, just below the sternum. He met his father's fading gaze.

"You are no father of mine," Ilya said, each word a shard of ice.

And he leaned his weight into it.

The resistance was gruesome- a horrible, grating pop as the sharp tips pierced the abdominal wall, then a softer, wetter give as they sank deep. Grigori's body arched off the bed in a final, violent spasm, a raw, tearing scream ripped from his throat, cut short as the blades found something vital. Ilya twisted the handles, once, a brutal, grinding motion. A hot rush of blood and other fluids spilled over his hand, soaking the sheets, dripping onto the floor with a steady *pat-pat-pat*.

He held them there, watching the life drain from the eyes that had haunted him since childhood. The monitor's frantic shriek had become a single, flat, endless tone. The room was a charnel house. The coppery, visceral stench of blood filled the air, overwhelming the antiseptic. It was on the walls, the bedding, Ilya's hands, his clothes. Slowly, he pulled the

scissors free. They came out with a sick, sucking sound. He dropped them onto the bed beside the ruin that had been Grigori Rozanov.

He felt sick. Deep in his soul. This wasn't him, yet this was the third life he had taken. Alpha laws were odd. Would he face consequences? No, he had done it in the name of defending his omega. The fact that they were not bonded yet might be an issue, but not one that couldn't be solved with some well placed bribes. But the damage to his mental health might need to be looked into when things were settled.

The door opened.

The two male 'nurses' entered. They did not startle at the carnage. Their eyes, flat and professional, took in the scene: the splattered walls, the pooled blood on the floor, the grotesque still-life on the bed, the blood-soaked alpha standing in the center of it.

Without a word, they set to work. One went immediately to the shrieking monitor and silenced it, then began the methodical process of disconnecting leads and wiping down the equipment with strong disinfectant. The other approached the bed. He first carefully pried the bloody scissors from the sheets, wiped them clean with a cloth, and placed them back on the medical tray. Then, from his kit, he produced a large, absorbent pad and pressed it firmly against the gaping wound in the abdomen, staunching the last welling seep of blood. He worked with a butcher's efficiency, wrapping the torso in a clean, disposable sheet, containing the mess.

The first nurse was already mopping the floor with a powerful solution that cut through the blood and left a sharp, chemical smell in its wake. He gathered the blood-soaked bedding, the shattered pitcher, the stained bedpan, and placed everything into thick, black biohazard bags. He produced a spray bottle and a rag, and began wiping the blood spatter from the wall, from the bedside table. In minutes, the overt evidence of violence was being erased, replaced by the smell of bleach and order.

The nurse tending the body finally looked at Ilya. He gestured to a small, connected bathroom. "You need to clean up. We have a change of clothes for you. Your size."

Ilya moved numbly. In the bathroom, under the fluorescent light, he saw himself in the mirror. A stranger stared back, pale face flecked with blood, eyes hollow, clothes drenched in

gore. He stripped, letting the ruined garments fall in a heap. He scrubbed his hands, his arms, his face under scalding water, watching pink swirls circle the drain until the water ran clear. The scratches stung fiercely.

When he emerged, wearing the plain, dark trousers and sweater left for him, the transformation was nearly complete. The room was almost clean. The body on the bed was now a discreet, wrapped bundle. The floor shone wetly. The only smell was bleach and death, fast being overpowered by the chemical cleaner.

The lead nurse gave a final nod. "It is done. The chart will show a catastrophic gastrointestinal hemorrhage. A tragic, but not unexpected, complication. Very messy. These things happen with the elderly." His eyes met Ilya's. "You should go. You were never here. The night has been quiet."

Ilya walked out of Room 114. The hallway was silent. He passed the nurse's station where the same impassive man sat, now typing the official cause of death into the system.

Outside, the cold night air hit him like a physical wall. He inhaled, and the clean, frozen air scoured his lungs, but it could not reach the new stain inside him. He had crossed into a place from which there was no return. He had not just killed his father; he had annihilated him in a storm of blood and rage, becoming the very monster the old man had tried to shape. But the purpose was his own. The chain was severed. The bridge was burned, and the ashes were washed away by professionals.

He slid into the back of the waiting car. "The airport," he said, his voice a hoarse whisper.

The blood was gone from his hands, but the smell seemed to linger in his sinuses- copper and bleach, a new, permanent perfume. In the back of the speeding car, the world outside the tinted windows was a smear of darkness and distant, lonely lights. The hollow calm had returned, but it was different now. It wasn't empty. It was occupied by a single, cold axiom: One more to go.

He pulled out the burn phone Anatoly had given him. The call connected after half a ring.

“It is done,” Ilya said, his voice devoid of inflection. “Thank you for your help.”

A pause on the line. Anatoly was not a man surprised easily. “Your visibility served its purpose. Vasin’s interest has... pivoted. He is intrigued by your sudden visit but only commented that to our good friend the doctor. I think you should let us take care of them, Mr. Rozanov. I owe you an honor debt and would like to repay you.”

“Just get it done,” Ilya cut in, the words sharp as glass. “I can’t take it anymore.”

Another, longer pause. Ilya could almost hear the calculations, the risk assessments scrolling behind Anatoly’s eyes. “Mr. Rozanov... Dmitri Vasin is going to be taken care of. He is a man with resources, allies. To ‘remove’ him would create a significant... disturbance, but I swear on my honor everyone will be taken care of within the week.”

“I do not care about disturbances,” Ilya stated, staring at his own reflection in the car window- a pale ghost floating over the passing darkness. “I care about finality. You made my father’s end disappear. Make Vasin disappear. I will pay for it. You don’t owe me anything anymore.”

The silence stretched. It was not a refusal. It was a professional weighing a profoundly dangerous contract. Finally, Anatoly spoke, his tone shifting to one of pure, amoral logistics. “It will be done.”

“You have a week,” Ilya said. “I am leaving Russia. When I land, I want confirmation that the project is underway. I do not need details. I need the result.”

He ended the call before Anatoly could reply. The transaction was complete. He had just ordered an assassination, his voice as steady as if he’d ordered a car to the airport. The part of him that should have recoiled was the same part that had died on the floor of Room 114, scrubbed away by efficient men with bleach. He was building a fortress of corpses to keep his one reason for living safe.

He had sent a text to his Russian agent, asking him to book a private flight to Montreal. Image be damned.

“Stop here please.” he told the driver, giving the address of a small, onion-domed church in a older, quieter district of the city. It was the church his mother had slipped away to on rare, stolen mornings, the scent of her perfume always mixing with incense when she returned.

The car stopped on a cobblestone street. The church was dark, save for a single, flickering oil lamp glowing red beside the heavy wooden door. It was unlocked. These places always were.

Inside, the air was thick and still, heavy with the memory of centuries of smoke and whispered prayer. The icons stared down from the walls with their serene, timeless grief. The silence here was different from the nursing home. It was a waiting silence. He stood at the back, his hands hanging at his sides, feeling the profound incongruity of his presence. He was a bloody thing in a place of supposed purity.

The church was dark, save for the glow of oil lamps and the silver shimmer of moonlight through narrow windows. The icons watched him from every wall. Christ Pantocrator. The Theotokos. Saints whose names he had forgotten years ago. They all seemed to be staring directly at him. Ilya stood frozen just inside the doorway. He had not been inside a church since his mother's funeral. Not really. There had been weddings. Public appearances. Christmas services attended because cameras expected him there. He had crossed himself at the appropriate moments and recited prayers he no longer believed.

But he had not entered a church as a son. As a sinner. As a man seeking forgiveness.

The smell hit him first, incense, wax. Old wood. For one impossible second he was eight years old again, sitting beside his mother in a pew while she whispered the names of saints into his ear and told him stories about mercy.

Mercy, the word felt foreign now. The church was empty except for one elderly priest kneeling before an icon stand near the altar. His beard was completely white. His black cassock hung loose on a frame that looked barely substantial enough to support it. The priest looked up.

Their eyes met. No shock. No alarm.

Only recognition.

"Ilya Grigorivich," the priest said quietly.

Ilya blinked. "Excuse me?"

"Its been many years, but I remember those eyes and that hair. Just like your saint of a mother."

The old man rose slowly. "You look so much like your mother."

For a moment Ilya couldn't breathe. "You knew her?"

"Everyone knew her."

The priest studied him.

"She prayed for you constantly." Something inside him cracked, just a little.

The priest gestured toward a small stand near the front of the church where a cross and Gospel rested beneath an icon of Christ.

"Would you like confession? A man does not come to the house of God in the middle of the night unless he needs to unburden himself."

The answer should have been no. He was not worthy. He was stained with blood.

His father's blood. Chris Hill's blood. He would be sexual abuser from Mexico. All the violence he carried inside him. Instead he heard himself say: "Yes."

The priest draped the epitrachelion around his neck and waited. Silence stretched. Orthodox confession was different than people imagined. The priest did not interrogate him. He simply waited. Patient, still. As if God had all the time in the world. The old priest did not rush him.

The silence stretched between them, broken only by the occasional crackle of a candle and the distant groan of old wood settling somewhere in the church. The epitrachelion rested lightly across Ilya's shoulders, but it felt heavier than body armor.

For several minutes he said nothing.

He simply stared at the icon of Christ hanging above the stand. The painted eyes seemed alive- watching, waiting. Understanding. The thought made his stomach twist. Finally he spoke.

"I killed my father tonight." The words echoed softly through the empty church.

The priest remained silent.

Ilya found himself grateful for that. He had spent his entire life surrounded by men who spoke too much. Men who explained. Men who justified. Men who lied.

The old priest simply listened. So Ilya continued. Slowly at first. Then all at once. He spoke about his mother. About the nursing home. About the confession dragged from a dying man whose mind had finally become too broken to maintain its own lies. He described the pills. The murder. The years stolen from both his mother and himself. The realization that his entire childhood had been cut short for a lie. Then he spoke about Shane. About Chris Hill. About Vasin. About the realization that his father had not stopped trying to control his life even from a hospital bed. The words poured out of him in a rough, emotionless stream.

When he finished, the church fell silent again.

The priest lowered his gaze.

"You regret this."

It wasn't a question.

Ilya laughed, the sound ugly and brittle. The priest looked up. "What?"

He rubbed a hand across his face.

"He killed my mother." The statement sat between them like a stone. He would have killed Shane too."

The priest remained still.

"I know what the Church teaches." Ilya's voice grew rougher. "I know murder is a sin."

The old man nodded.

"Yes."

"I know vengeance belongs to God."

"Yes."

"I know what I did."

The priest's expression never changed. "And what did you do? Why do you think that you need absolution for God."

Ilya stared at the floor.

For the first time since entering the church he felt tired. Not physically, but soul-deep. The kind of exhaustion that came from carrying hatred for too long. "I removed a threat." The answer came immediately. Because it was the truth.

The priest was quiet for a long moment.

"And if God returned you to that room tomorrow?"

Ilya closed his eyes. Immediately he saw the blood. The scissors.

His father's smile. The casual way he'd discussed murdering his mate as though she were a broken nobody.

Then he saw Shane. Sleeping peacefully in Montreal. Alive, safe, breathing.

The answer was easy. Painfully easy. "I would do it again." The confession hung in the air.

The priest studied him. "Then why are you here?"

That question took longer. Because he honestly didn't know.

He wasn't seeking forgiveness. Not really. He wasn't seeking absolution. He wasn't even seeking understanding. Eventually he found the answer.

"Because I don't like that it was easy."

The words emerged in a whisper.

His chest tightened.

"I thought it would feel different."

He swallowed.

"After Chris Hill I told myself it was because Shane was in danger."

His hands clenched.

"Then tonight happened."

His voice cracked.

"And I enjoyed it."

The admission felt like pulling a knife through his own ribs.

"I enjoyed hurting him."

The priest remained silent.

"I wanted him to suffer."

Ilya stared at his trembling hands.

"I wanted him afraid."

His breathing grew uneven.

"And for a few minutes I was happy."

The church seemed to grow colder.

"I hate that." There it was. The real confession, not the murder. Not the violence.

The satisfaction. The part of himself that had looked into Grigori Rozanov's eyes and felt relief.

The part that had enjoyed revenge. The part that sounded far too much like his father.

The priest finally spoke. "You fear becoming him."

Ilya's head snapped up. Because yes, that was exactly it.

Not prison, or hell. Not judgment.

Him. The blood in his veins. The violence.

The capacity for cruelty. The terrible possibility that Grigori Rozanov had not created a monster. Only recognized one.

"I loved it."

The admission came out raw. Honest.

"I hated him and I loved hurting him."

His voice dropped lower.

"If Shane had been threatened again..." He couldn't finish. Because they both knew. There was no limit. No line, no law.

No consequence. Nothing he would not do. Nothing he would not become.

Not for himself. Never for himself.

But for Shane? For Shane he would burn countries.

The priest studied him for so long that Ilya eventually looked away.

When the old man finally spoke, his voice was gentle.

"That is not the same thing as your father."

Ilya frowned.

"How?"

"Because you are horrified." The answer was immediate.

Simple, certain.

The priest gestured toward the icon behind them.

"Your father celebrated his sins."

His gaze settled on Ilya. "You mourn yours."

The distinction sunk into his mind, more than any condemnation could have.

The old priest sighed. "What you did was still wrong."

Ilya nodded. He knew that.

"But remorse is not always wishing something had never happened. And you were protecting your mate, that is a god given commandment when two souls are lucky enough to be so connected."

The priest folded his hands. "Sometimes remorse is wishing there had been another way."

Something in Ilya's chest tightened painfully. Because that was exactly it.

If there had been another way, he would have taken it. If there had been a way to save his mother. A way to save Shane. He would have chosen it.

But standing in that nursing home room, faced with the truth of what his father had done and what he intended to continue doing-

Ilya honestly didn't believe another path had existed. And perhaps that certainty would damn him. Perhaps God would judge him for it.

Perhaps He already had. But Shane was alive. And if damnation was the price of that, then Ilya suspected he had paid it willingly long ago.

He did not wait for a prompt. He began to speak in Russian, his voice low, a monotone in the sacred dark.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been... many years." He took a breath that did not fill his lungs. "I have committed the sin of murder. With malice. With cruelty. I took a life in anger and called it justice. I felt his blood on my hands. I watched the light leave his eyes and I felt... nothing. Then I hired a man to commit another murder. I feel nothing about that, either."

He paused, the words hanging in the incense-heavy air. The priest on the other side of the screen was utterly silent.

"The man I killed... he killed my mother. He told me so. He poisoned her for the crime of wanting to leave and save me. He also conspired to have the man I love killed, to 'fix' me. I killed him for that, too. But mostly, I killed him for her. Is that a sin? To kill for a ghost? To kill for a future that someone else tried to strangle?"

No answer came. Ilya hadn't expected one.

“The man I love... I have hurt him terribly. In my obsession, I became a jailer. I thought it was protection. I was wrong. He was taken because of me. He was hurt because of me. I burned a man alive to get him back. I carry that fire inside me now. It is the only warmth I have left.” His voice cracked, just once. “I am going to him now. With these hands. I do not know how to touch him without staining him. I do not know how to love him without the shadow of what I have done consuming us both. I am afraid... I am afraid the nothingness inside me is all I have left to give him.”

He fell silent. The confession was not a request for absolution. It was an inventory. A stating of facts to the dark. He had named his crimes: patricide, conspiracy to murder, arson, obsession. He had named his wounds: a murdered mother, a traumatized lover, a soul scoured hollow.

After a long moment, a quiet, aged voice finally came through the lattice. “God forgives the repentant heart, my son. Do you repent?”

Ilya looked down at his clean, trembling hands. He saw the phantom blood. He saw the ghost of the scissors. He thought of the order he had just given to Anatoly.

“No,” he whispered, the word final and absolute. “I do not. I would do it all again. For her. For him. That is my sin, Father. The irredeemable one. I am not sorry.”

The silence from the priest’s side was total. It was the silence of a door closing.

Ilya stood, the wooden bench creaking. He left the confessional without crossing himself, without looking at the icons. He walked back down the silent nave, a shadow dissolving into the greater dark.

Outside, the cold air was a shock. He stood on the steps, looking up at the slice of starless sky between the rooftops. No peace had come. No burden was lifted. He had simply spoken the truth of his damnation into a holy ear and felt nothing. The fortress was complete, and he was its sole, damned occupant.

He got back into the car. “To the airport. Now.”

As the jet climbed over the sleeping city, pushing through the cloud layer into the clear, star-dusted blackness above, Ilya stared out the window. Below him, Russia- a tapestry of old ghosts and fresh graves, receded into the dark. Ahead, across the vast, black Atlantic, was a single point of light. Shane.

He was going home. He was a man who had confessed to murder and felt no remorse. A man who had ordered another. A man who carried the scent of a father's blood under the smell of bleach and jet fuel. He was the monster, fully realized. And his only purpose now was to wrap that monster around his omega so tightly that no other darkness could ever get in. The healing, if it was ever to come, would have to grow around the stone of what he had done. He had survived. Now he had to tell the man he was meant for him and hopefully they could forge ahead. And pray that the love he had once twisted into obsession could somehow withstand the weight of the void he now carried.

Chapter End Notes

Well.

That happened.

I don't even know if I have anything intelligent to say after this chapter other than: poor Shane is about to learn that leaving Ilya unsupervised in Russia was maybe not the best idea.

One thing I really wanted to explore here was the difference between guilt and remorse. Ilya understands what he did was wrong. He understands it damaged him. He understands that a good man probably wouldn't have done it.

The problem is that if given the choice again, he would still choose Shane.

Every single time.

Whether that's love, obsession, devotion, or something much uglier is probably the question hanging over the rest of this story.

💙 What do you think Shane's reaction will be when he learns everything?

Until next time, my lovely enablers. ❤️ We finally get to the part of the story where there's only one or two delicate parts, but the heavy heavy is over.

Chapter 29: Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Hi hello, welcome back to the chapter where Ilya discovers that crossing continents, confronting generational trauma 🤔, and emotionally combusting does not excuse him from being walked like a dog by Shane. Kinda, maybe.

Also: We love Scott Hunter. Shane has feelings 🥺. Ilya has approximately one functioning brain cell and it is entirely dedicated to Shane Hollander ❤️

Please mind the tags ⚠️, take care of yourselves 🤗, grab a snack and some water 🍪💧, and enjoy the emotional devastation 😭, soft domesticity, and the beginning of what might possibly be a healthier version of them.

Possibly. 😊✨

Chapter Notes

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

The jet touched down at YUL with a jolt that felt like the world reasserting itself. The transition from the sealed, silent capsule over the Atlantic to the fluorescent buzz of Terminal 8 was jarring. Ilya moved through customs on autopilot, his documents processed without comment. He was just another tired traveler, albeit one with a hollow stare and the faint, healing scratches on his forearms hidden by his sweater cuffs.

He found a quiet corner near a bank of charging stations, the ambient noise a dull roar of rolling suitcases and fragmented conversations. He stared at his phone, the device a lifeline. He had to know. He dialed Marly.

It picked up on the second ring. “Roz.”

“How is he?” Ilya said, the words clipped.

A sigh came through the line, heavy with a day’s worth of tension. “He’s... he’s holding it together. But just barely. He’s a nervous wreck, Ilya. Pacing. Jumping at every sound from

the hall. He won't eat. He just keeps asking the same questions we can't answer. 'What did Ilya get into? Is he safe?'"

Ilya closed his eyes, pressing his thumb and forefinger against the bridge of his nose. He could see it. Shane, in the controlled environment of his own home, his carefully constructed world once again invaded by unknown threats, his routine shattered, his safety contingent on the presence of near-strangers. For a man who needed order, who Ilya had noticed had little quirks when he was around new people, and for whom control was not a preference but a necessity, it would be a special kind of hell.

"Hunter finally got him to drink some tea about an hour ago," Marly continued, his voice dropping. "We had one of those calming pills from his own prescription bottle. It knocked him out. He's asleep on the couch now. Finally."

A sleeping pill. Fuck. Shane, who was so careful about what he put in his body and his mind, had been pushed to the point of needing a drug to calm down. The guilt was like cold, sick tar in Ilya's gut. He had done this. His history, his actions had forced this on the person he was supposed to protect above all else.

"You are both still there?" Ilya asked, his voice tight.

"Yeah. Hunter's making calls, rearranging his schedule with his mate I'm guessing. I'm just... sitting here. Watching him sleep. He looks younger. And scared, even in his sleep." Marly paused. "When are you getting here?"

"A couple hours. I'm waiting for rental car."

"Good. He needs to see you. Even if he's pissed. He needs to see you're in one piece. And I need answers." Another pause, more hesitant. "Rozy... what the hell is going on? You gotta give me some details. Coach is calling like crazy. This feels... dark."

"It is dark," Ilya confirmed, no point in lying to the man guarding his mate's unconscious body. "It is finished now. I've handled everything. Your job is just to be a wall until I get there. Can you do that?"

“Yeah,” Marly said, the word solid. “We’ve got him. Just get here.”

They hung up. Ilya stood motionless for a long minute, the chaos of the airport swirling around his island of static dread. *A nervous wreck. A sleeping pill.* Was this all he was destined to deliver? He wanted to be better, to be deserving of Shane. He refused to lose him from the choices he had made because he didn’t know how to control himself.

His stomach growled, a blunt, animal reminder. He hadn’t eaten since before the nursing home. The thought of food was repulsive, but the body had its demands. He walked to a generic food court and bought a large black coffee and a dry, oversized pretzel he had no intention of tasting. He sat at a small table, forcing himself to take bites, to swallow. The pretzel was dust and salt. The coffee was disgusting. It was fuel though, nothing more.

Around him, people lived their small, immediate lives- a family argued over gate changes with a clerk, a couple shared headphones, a businessman typed frantically on his cell phone. Their lives were intact, unlike his, and he would not be okay until he had Shane back in his arms.

A text came through with a notification that the car was ready. He disposed of the uneaten food and joined the queue. The process was mindless: scanning his drivers license, murmuring thanks to the attendant, the shuffle down to the garage. He found the car and tossed his bag in the passenger seat and started the GPS.

Ilya pressed his forehead against the cool window for a minute before starting to drive. He wondered if Shane would be happy to see him. He should have called him more while being away.

But what was he bringing home? Not the obsessed controller who had installed cameras. That man had been burned away in the fire that killed Chris Hill. He was bringing home the man forged in the aftermath: the survivor, the hollow man, the patricide. A man who had looked into the abyss of his own capacity for violence and had not looked away. A man who had confessed his sins and felt no remorse. And his only plan was to ask the man he loved- the structured, kind, traumatized omega currently sleeping under a chemical haze- to somehow find a way to exist beside it. To trust that the void would protect him, not consume him.

Their ride through Montreal's midnight streets was a blur of familiar landmarks seen through a pane of smoked glass. Ilya registered none of it. His body was in the backseat, but his mind was trapped in a loop of sterile rooms, blood spray, and the flat, electronic scream of a heart monitor. The only thing pulling him forward was a gravitational tug towards a single address.

He pulled up to Shane's home. Ilya parked and grabbed his bag, getting out and stood on the sidewalk, looking up at the dark windows of the apartment. A single light glowed from the first floor.

He walked up the driveway, eager to just see Shane at the very least, the silence was oppressive. He stood before the door, his fist hovering. He didn't pound. He knocked softly, three times, the sound absurdly polite against the roar of his own heartbeat.

The door opened with swift, controlled movement. Scott Hunter filled the doorway, his expression not surprised, but grimly expectant. He took one look at Ilya's face- pale, hollow-eyed, a walking monument to exhaustion and something darker, and his jaw tightened.

Without a word, Scott stepped out, forcing Ilya back with his presence, and pulled the door shut quietly behind him. They were alone on the small, cold landing, the late-night silence of the building pressing in.

"You look like shit," Scott said, his voice low but razor-sharp. He didn't invite him in. He was blocking the door, an alpha guarding a den. That pissed him off a bit.

"I need to see him," Ilya said, the words scraped raw.

"You need to talk to *me* first," Scott countered, crossing his arms. His gaze was a physical weight, assessing, distrustful. "What in the actual fuck, Rozanov? I get a call from you, sounding like you're about to lose your shit, begging me to fly across the country to babysit your... your what? Your rival? Your secret pen pal? Shane's been a mess. A terrified, pacing, silent mess. He took a sleeping pill because he couldn't stand being in his own skin. So you're going to stand out here in the cold and you're going to tell me what gives you the right to turn his life inside out like this."

“This is none of your business, old man. I appreciate you coming to help, but I can take it from here.”

“No. you want to get into this house then you tell me what the fuck is going on. That’s my friend in there and he’s just starting to get better so you tell me everything.” The accusation was deserved. It was the voice of reason, of healthy boundaries, of everything Ilya had trampled. He met Scott’s eyes, too tired for deflection, too empty for his usual arrogant mask.

“We’ve been together all this time. That whole rivalry thing is mostly from the league and reporters,” Ilya said, each word deliberate, dragged up from the void inside him. “He is my...” He faltered. No word felt sufficient. Mate was too biological, too possessive. Lover felt too small for the cataclysm of feeling. “We are in a relationship. A private one. It is... complicated. More than complicated.”

Scott’s eyebrows shot up, but the anger didn’t dissipate; it morphed into an assessing, more protective outrage. “A relationship? The kind that requires guards and Shane having his nervous fits? The kind that leaves him needing pills to sleep?”

“The kind,” Ilya forced out, the confession like swallowing glass, “that my family’s poison tried to destroy. There was a threat. From Russia, connected to my father. It was aimed at him to get to me. I went to end it.” The images flashed: the scissors, the blood, the clean-up. He could feel the ghost of the warmth on his hands.

“You ended it,” Scott repeated, his voice dangerously quiet. “How?”

Ilya didn’t flinch. “Permanently.”

A long, heavy silence stretched between them. Scott was no fool. He was an alpha who’d fought his own battles, who lived in a world where threats to an omega could evoke primal responses. He looked at Ilya- really looked at the profound hollows under his eyes, the faint, fresh scratches on his hands going up under sleeves, the utter lack of anything resembling victory in his posture. He saw a man who had walked through fire and carried the ashes in his soul.

“And now?” Scott finally asked, the edge in his voice blunted slightly by a dawning, grim understanding.

“He is my mate, Hunter. In every way that matters. We would be bonded already, if...” He swallowed. “If I had not broken everything first. If he will still have me, after this. After everything.”

The raw, unvarnished truth of it hung in the cold air. This wasn’t a hockey feud or a casual secret. This was a claim, stark and desperate, laid bare to another alpha who understood the importance of it.

Scott studied him for another long moment, his protective stance slowly relaxing from a barricade to a weary acknowledgment. He sighed, the sound thick with resignation. “He’s asleep on the couch. He fought it, but... he couldn’t stay in his own head anymore.” He uncrossed his arms and took a step back, his hand on the doorknob. “Marlow’s been taking turns with me to sit with him. Don’t wake him up. Just... sit. Be there. The explanations you owe *him* is going to be a hell of a lot longer than this. He has a lot of people who love him, Rozanov. Alpha or not we’ll take him away from you if we see you hurt him.” He opened the door.

The warmth and faint, familiar scent of Shane’s home washed over Ilya, a balm and a brand. He stepped inside, and Scott moved past him, back towards the kitchen, giving a curt nod to Marly who looked up from his phone.

And then Ilya saw him.

Shane was curled on his side on the large sofa, wrapped in a blanket, one hand tucked under his cheek. In sleep, the lines of anxiety were smoothed away, but he didn’t look peaceful. He looked young and utterly depleted, his breathing deep from the medication.

Ilya’s knees nearly buckled. The vast distance between the blood-soaked nursing home in Vyborg and this quiet, vulnerable vision was a chasm his soul couldn’t cross. He was an obscenity in this space of gentle order.

He didn't approach. He stood rooted just inside the doorway, as he had in the hotel room months ago, obeying the silent command to keep his distance. He simply looked, drinking in the proof of Shane's safety, each breath a painful reminder of the cost.

He had survived. He had ensured Shane's survival. But the man asleep on the couch was not healed. He was sedated. And the man standing watch over him was not healing. He was hollowed out, a weapon, unsure if it was still safe to touch.

The door clicked shut behind Scott Hunter, sealing Ilya in the warm, quiet space of Shane's living room. Marly looked up from his phone, his expression shifting from weary vigilance to one of profound relief. He stood, giving Ilya a long, slow once-over, taking in the pallor, the hollow eyes, the way he stood just inside the threshold like a ghost unsure it was permitted to haunt.

"Jesus, Roz," Marly breathed, voice low. He didn't offer a handshake or a clap on the shoulder. The moment felt too fragile for that. "You look like shit."

Ilya didn't answer. His entire focus was across the room. Shane was a curled shape on the sofa, buried under a cream-colored blanket, one hand visible, fingers loosely curled. The soft light from a single lamp painted his profile in gold and shadow. He was so still. The deep, even rhythm of his breath was the only sign of life, the main focus of Ilya's attention.

Marly followed his gaze. "He's out. Has been for a couple hours. Didn't go down easy." He moved to collect his jacket from the back of a chair. "I'm gonna head to my hotel. Get a few hours." He paused next to Ilya on his way to the door. His voice dropped further, a gruff whisper. "You owe me. Big time. And not for the flight. For making me see him like that. Hollander is a good guy. Shitty team, but he plays a clean game and whatever is going on here, he doesn't deserve to go through something like that again. I'll tell coach we spoke. Just let me know how many days you're going to be out for."

Ilya gave a single, stiff nod, his throat too tight for words. *You have no idea what I owe*, he thought, the debt a mountain inside him. "Thank you, Marly."

"Call if you need anything. Hunter's in the kitchen," Marly said, and then he was gone, the door closing with a soft, final click.

Alone. Ilya didn't move. He stood sentinel, drinking in the sight. This was the reality he had fought for, bled for, damned himself for. Not a concept, not a mission objective. A man. *His* man, *his mate*. Sleeping under the chemical veil Ilya's own actions had necessitated. The guilt was a cold, heavy stone in his gut. He wanted to fall to his knees. He wanted to flee. He did neither. He just watched, memorizing the peaceful rise and fall of Shane's chest, a peace he knew was borrowed and fragile.

Minutes bled into one another, marked only by the slow sweep of light from a passing car outside. Then, a shift. A small, muffled sound from the couch. Shane's brows drew together, his head turning restlessly on the cushion. The medication was wearing off, and the real world, the fear, the confusion- was seeping back in at the edges of his subconscious.

His eyes fluttered open, glassy and unfocused. They scanned the dim room, lost, until they landed on the dark figure standing by the door. There was no fear. Just a slow, dawning recognition that bypassed all conscious thought. A soft, wounded noise escaped him - a whimper that was all omega, all need.

"Ilya...?" His voice was slurry with sleep and drugs, barely a whisper.

Before Ilya could answer, could even move, Shane's hand emerged from the blanket, reaching out into the empty space between them. His fingers flexed, grasping at air. It was the most helpless, trusting gesture Ilya had ever seen.

It shattered his paralysis. In three long strides, he crossed the room and sank to his knees beside the couch. He didn't reach to take Shane's hand; he simply presented himself, within reach. "I am here, solnyshko. I am here."

Shane's hand found his sweater, fisting in the fabric with a strength that belied his drowsy state. He tugged, a weak but insistent pull, and Ilya leaned in closer. Shane nuzzled his face into the space between Ilya's jaw and shoulder, a blind, instinctive search for comfort, for scent. A broken, whimpering sigh warmed Ilya's skin.

Then Shane's other hand came up, clumsy and drowsy, patting at Ilya's neck, his collarbone. His fingers, soft and seeking, found the edge of the synthetic scent patch Ilya always wore in

public- a bland, neutralizing square that hid the true, storm, leather, pine and winter spice of his alpha signature. In his groggy, vulnerable state, Shane seemed confused by it. He pawed at it, his whimpers growing more distressed. With a drowsy, determined grunt, his nails caught the adhesive edge.

He peeled it off.

The sound of the adhesive releasing was loud in the quiet room. Ilya froze, a jolt of something primal and electric shooting down his spine. He should stop him. This was too much, too intimate, a boundary crossed in a state of altered consciousness. But he was powerless to move.

As soon as the patch was gone, Shane buried his face directly into the exposed skin of Ilya's neck. He inhaled, a deep, shuddering drag of breath that made his whole body go limp with relief. And then it came- a low, thrumming, contented purr that vibrated from Shane's chest into Ilya's own. It was a sound of pure, instinctive omega satisfaction, of homecoming, of comfort. A sound Ilya had craved to hear from him, in their most unguarded moments. It was a gift and devastation.

Tears, hot and sudden, pricked at Ilya's eyes. He swallowed hard against the knot in his throat.

"Okay," Ilya whispered, his voice rough with emotion. "Okay, lyubimyy." Gently, he slid one arm under Shane's knees and the other around his back. He lifted him, blanket and all, as if he weighed nothing. Shane instinctively curled into him, his face still buried in Ilya's neck, his purr a steady, calming engine. Ilya carried him a few steps and settled into the corner of the large sofa, arranging Shane fully in his lap, a precious, warm bundle of trust and need. He wrapped his arms around him, holding him close, his chin resting on top of Shane's head. He closed his eyes, just breathing him in, letting the purr resonate through his own bones, a temporary salve on his fractured soul.

He had never had a partner go into subspace without sex before. He had felt Shane do it several times, but he always stopped it, knowing someone like Shane would have a harder crash, but the biological, omega state of vulnerable surrender- a retreat from overwhelming fear into a primal sense of safety provided by a trusted alpha. Shane's mind was not fully present; it was floating, cushioned by medication and instinct, seeking anchor in Ilya's scent

and strength. This time, he let Shane fully go under, wanting to prove to both of them that Ilya could be the proper alpha, that he could provide safety in a normal context.

The kitchen door swung open. Scott Hunter walked in, holding two mugs of tea. He stopped dead at the sight before him: Ilya, eyes closed, holding a purring, pliant Shane possessively in his lap, the discarded scent patch a small, glaring semi transparent square on the carpet.

“What the hell?” Hunter’s voice was sharp, cutting through the tranquil haze. He set the mugs down with a clatter. “Shane? Shane, are you awake?”

Shane stirred at the sound of his friend’s voice, a faint line appearing between his brows. He didn’t open his eyes, just nuzzled deeper into Ilya’s neck, his purr stuttering slightly.

“Hunter,” Ilya warned, the word a low rumble. The alpha in him, the possessive, protective beast, surged at the interruption, at the threat to this fragile peace. A growl built in his chest, visceral and automatic, before he could clamp down on it. He forced it back, taking a sharp, controlling breath. He could not, would not, alpha-posture at the man who had kept Shane safe for these few days. “He is... he is not fully here. The pill. And... this.” He gestured weakly with his chin, indicating Shane’s state.

Hunter approached, his face etched with concern. He crouched in front of the couch but stayed a few feet away, ignoring Ilya to focus on Shane. “Shane? Buddy, can you look at me? Are you okay? Did he do something?” He reached out, as if to touch Shane’s shoulder.

Ilya’s arms tightened infinitesimally, a reflex he couldn’t suppress, but he didn’t otherwise move.

“Scott...?” Shane’s voice was muffled against Ilya’s skin, thick and distant. He blinked slowly, his eyes hazy and unfocused when they finally opened. He looked at Hunter, but his gaze was soft, dreamy, recognition filtered through a dense fog. “S’okay. Alpha’s here.” He said it with the simple, unquestioning certainty of a child stating the sun is up.

Hunter’s eyes snapped to Ilya’s, a storm of conflict in them- protective fury warring with dawning, uncomfortable understanding. He’d heard the purr. He saw the utter, vulnerable

trust in Shane's posture. He saw the raw, desperate care in the way Ilya held him, a man holding the only valuable thing left in a ruined world.

"Is he coherent?" Hunter asked tightly, his question aimed at Ilya now, a demand for a status report.

Ilya looked down at Shane, who had closed his eyes again, his breathing deepening back toward sleep, soothed by their voices. He gently shook him. "Shane. Solnyshko. Hunter is asking you a question. Can you answer him?"

Shane made a soft, protesting noise. "Sleepy. 'M safe. You smell... sooo good." His hand fisted loosely again in Ilya's sweater, anchoring himself.

Ilya met Hunter's gaze again, his own eyes bleak. "That is the most coherent he has been. He is in between. Medication is wearing off, but his instincts... they took over." He stated it as a fact, without pride, only a heavy acknowledgment of the biological truth that underpinned their damaged bond. "He needs to sleep it off properly. Here. Where he feels safe."

Hunter stared at them for a long, tense moment. The image was undeniable: the fierce, possessive Russian alpha who had just returned from some unspeakable mission, cradling the vulnerable, trusting omega who was, for all intents and purposes, his mate. It was a picture of profound devotion and profound dysfunction, inextricably linked.

Finally, Hunter let out a long, weary breath. He stood up, running a hand through his hair. "I'll be in the guest room. First door on the left. You... don't move. If that purr stops, if he seems in distress, you come get me. Immediately." It was an order, but also a concession. A reluctant transfer of guard duty.

Ilya nodded. "I will."

Hunter gave Shane one last, worried look, then turned and left the room, leaving the two of them alone in the lamplight.

Ilya rested his head back against the couch, holding Shane close. The purr continued, a fragile vibration against his chest. He was home. He was holding his world. And his world was asleep in his arms, trusting the monster to keep the nightmares at bay. The weight of it, the beauty and the terror, was enough to crush him. He simply held on, listening to the purr, waiting for the dawn, and dreading the moment Shane would wake up and have to look at him with clear, conscious eyes.

The deep, drug-induced sleep had Shane out for hours. Ilya didn't move. He remained anchored to the corner of the sofa, Shane a warm, purring weight in his lap, his own body humming with a fatigue that went beyond the physical. He watched the slow creep of dawn through the blinds, painting grey light across the room. He cataloged every shift of Shane's breathing, every flutter of his eyelids beneath their closed veil.

The purr had softened to a nearly inaudible tremor, a contented idle. Then, it stopped. Shane's breathing hitched, changed rhythm. His brows knitted, and he let out a soft, confused sound as consciousness, full and clear, began to reclaim him.

His eyes opened. They were no longer glassy or distant. They were Shane's eyes- intelligent, observant, a little wary. They focused on Ilya's face, inches from his own, and for a heart-stopping second, there was only blank confusion. Then, memory and recognition flooded in, followed by a wave of pure, unguarded relief that made his features soften.

"You're here," Shane breathed, his voice raspy from sleep and disuse. A tentative hand came up, his fingers brushing against the stubble on Ilya's jaw, as if verifying he was real. "You're really here."

"Da," Ilya whispered, the word thick. "I am here."

The smile that broke across Shane's face was like the sun piercing storm clouds. It was tired, but it was genuine. It held none of the fear or tension from the previous day, only a profound, simple gladness. He didn't ask questions. He didn't demand explanations. In that first, waking moment, he just accepted Ilya's presence as the answer to every unnamed anxiety.

He shifted in Ilya's lap, winding his arms around Ilya's neck, and pulled him down.

The kiss was not gentle. It was a hungry, desperate reclaiming. Shane's mouth was soft and insistent, his tongue seeking entry with a need that spoke of days of fear and separation. Ilya groaned into it, his own control fraying instantly. He kissed him back with equal fervor, one hand tangling in Shane's sleep-mussed hair, the other splayed across his back, holding him impossibly closer. It was heat and salt and the sweet, familiar taste of *home*. It was an anchor in the roiling sea of his guilt.

For long, blissful minutes, there was only this- the slide of lips, the shared breath, the desperate press of bodies seeking to erase anything and everything that wasn't in their little bubble. Shane made small, needy sounds in the back of his throat, his hips canting up unconsciously, seeking friction. His hands roamed Ilya's back, his shoulders, as if memorizing the terrain of him all over again.

Ilya was losing himself in it. The void inside him yearned for this warmth, this oblivion. To lose himself in Shane's body, to feel wanted and needed in this most basic way, was a temptation so fierce it was agony. His own body responded fiercely, a sharp, aching want that clouded all thought.

But the images surfaced anyway, unbidden. The blood spray on the wall. The scissors. The flatline. The cold order to Anatoly. He saw them superimposed over Shane's trusting, eager face.

With a raw, torn sound, Ilya broke the kiss. He pulled back just enough to rest his forehead against Shane's, his breathing ragged. "Shane... wait. Pozhaluysta. Stop."

Shane blinked, dazed, his lips kiss-swollen and wet. "What's wrong?" he murmured, trying to close the distance again. "I missed you. I need..."

"I know. I missed you too," Ilya said, his voice pained. "I need you more than air. But... you need to know. Before we... you need to know what I did."

The haze of desire in Shane's eyes slowly cleared, replaced by a focused, sober attention. The structured, analytical part of his mind was engaging. He searched Ilya's face, reading the shadows there, the grim set of his mouth. He didn't pull away, but he stilled. "Okay," he said softly. "Tell me."

Ilya didn't move from their embrace. He needed the contact as a lifeline to get through this. He kept his forehead against Shane's, his eyes closed, speaking into the intimate space between them.

"I got a call after our game. A threat came from my father. A man named Vasin owed my father a debt. My father... he saw you as a threat to his control over me. He pointed Vasin at you. As a favor." He felt Shane tense slightly, but he pressed on, the words coming in a low, relentless stream. "I went to Russia to confirm it first, then I went to see my father."

He took a shuddering breath. "He confessed. To killing my mother. Making it look like suicide. He was... proud of it. And he told me what he had done. Pointing Vasin at you." Ilya's arms tightened around Shane. "He would never have stopped. He would have kept trying to erase anything he thought made me weak. And you... solnyshko, you are everything to me. You are not a weakness. You are my only strength. But to him, you were a disease to be cut out."

Shane was silent, listening, his breath warm on Ilya's skin.

"So I took care of it," Ilya whispered, the confession finally laid at Shane's feet. "I made sure he could never threaten you, never even think your name again. The people who wanted to hurt you because of me are gone."

He didn't describe the violence. He didn't mention the blood, the clean-up crew. He didn't describe the cold, clinical phone call to Anatoly. He gave Shane the unvarnished truth of the result, sparing him the grisly mechanics. The guilt was his to carry, not Shane's to imagine.

The silence that followed was profound. Ilya braced himself for recoil. For horror. For the realization to dawn in Shane's eyes that he was holding a murderer.

Instead, Shane let out a long, slow breath. He shifted, not away, but closer, burying his face back into the crook of Ilya's neck, the now-bare skin where his scent bloomed strongest. He nuzzled there, inhaling deeply. Then, his voice muffled against Ilya's skin, soft but clear, he spoke.

"Thank you."

Two words. They shattered Ilya completely.

He pulled back, gripping Shane's shoulders, searching his face with desperate, disbelieving intensity. "What? Shane... lyubimyy... do you understand what I am telling you? I killed him."

Shane met his gaze, his own eyes clear and strangely calm. Ilya could see his mind working, organizing the information he'd just received. He saw through the noise to the core equation. "He killed your mom. He was going to have me killed. He hurt you your whole life." He stated it as a series of facts. "You stopped him. You kept him from hurting anyone ever again. You kept me safe." He reached up and cupped Ilya's cheek, his thumb stroking over the high bone. "You came back to me."

Ilya stared at him, utterly lost. "You are thanking me? For becoming... this?"

"I'm thanking you for choosing me," Shane said simply. "Even when it meant becoming that. I wish it hadn't. I wish... I wish so much it hadn't. But you did it for me." His lower lip trembled, not with fear, but with a surge of emotion. "No one has ever... Ilya, no one has ever fought for me like that. Not ever."

It was an acceptance so absolute, so unconditional, it felt like absolution from the only source that mattered. It didn't erase the sin, but it reframed the sacrifice. Shane wasn't condoning the monster he was, he was acknowledging the love that had created it, and choosing to stand with the man who carried it.

Shane's thumb kept moving against Ilya's cheek, slow and careful, but his expression had changed. The first rush of relief had faded enough for the rest of it to settle in.

“You killed him,” Shane said again.

Ilya’s stomach dropped. He nodded once.

“And Vasin?”

“Gone.”

“Are they both gone?”

“Yes.”

Shane swallowed. His eyes flicked away from Ilya’s face for the first time, drifting toward the pale morning light filtering through the blinds. His mind was working. Ilya could see it happening, could practically hear the pieces clicking into place behind those sharp, intelligent eyes. His father. The threat. Russia. The nursing home. The terrifying emptiness Ilya had carried home with him.

“Does anyone know it was you?” Shane asked.

“Not in a way that can come back to you.”

“That wasn’t what I asked.”

The quiet correction hit harder than anger would have.

Ilya looked down at their joined hands. Shane’s fingers were still threaded through his, still warm, still holding on. “Some people know enough,” he admitted. “People I trust. But no one who will speak. My father had enemies. Vasin had enemies. There will be explanations, stories. There always are.”

Shane’s jaw tightened. “And you?”

“I will be fine.”

“That’s not an answer either.”

Ilya finally looked at him. Shane’s eyes were bright now, not with fear of him, but with something worse. Fear for him.

“I don’t know what happens next,” Ilya said quietly. “I know you are safe. That was all I could think about. It was the only thing that mattered.”

Shane stared at him for a long moment. Then he shifted closer, his knees pressing between Ilya’s thighs, his hand sliding from Ilya’s cheek to the back of his neck.

“I’m not scared of you,” Shane said.

Ilya went still.

“That’s not what I’m trying to figure out.” Shane’s voice wavered just slightly, but he didn’t look away. “I’m trying to figure out how you went there alone. How you did all of that alone. How you came back to me with all of it inside you and thought you had to carry it by yourself.”

The words split something open in Ilya’s chest.

“I did not want you to see me like this.”

“Ilya.” Shane’s fingers tightened at the nape of his neck. “I’ve seen you at your worst. I’ve seen you scared. I’ve seen you cruel. I’ve seen you trying so hard to act like nothing can touch you that you almost destroyed both of us.” His voice softened. “And I still wanted you. I still want you.”

Ilya’s breath caught.

“But I don’t want you to keep deciding that loving me means you have to become something terrible by yourself.” Shane pressed his forehead to Ilya’s. “You don’t get to disappear into your own head and call it protecting me.”

For a moment, Ilya could not speak. He could only close his eyes and breathe in the warm, familiar scent of Shane, letting the words settle somewhere deeper than guilt.

“I do not know how to do this differently,” he admitted.

“Then we figure it out,” Shane whispered. “Together. But you tell me when you’re thinking about something crazy. You call me. You call Marlow. You call Svetlana. You call anyone. You don’t just decide you have to burn the world down alone.”

Ilya’s throat worked painfully. “Okay.”

Shane pulled back just enough to look at him. “Okay?”

“Okay,” Ilya repeated, more firmly this time. “I will try.”

It was not a grand promise. It was not enough to erase anything. But Shane’s face softened anyway, as if he understood that for Ilya, trying was the closest thing to faith he had ever been able to offer.

Overwhelmed, Ilya could only pull him into a crushing embrace, his face buried in Shane’s hair. He didn’t cry, but his entire body shook with the force of the release of emotions.

And then he felt it again. The vibration. Starting deep in Shane’s chest, a low, resonant purr of pure, instinctive contentment and safety. It wasn’t the drowsy purr of subspace. It was a conscious, deliberate offering. A biological affirmation of trust and belonging. Shane curled into him, molding his body to Ilya’s, the purr a steady, physical promise against Ilya’s heart.

In that moment, holding his purring omega who knew the darkest truth of his soul and had chosen to stay, Ilya understood the difference. Obsession demanded control at any cost. Love, true love, was this: presenting your bloodstained hands to the person you adored, and having them not flinch, but hold on tighter. It was the terrifying, beautiful risk of being known, of being *seen* at his base level, and being chosen anyway.

The purr was still vibrating through Ilya, a tangible thread stitching his shattered pieces back together, when the floorboard in the hall creaked. Scott Hunter stood in the doorway, his expression a careful mask of neutrality that didn't reach his eyes. He'd given them the night, but the morning demanded accountability.

"Shane," Scott said, his voice deliberately calm. "You're awake. How are you feeling?"

Shane, still curled in Ilya's lap but now fully present, turned his head. The simple, trusting contentment on his face softened slightly, his mind visibly shifting gears from the primal to the social. "Better, clearer."

"Good." Scott took a step into the room, his gaze flicking to Ilya, a silent warning to remain still, before settling back on his friend. "We need to talk." He didn't gesture at Ilya; he didn't need to.

Ilya felt Shane's muscles tense, but not with fear. He was mentally categorizing, preparing, what he'd say. Shane sat up a little straighter, though he didn't leave the circle of Ilya's arms. That, in itself, was a statement.

"Uh, we're together?" Shane said, his voice quiet, looking up at Ilya for confirmation. Ilya smiled down at him, briefly wrapping gentle hands around his lower jaw and neck. "We're... together. Yea. We're in a relationship. Have been for a while. It's private. It has to be."

“Is he why you were so messed up for-” Scott trailed off, the unspoken word hanging in the air.

Shane’s nod was a small, definitive movement-cutting Scott off. “Yes. And because of the league. And because of... everything that happened.” He swallowed, his hand finding Ilya’s where it rested on his stomach, threading their fingers together. “It’s complicated, Scott. It’s been messy and hard and really, really fucked up. But it’s real.”

Scott crossed his arms, his protective stance at odds with the reluctant understanding in his eyes. He’d seen them. He’d heard the purr. He couldn’t argue with the biological, emotional truth of it. “Does anyone else know? Hayden? JJ? Your parents?”

“No,” Shane said quickly, a flicker of anxiety breaking through his calm. “Just you and Marlow now. And... please. Please, don’t tell them yet. Not like this. I need to... I need to figure out how to tell them myself. On my terms. When things are calmer.” The plea was raw, born from his deep-seated need for control over his own narrative, especially one involving the most vulnerable part of himself.

Scott studied him for a long moment, then his shoulders slumped in resignation. He was a protector, but he was also a friend who respected autonomy. “Alright. But ‘soon’ isn’t ‘never,’ kid. They love you. They’ll want to know why you’ve been... like this. And they’ll figure out he’s the reason.” He shot another look at Ilya, this one less hostile, more weary. “You’ve got a lot to answer for, to more people than just him.”

“I know,” Ilya said, the first words he’d spoken since Scott entered. They were gravelly, but clear. An acknowledgment of the debt that extended beyond this room.

“I’ll tell them,” Shane promised, squeezing Ilya’s hand. “I will. Before the end of the season. I just need a minute to breathe.”

Scott accepted this with a nod. “I have to get back to New York. Kip’s got a doctor’s appointment.” He walked over, crouching again to be at eye level with Shane. “You call me. For anything. If you need out, if you need help, if you just need someone to sit with you. Understood?”

“Understood. Thank you, Scott. For everything. And I’m sorry I threw a book at you.”

Scott laughed and waved it off. With a final, speaking glance at Ilya- a look that promised retribution if this peace was broken, Scott stood and left. The sound of the front door closing a few minutes later marked a shift in the atmosphere. They were truly alone.

For several seconds, neither of them moved.

The apartment felt different without Scott’s watchful presence in it. Quieter. Softer. Dangerous in a way Ilya had not expected, because there was no longer anyone standing between him and the unbearable fact of Shane’s trust.

Shane was the first to break the silence.

“When did you last eat?”

Ilya blinked. “What?”

“When did you last eat?” Shane repeated, more firmly.

“I had coffee.”

“That is not food.” Shane stared at him.

Ilya looked away. “I tried to eat large pretzel at the airport but it was disgusting.”

The corner of Shane’s mouth twitched despite everything, but the expression disappeared quickly. He stood up from Ilya’s lap, smoothing his hands over his sweatpants as if trying to organize himself through movement. “Sit.”

“Shane-”

“Sit down.”

The quiet authority in his voice stopped Ilya more effectively than any command from a coach, a teammate, or a man twice his age ever could have. Ilya sat back against the couch.

Shane disappeared into the kitchen. Ilya heard cabinets opening, the refrigerator door, the faint clink of a plate against the counter. The sounds were painfully ordinary. Domestic. The kind of sounds Ilya had never imagined belonging to him.

He leaned his head back against the couch cushion and closed his eyes.

A few minutes later, Shane returned carrying a plate with toast, sliced fruit, and a small bowl of yogurt. There was tea in the mug Scott had left behind. Shane set everything down on the coffee table and sat beside him, close enough that their knees touched.

“You need to eat,” Shane said.

“I am not hungry.”

“I don’t care.”

Shane’s cheeks flushed slightly, but he held his ground. “You flew from Russia to New York to Montreal. You haven’t slept. You look like you’re going to fall over if you stand up too quickly. You can’t tell me you came here to protect me and then act like your body doesn’t matter.”

The words landed somewhere tender.

Ilya looked down at the plate. “You are angry?”

“Yes. You need to take care of yourself.”

“But you are feeding me.”

“Yes.” A tiny, reluctant smile touched Shane’s mouth. “Both things can be true.”

Ilya picked up a piece of toast. His hands were steadier than they had been at the airport, but only barely. He took a bite because Shane was watching him, because Shane had made it, because for once in his life he wanted to be someone who could accept care without turning it into a debt.

The toast tasted like nothing at first.

Then Shane’s hand settled gently on his knee.

And suddenly it tasted like warmth.

They ate in silence for a while. Shane nudged the fruit closer whenever Ilya stopped. Ilya did not argue again. When he had finished half the plate, Shane handed him the tea.

They ate in silence for a while.

Or rather, Ilya ate.

Shane sat beside him with his own untouched piece of toast on a small napkin, his tea cooling slowly between both hands. At first, Ilya assumed he had simply made more than he wanted. Then he noticed the way Shane kept breaking the toast into smaller pieces without bringing any of them to his mouth. One piece became two, then four. His fingers moved with absent, precise purpose, arranging the crumbs into a neat little line along the edge of the napkin.

“You are not eating,” Ilya said quietly.

Shane’s hands stilled.

“I’m not hungry.”

“You have not eaten since when?”

Shane looked down at the toast. "I had tea earlier."

"Not enough. Eat with me, please."

A flicker of irritation crossed Shane's face, so quick Ilya might have missed it if he had not been watching him so closely. "Neither was your pretzel, apparently."

Ilya watched him carefully. There was something too deliberate about the way Shane held himself. His shoulders were tight. His jaw was set. He looked exhausted, pale beneath the warm living room light, as if the last several days had hollowed him out from the inside and he had decided that hunger was simply one more sensation he could refuse to acknowledge.

"You need to eat too," Ilya said.

"I will later."

"Shane."

"I said later." The sharpness in his voice hung between them. Immediately, Shane looked away. His fingers curled around the mug, knuckles paling slightly. "Sorry," he murmured. "I just... I don't feel good."

Ilya's anger disappeared as quickly as it had come. He understood that tone. It was not defiance, not really. It was the brittle edge of someone trying to maintain control over the only thing left within reach.

He reached for Shane's hand, stopping just short of touching him. "Can I?"

Shane looked at him, then gave the smallest nod.

Ilya laid his hand over Shane's. Shane's fingers were cold.

"You do not have to eat all of it," Ilya said softly. "One bite. For me."

Shane's eyes flickered. "That's manipulative."

"Yes," Ilya admitted. "But I am very tired and emotionally damaged. You should be gentle with me."

A weak laugh escaped Shane before he could stop it.

Ilya lifted the small piece of toast Shane had broken apart and held it out between them. "One bite, solnyshko."

For a long moment, Shane stared at it.

Then, with visible reluctance, he took it from Ilya's fingers and put it in his mouth. He chewed slowly, like the act required more effort than it should have. When he swallowed, his throat worked hard.

“There,” Ilya murmured. “Good boy.”

Shane’s cheeks flushed at the praise. “Don’t make it weird.”

“I make everything sound like sex. Is my gift.”

That earned him another tiny smile.

But Shane pushed the rest of the toast away after that, folding the napkin carefully over the crumbs as if closing the subject. Ilya did not press him again. Not now. He had already learned what happened when he mistook control for care.

Instead, he kept his hand over Shane’s and finished the rest of his own food.

Later, he would remember the untouched toast. The tea gone cold. The way Shane had looked almost relieved when the plate was moved out of reach.

But in that moment, Ilya only thought Shane was tired.

Ilya looked at him over the rim of the mug. “You are very bossy when you are frightened.”

Shane’s eyes dropped to his own hands. “I know.”

“You should be.”

That made Shane look up.

Ilya reached out slowly, giving him time to pull away, and brushed his thumb across the back of Shane’s hand. “You should tell me what to do sometimes.”

The vulnerability in Shane’s expression nearly undid him.

“I don’t want to control you,” Shane said quietly.

“I know.” Ilya’s voice was rough. “That is why it would be different.”

Shane turned his hand over beneath Ilya’s, lacing their fingers together. “Then eat the rest.”

Ilya obeyed.

Shane let out a long breath, the remaining tension leaving his body. He leaned back against Ilya, but his mind was already ticking forward to the next necessary task. He reached for his phone on the coffee table, his movements regaining their typical, efficient precision.

“Hey, Coach? Yeah, it’s Shane.” He listened, his free hand rubbing Ilya’s thumb absentmindedly before he stood and started pacing. “I know, I know. I’m sorry. It’s... my shoulder’s just really barking today. The flight aggravated it. I think if I could just have today to rest it, get some treatment, I’ll be good for the road trip.” He paused, listening, his

expression one of focus. “Yeah, of course. I’ll be on the plane tomorrow afternoon. I promise. Thanks, Coach.”

He ended the call and set the phone down, a faint blush coloring his cheeks as he turned shyly to look at Ilya. “I got today. *We* have today. I have to be on the plane to Seattle tomorrow by three.”

The gift of time. A stolen, fragile day for just the two of them. Ilya absorbed the information, but one part of Shane’s performance snagged in his mind, sharp and sudden.

Slowly, deliberately, Ilya stood. In one fluid motion, he managed to reach Shane. Shane looked up at him, questioning, but Ilya didn’t speak. He simply reached down, took Shane’s waist in his hand. Then he guided him back, step by step, until Shane’s shoulders met the wall beside the windows.

Ilya caged him there, one hand planted flat on the wall by Shane’s head, the other curling possessively around his hip. He leaned in, his body a line of heat and intent, his eyes searching Shane’s face.

“So,” Ilya said, his voice a low, alpha rumble that vibrated in the small space between them. “You told your coach you are hurt to spend more time with me?”

It wasn’t a question about the lie. It was a question about the truth he’d woven into it. The vulnerability he’d invoked.

Shane held his gaze, the shyness still there but met with a growing steadiness. He gave a single, small nod. “It’s the only thing they’d accept without sending a team doctor. A sore ‘beta’ shoulder gets a tape job and a ‘suck it up.’ It’s a card. I had to play it. They keep saying they need me for the playoffs.”

The wave of feeling that crashed over Ilya was too vast to name- protectiveness, awe, a devastating sense of unworthiness, and a fierce, blazing pride. This brilliant, resilient man was choosing him, strategizing for him, risking for him.

Ilya didn't have words for it. So he showed him.

He bent his head and captured Shane's mouth in a kiss that was nothing like the desperate, hungry reunion from before. This was deep, claiming, and unbearably tender. It was a vow sealed in the warmth of shared breath. He poured everything into it- the gratitude, the devotion, the terrifying, all-consuming love that had driven him to murder and now held him, gentle, against this wall.

Shane melted into it, his hands coming up to clutch at Ilya's sweater, a soft sound of surrender and welcome humming in his throat. For a long while, there was only this: the slow, exploring kiss, the press of bodies, the silent communication that bypassed the need for apologies or explanations. They had today. However they had gotten it, whatever it cost, they had this one, stolen day to just be. To remember what they were fighting for, in the quiet, before the world demanded them back.

The kiss was a deep, searching thing, a silent conversation that spoke of fear dispelled and a terrible, hard-won peace. Ilya poured every ounce of the devotion that had driven him to monstrous acts into the gentle slide of his tongue, the careful nip of his teeth. Shane answered with a soft, eager noise, his hands fisting in Ilya's sweater, curling around his hair, grabbing his arms - anywhere he could reach, pulling him closer until not a sliver of light could pass between them.

But then, with a sudden, firm pressure of his palms against Ilya's chest, Shane broke the kiss. His eyes were dark, intent, and filled with a quiet, determined fire Ilya hadn't seen directed at him. Not since before the surveillance, before the collapse of their relationship the first time.

Without a word, Shane pushed.

It wasn't a violent shove. It was a guided, insistent pressure. Ilya, so much larger and stronger, allowed himself to be moved, his boots shuffling backward on the rug, his gaze locked on Shane's face. Step by step, Shane walked him backward until the backs of his knees hit the low edge of the coffee table. He stumbled, off-balance, and sank down onto the soft cushions of the sofa.

Shane followed him down, not into his lap this time, but settling on his knees on the floor between Ilya's spread legs. The morning light from the window haloed his messy dark hair, lit the fierce, focused expression on his face. He placed his hands on Ilya's thighs, his touch firm, anchoring.

"Shane," Ilya breathed, a warning and a plea tangled together. His heart was a frantic drum against his ribs. This was too much, too fast. He still felt dirty, as if his sins were a solid film on his skin, and this- this pure, intimate offering felt like a sacrilege.

"Shhh," Shane murmured, his thumbs rubbing slow circles on the denim. His gaze was unwavering. "My turn. Let me."

It wasn't a question. It was a reclamation. For months, their dynamic had been defined by Ilya's taking, his controlling, his obsessive need. Even the rescue had been a violent, overwhelming act of possession. When they reunited, Ilya had pushed for Shane to be more vocal, a more active participant to where he'd like their intimacy to lead to. Shane usually shyed away from fully taking the lead. This, Shane was saying, was different. This was a gift, given freely. A choice.

He held Ilya's gaze as his hands went to the buckle of his belt. The click of the release was loud in the quiet room. The rasp of the zipper followed. Ilya could only watch, mesmerized, as Shane carefully drew him out. He was already fully hard, aching, the reality of Shane's touch after so much deprivation and horror making him dizzy.

Shane didn't hesitate. He leaned forward, and his mouth, that clever, stubborn, beautiful mouth, was on him.

The heat was an electric shock that tore a ragged groan from Ilya's throat. His head fell back against the couch, his hands gripping the cushions so hard the fabric threatened to tear. It was wet, and perfect, and so devastatingly enthusiastic it made his eyes burn. Shane took him deep, his throat working, then pulled back to lavish attention on the head with soft, sucking kisses and flicks of his tongue. He was methodical, attentive, learning what made Ilya's hips jerk and what drew broken curses from his lips.

"Bozhe moy...Shane... solnyshko..." Ilya panted, the words torn to shreds. He was unraveling at an alarming speed. The stress, the fear, the soul-deep exhaustion, the

overwhelming relief of being here, his mate safe, with Shane's mouth on him- it was too much. The coil in his gut tightened with a swift, brutal urgency. He was going to come. Already. It was embarrassing, pathetic.

A soft, humming sound vibrated through him. Shane's purr. He'd started purring again, the sensation buzzing against Ilya's most sensitive skin. When he opened his eyes and looked down at Shane, his usually awkward shy Omega was looking right at him. The pride in it was unmistakable. *See? See what I can do to you?* It was a gentle taunt, a reclaiming of power that was also an act of profound love.

"Shane, *I-ya ne mogu* -I can't-" Ilya gasped, his body bowing off the couch.

He knew he was seconds away. He wanted to open his mouth and warn Shane but no sound other than a grunt came out. Coming in his mouth, without warning, forcing him to swallow... it felt like another violation. Another act of taking without consent, however small. With a Herculean effort that felt like tearing his own spine out, Ilya fumbled a hand down, his fingers tangling in Shane's hair. Not to push him deeper, but to pull him gently, insistently, off.

Shane resisted for a second, a muffled sound of protest around him, before relenting. He pulled back, his lips wet and swollen, confusion and a flicker of hurt in his dazed eyes. "Ilya? What's-"

"I am sorry, I am too close," Ilya choked out, his voice wrecked. "I do not want to... not in your mouth, not like that. Not without you..."

It was too late for elegant explanations. The pressure was a tsunami. Wrapping his own hand around his slick length, he gave two, three rough, frantic strokes before his orgasm ripped through him with a force that stole his vision. A raw, guttural cry was torn from his throat as he came, stripes of white painting his own stomach and the dark fabric of his sweater, his body convulsing with the intensity of it.

For a moment, there was only the sound of his own ragged breathing, the pounding of his heart. Shame and overwhelming sensitivity washed over him. He'd lost control. He'd stopped Shane. He'd made a mess.

He blinked his eyes open, expecting to see withdrawal, or at least confusion.

Instead, Shane was watching him, his gaze soft and impossibly fond. A small, smug smile played on his kiss-reddened lips. Then, without a hint of hesitation, he leaned forward again.

Ilya flinched, a weak protest on his lips, but Shane ignored it. He didn't go for Ilya's spent cock. He dipped his head and swiped his tongue, broad and deliberate, through the mess on Ilya's lower abdomen. He licked a stripe up through the cum cooling on the sweater, then carefully cleaned the head of Ilya's cock with a few soft, kittenish laps that made Ilya jolt with oversensitivity.

When he sat back, he licked his lips, the pout from a moment before entirely gone, replaced by a look of serene, possessive satisfaction. "I wouldn't have minded," he said quietly, his voice husky. "But thank you. For thinking of it."

He rested his cheek on Ilya's thigh, his purr restarting, a low, contented rumble. Ilya, utterly spent and emotionally flayed, could only let one trembling hand fall to rest in Shane's hair, his thumb stroking the soft strands. The monster was sated, cherished, and meticulously cleaned up after by the only person who wasn't afraid of his mess. The devotion, he realized with a sinking, awe-filled heart, wasn't just his to give anymore. It was being given back to him, in ways he was only beginning to understand.

Shane's quiet, purring contentment against his thigh was a fragile, perfect thing. Ilya let his hand rest in Shane's hair, the tremors of his own release still echoing in his bones, basking in the simple, shocking reality of being tended to. Of being wanted, even in his messy, post-coital state.

After a long moment, Shane lifted his head. His eyes were clear, the last vestiges of drowsy subspace gone, replaced by a purposeful calm. He stood up, his movements fluid, and extended a hand down to Ilya.

"Come on," he said, his voice soft but firm.

Ilya took his hand, allowing Shane to pull him to his feet. He expected to be led to the shower. Instead, Shane turned towards the hallway, tugging him gently along. Towards the bedroom.

A fresh, different kind of tension coiled in Ilya's gut. This was new territory. After the surveillance, the violation of privacy, Shane's bedroom had become a symbol of the ultimate boundary Ilya had shattered. He had watched him sleep through a camera lens. He didn't deserve to cross that threshold.

But Shane was leading him, his grip sure. He pushed the door open and pulled Ilya inside, then released his hand. He pointed to a spot by the wall, near the door. "Stay there," he instructed, not unkindly, but with the focused authority of a man on a mission.

Ilya obeyed, leaning his shoulders against the wall, folding his arms. He watched, utterly captivated, as Shane turned to face the bed.

What followed was a methodical, mesmerizing ritual. Shane stripped the neatly made bed with efficient tugs, letting the duvet and sheets pool on the floor. From the closet, he pulled out extra blankets- a soft grey fleece, a thick, nubby knit in cream. From a drawer, he retrieved several items of clothing Ilya recognized with a jolt: the dark hoodie from Boston Shane had kept, a t-shirt Ilya had left behind months ago, a pair of sweatpants that smelled faintly of Ilya's detergent.

His heart clenched. Shane had kept them. Not hidden away, but close.

Shane began to build. He spread the largest blanket as a base, then layered the sheets and other blankets, not haphazardly, but with deliberate criss-crossing and tucking, creating a deep, padded basin in the center of the mattress. His brow was furrowed in concentration, his movements precise. He would smooth a section, then pause, his head tilting as he assessed it, before adjusting a fold by a mere inch or two.

Then, with a care that bordered on reverence, he began weaving Ilya's clothes into the fabric of the nest. The hoodie was arranged so the sleeve curled around a pillow. The t-shirt was tucked along one side, its collar peeking out. The sweatpants were folded into a soft lump at the foot. Each piece was placed, considered, and sometimes minutely repositioned until it satisfied some internal, critical schema.

Ilya watched him place the dark hoodie beside the pillow, the sleeve curled inward as if it had been waiting for someone to tuck themselves against it. Then Shane picked up the old t-shirt, holding it for a second too long before pressing it carefully into the blankets.

“You kept them,” Ilya said softly.

Shane froze.

The flush that had been creeping up the back of his neck deepened. He did not turn around. “I was going to throw them out.”

Ilya said nothing.

“After that time,” Shane continued, his voice quieter now. “After I found out about the cameras. After everything.” His fingers worried at the hem of the shirt. “I took all of it out of the closet. I put it in a garbage bag. I thought if I got rid of anything that smelled like you, maybe I would stop looking for you everywhere.”

Ilya’s chest tightened so sharply it almost hurt to breathe.

Shane gave a small, humorless laugh. “I couldn’t do it.”

He finally turned around, but his eyes stayed fixed on the nest instead of Ilya.

“I could still smell you in hotels. In airports. On my own clothes sometimes, even when I knew it wasn’t really there.” His voice wavered. “And I hated that I missed you. I hated that I was angry at you and scared of you and still wanted you anyway.”

Ilya’s throat closed.

“So I kept them,” Shane admitted. “Not because I forgave you. Not then. I just...” He swallowed. “I didn’t know how to make myself stop.”

The room was silent except for the faint hum of the city outside.

Ilya pushed away from the wall, then stopped himself before he crossed the room. Every instinct in him wanted to take Shane into his arms, to apologize until there was nothing left of him. But this was Shane’s space, Shane’s time to express himself. He would not invade it.

“You do not have to explain missing me,” Ilya said finally, his voice low. “I understand.”

Shane looked up at him then. His eyes were bright, but steady.

“I’m not explaining it because I’m ashamed,” he said. “I’m telling you because I want you to understand what this is.”

He gestured to the nest. To the blankets. To the pieces of Ilya woven into the careful structure of safety.

“This isn’t me forgetting,” Shane whispered. “It isn’t me pretending you didn’t hurt me.”

Ilya's heart beat once, hard and painful.

"It's me choosing you anyway," Shane said. "But differently this time." It was a choice made with open eyes.

Ilya stood completely still, afraid that if he moved, the fragile moment would break. Shane turned back to the nest, smoothing one last wrinkle from the grey blanket. "I need things to feel safe," he said, almost defensively. "I need them to be where they're supposed to be. I need to know what happens next."

"I know," Ilya said.

"And I need you to ask before you take."

The words were quiet, but they struck with the force of a blade.

Ilya lowered his head. "I will."

Shane looked over his shoulder at him. "You promise?"

Ilya met his gaze. "I promise."

Only then did Shane pick up Ilya's sweater from where it had been discarded and carry it to the center of the nest.

Ilya couldn't help the grin that spread across his face. It was a helpless, awed thing. This was Shane's mind made physical. His need for order, for safety, for control- so brutally stolen from him by Ilya's past and Ilya's own actions, being rebuilt here, in this quiet room. And he was building it around Ilya's scent, incorporating the remnants of him into a structure of security. It was the most profound act of trust Ilya had ever witnessed.

A faint, pink flush colored the back of Shane's neck as he worked, as if he could feel Ilya's gaze tracing his every move. Finally, he stepped back, surveying his work. His shoulders relaxed, a small, satisfied sigh escaping him. The nest was perfect.

He turned then, and his eyes met Ilya's. The flush was on his cheeks now, too, a mixture of shyness and defiant pride. He walked over to where Ilya stood by the wall. Without breaking eye contact, he reached for the hem of Ilya's soiled sweater.

"Lift your arms," Shane murmured.

Ilya complied, his breath catching as Shane pulled the sweater up and over his head, leaving him bare-chested. Shane didn't linger. He turned, carrying the sweater- still marked with the evidence of their earlier intimacy, back to the nest. He didn't treat it as something soiled; he treated it as a vital, final component. He folded it carefully and placed it right in the center, where a pillow would normally go.

Then, at last, he climbed into the nest. He moved within it, shifting, settling, until he was reclined in the center, surrounded and cushioned by the blended fabrics of their lives. He looked utterly at home. Utterly safe.

He turned onto his side and looked at Ilya, still standing by the wall. His expression was open, hopeful, and fiercely vulnerable. He held out his hand in invitation.

For a moment, Ilya was paralyzed. The ghost of the man he had been, the one who would have taken this as a right, who would have swaggered in and claimed it as his due rose up in shame. But that man was gone, burned away. The man who remained knew the priceless value of this offering.

He pushed away from the wall. He crossed the room, his bare feet silent on the floor. He didn't climb in with alpha possessiveness. He approached the nest as he would a sacred space, which it was. At the edge, he paused, meeting Shane's gaze, asking for final permission.

Shane's fingers flexed, beckoning.

Ilya carefully lowered himself into the nest. It was astonishingly soft, enveloping. The scents were overwhelming- clean cotton, Shane's sweet omega signature, and everywhere, his own. It was like being held inside their combined essence. He settled on his side, facing Shane, their bodies not quite touching, separated by a breath of air.

Shane watched him, his eyes scanning Ilya's face in the dim room light. Then, with a final, soft sigh of completion, he closed the last inch between them, curling his body into Ilya's, tucking his head under Ilya's chin. He fit perfectly, as if the nest had been engineered to bring them to this exact point of connection.

Ilya wrapped his arms around him, holding the most precious, meticulously crafted thing he would ever be allowed to touch. Here, in the sanctuary built by Shane's own hands and mind, the void inside Ilya didn't feel so hollow. It felt... quiet. Waiting. For the first time since the nursing home, since the confession, since the blood, he felt not like a monster in hiding, but like a man being carefully, deliberately, pulled in from the cold.

For a while, neither of them spoke.

Shane lay tucked beneath Ilya's chin, one arm draped across his waist, his fingers lazily tracing the bare skin of Ilya's stomach. The nest held them close on every side, soft blankets and old clothes creating a small, warm pocket of safety in the middle of a world that had never seemed interested in letting them keep it.

Ilya listened to Shane breathe.

He wanted to stay exactly like this forever. He wanted to lock the bedroom door, turn off both of their phones, and let the league, the reporters, the coaches, Russia, Montreal, Boston, all of it, disappear outside the walls of this apartment.

But Shane was already thinking.

Ilya could feel it in the subtle shift of his body. The way his fingers stopped moving. The faint tension returning to his shoulders. Shane's mind was never still for long. It organized. It planned. It found the next problem and began building walls around it.

"Where do you play next?" Shane asked quietly.

Ilya's chest tightened.

"Not sure," he said. "But I will not be playing."

Shane tipped his head back enough to look at him. "Because of your dad?"

"Yes."

The word sat between them, strange and heavy. His father was dead. The sentence should have felt impossible. Instead, it felt like the quiet after a gunshot. Final, empty.

Ilya reached blindly for his phone on the nightstand. The screen lit up with a flood of missed calls and messages: his manager, his agent, teammates, people who had no idea what had happened and people who knew too much. He stared at the name of his manager for a moment before opening the thread.

His fingers hovered over the keyboard.

My father passed away. I will need a few days away from the team. Please make the appropriate announcement. I do not want calls from media.

He read it twice.

There was no grief in the words. No lie, exactly. His father had died. Ilya simply could not make himself add the language everyone expected. *Devastated. Heartbroken. Asking for privacy during this difficult time.*

He sent it anyway.

The message disappeared into the thread.

Shane watched him carefully. “Are you okay?”

Ilya gave a humorless little laugh. “No.”

Shane’s expression softened.

“But I will be,” Ilya added. “Eventually.”

Shane reached up, brushing his fingers over Ilya’s cheek. “You don’t have to be okay right now.”

Ilya turned his face into Shane’s palm and closed his eyes for one brief second.

Then Shane reached for his own phone.

The shift in mood was immediate. Necessary. Cruel.

“I have Seattle,” Shane said, scrolling through his calendar. “Then two days back in Montreal. Then we’re in Florida for three games.”

Ilya opened his eyes. “Florida.”

Shane nodded. “The second game is in Tampa. I have a sponsorship thing the morning after. It’s stupid. Some hockey equipment campaign. They already booked it months ago.”

“I can come.”

Shane looked at him.

“I can fly in for the day,” Ilya said, already doing the math in his head. “I will be in Florida. You finish your stupid sponsorship thing. Then I see you.”

A small smile pulled at Shane’s mouth. “You’d fly all the way to Florida for one day?”

“For six hours if that is all you give me.”

The smile faded into something softer. More vulnerable. “It might only be six hours.”

“Then I will take six hours.”

Shane looked back down at his phone. His thumb moved across the screen as he checked the next few weeks, comparing dates with the kind of precision that made Ilya ache. They were

not planning a vacation. They were trying to find scraps of time between games, flights, practices, sponsor obligations, media appearances, and the possibility of playoffs.

“After Florida,” Shane said slowly, “we both have games for almost three weeks.”

“Toronto,” Ilya said, remembering. “You play there.”

“Yeah. We have one night between games.” Shane glanced at him. “You could come in after your game. I could meet you at the hotel.”

Ilya nodded, though something sour twisted in his stomach. One day in Florida. One night in Toronto. Then nothing.

“And after that?” he asked.

Shane’s fingers stopped moving.

“After that...” He swallowed. “It depends on playoffs.”

The words hung in the nest like a storm cloud.

Ilya hated them.

He hated the playoffs. He hated the league. He hated every person who would look at Shane in a locker room, on a plane, in a hotel hallway, and get more of him than Ilya did. He hated the thought of weeks stretching between them again, of waking up in Boston with Shane’s scent fading from his clothes and no certainty of when he would be able to touch him next.

The old instinct rose fast and sharp.

Tell him to skip it. Tell him to fake another injury. Tell him to come with you. Tell him that none of it matters compared to this.

Ilya swallowed it down.

Shane had already lied to his coach for him. He had already made himself vulnerable, already offered Ilya a place in his nest and a place in his life after seeing the worst of him. Ilya would not ask him for more sacrifices just because he was afraid of being alone.

Not now.

“Then we wait,” Ilya said.

Shane looked at him, surprise flickering across his face.

Ilya forced himself to keep his voice even. “You have your team. Your playoffs. Your career. I will not ask you to choose between them and me.”

“Ilya-”

“I mean it.” He tightened his arms around Shane, not enough to trap him, only enough to feel him there. “I do not like it. I hate it. But I will not make you smaller so I can feel less lonely.”

The silence that followed was different from the others. It was not heavy with fear. It was heavy with the fragile, unfamiliar shape of trust.

Shane’s eyes filled, though he blinked quickly as if annoyed by it.

“You really mean that?” he whispered.

Ilya kissed his forehead. “I am trying to become someone who does.”

Shane’s breath caught.

Then he shifted closer, pressing every inch of himself against Ilya’s body, as if he could make up for the coming distance now. “Florida,” he murmured. “Then Toronto.”

“Florida,” Ilya agreed. “Then Toronto.”

“And after that...”

“We will see.”

Shane nodded against his chest.

It was not enough. It would never be enough.

But it was real.

Ilya set both phones facedown on the nightstand, shutting out the schedules and the messages and the world waiting to take them apart again. Then he pulled Shane closer inside the nest, burying his face in the soft dark hair at the crown of Shane’s head.

For today, he had him.

For today, Shane was safe.

For today, Ilya did not ask for more than Shane was willing to give.

And for a man who had spent his whole life taking whatever he wanted before someone else could take it from him, that restraint felt almost like love.

Chapter End Notes

Well. They finally got a little bit of peace. 🥰💛

Not peace peace, because these two are incapable of doing anything normally 🙄, but they got a nest, some purring, a hard conversation 💔, and a very reluctant attempt at boundaries. Progress is progress. 😭✨

Ilya is learning that loving Shane cannot mean making every decision for him. Shane is learning that being loved does not have to mean being controlled. Neither of them has this figured out yet, but they are trying—and for these two, that is huge. 🧡

Also, I am deeply sorry about the schedule discussion at the end 😭 Hockey is cruel, long distance is cruel, playoffs are cruel, and apparently I enjoy making them count down weeks until they can touch each other again. 💔

Tell me your favorite moment! 👁️ Scott threatening Ilya? 😞 Shane making Ilya eat? 🍞 The nest? Shane choosing him with open eyes? 🙄 Or Ilya trying very hard not to ask Shane to sacrifice more for him? 😭

And as always: thank you for every comment, scream, keyboard smash, theory, and emotional support message 😭💬🧡 You make writing these chapters so much more fun, and I genuinely love seeing what moments y'all like. 🧡✨

Chapter 30: Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Okayyyyyyy, I have seen the comments. I have seen the theories. I have seen several of you staring directly at Shane's stomach like you're about to request an ultrasound. 😭
👁️👁️

All I will say is that Shane has been having some very big feelings lately, Ilya has approximately zero chill, and perhaps they should both be banned from making life-altering decisions while emotional, exhausted, and within ten feet of a hotel bed.

Enjoy the All-Star chaos. And maybe keep an eye on Ilya. He is having a normal one. Probably.

Thank you to my Beta reader who convinced me that sex is good to keep in this, and that its part of the plot. Thank you to my assistant at work that helped me with this while we were supposed to be busy during actual work and to my boss who lets me do whatever I want

Chapter Notes

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

The first thing Shane became aware of was warmth. A deep, solid, radiating warmth along his back, and the heavy, comforting weight of an arm draped over his waist. Then, scent - real, unfiltered alpha scent, pine and leather, woven into the very fabric of the nest around him and emanating from the skin pressed against his. It was safety. It was home.

He blinked slowly awake in the grey pre-dawn light, his mind still soft and pliable from sleep. Ilya was a solid wall of heat behind him, his breathing deep and even against the nape of Shane's neck. One of Ilya's hands was splayed possessively over his lower stomach, the other pillowed under Shane's own head, there legs were interlocked below the soft sheets. Every point of contact was a live wire of quiet, sleepy pleasure.

Shane shifted minutely, a soft sigh escaping him as he pressed back into that warmth. The movement stirred Ilya from sleep. A low, sleepy rumble vibrated through Shane's spine, and the arm around his waist tightened, pulling him even closer. Ilya nuzzled into the junction of his shoulder and neck, his lips and stubble a delicious scratch against sensitive skin. No words. Just a deep, instinctive sound of contentment.

This was different. In the past, their morning couplings had often been desperate, hungry things- a frantic reclamation after time apart, or a tense prelude to another separation. This was slow, syrupy. They had nowhere to be. The world outside the nest was muted, held at bay for at least the next few hours.

Ilya's hand on his stomach began to move, a slow, sweeping caress from his navel down to the waistband of his soft sleep pants, and back up. His other hand came up to gently tilt Shane's head, giving him better access to his throat. Ilya kissed the line of his jaw, his temple, his cheekbone, each press of his lips reverent and unhurried. Shane melted into it, turning in the circle of his arms until they were face to face, noses brushing, sharing the same sleep-warm air.

The kiss that followed was just as slow. A lazy exploration. Ilya tasted of sleep and something uniquely, fundamentally him. Shane parted his lips on a soft sigh, and Ilya's tongue slid in to meet his, a languid dance that had no goal but this closeness. Shane's hands came up to cradle Ilya's face, his thumbs stroking over the sharp planes of his cheekbones, feeling the faint scratch of stubble.

The heat between them built not in a sudden flash, but like the sun gradually heating a room. Ilya rolled them gently, coming to rest over Shane, his weight a perfect, grounding pressure. He kissed a path down Shane's throat, over his collarbone, pushing the soft cotton of his t-shirt aside with his nose and mouth to lavish attention on a nipple. Shane arched off the nest of blankets with a breathy gasp, his fingers tangling in Ilya's sleep-mussed hair.

Everything was hazy and perfect. The slide of skin on skin as their remaining clothes were pushed out of the way was electric. Ilya's touch was everywhere, mapping him with a devotion that made Shane's chest ache. He was floating in a sea of sensation, anchored only by Ilya's body and scent.

Then Ilya shifted. He reached over the side of the nest, his hand fumbling for the small drawer in the bedside table.

The sound of the drawer opening was like a crack in the perfect, sleepy silence. Shane's heart, which had been beating a slow, contented rhythm, gave a hard, unhappy thud. He knew

what was in that drawer. The small, foil-wrapped squares. Ilya's hand emerged, one of them held between his fingers.

A cold little knot formed in the pit of Shane's stomach, so at odds with the warmth everywhere else. He watched, his pleasure momentarily suspended, as Ilya tore the packet open with his teeth. The sound was obscenely loud. Ilya's movements were careful, deliberate, as he sheathed himself.

It was an act of consideration. Of responsibility. Ilya was being *good*. He was following the rules they'd implicitly set, protecting Shane from consequences neither of them were ready for. Shane knew this. Logically, he appreciated it. His omega suppressants were highly effective, but they weren't infallible, and the risk, to his career, to their chaotic lives- was monumental.

But in the secret, yearning core of his very soul, the part that was still floating in that hazy, primal space, he hated it. He hated the barrier. He hated the faint, clinical smell of the latex that cut through their mingled scents. He hated the reminder that even here, in their most private sanctuary, the outside world and its dangers had to be managed.

In the past, in the feverish, obsessive height of their early relationship, Ilya had sometimes forgotten. In his single-minded focus on possession, on claiming, the condom had been an afterthought, skipped in his urgency. And a treacherous, secret part of Shane had... hoped. Had felt a dark, thrilling spike of something like victory when Ilya, lost in him, had neglected that final step. It was wrong. It was reckless. But it had felt like the most profound intimacy imaginable.

Now, Ilya never forgot. This new, careful, post-therapy Ilya was meticulously responsible. And Shane missed the recklessness. He missed the feeling of Ilya being so overcome with wanting him that every other consideration burned away.

He didn't know how to say it. The words stuck in his throat, tangled up with fear and shame. *You don't have to. I'm safe. I want to feel you. Just you.* It felt too vulnerable, too much like asking for a vulnerability he wasn't sure he had the right to request. What if Ilya said no? What if he looked at him with that new, careful rationality and explained all the reasons it was a bad idea? The rejection would shatter this fragile morning peace.

So he said nothing. As Ilya moved over him again, his body now sheathed in that hated barrier, Shane wrapped his legs around his waist and pulled him down into a desperate kiss, trying to recapture the perfect, unthinking haze of before. He poured all his wordless frustration and longing into it, arching up to meet him as Ilya finally, slowly, pushed inside.

It was still good. It was Ilya, his alpha, moving in him with a tenderness that was almost worse than the old roughness. But in the secret part of his heart, Shane mourned the loss of that raw, unfiltered connection. He turned his face into the pillow as the pleasure built, not just to muffle his sounds, but to hide the conflicted, yearning expression he couldn't school from his face. He came with Ilya's name a choked sob on his lips, his body clenching around the barrier, wishing with a fierce, silent ache that it wasn't there at all.

The stolen day bled away in a haze of quiet intimacy. They didn't leave the nest. They talked, in hushed, fragmented sentences. They slept again, now naked and tangled together. They kissed, slowly, with a tenderness that felt like a new language they were both clumsily learning. Ilya cataloged every second, storing it against the coming deprivation.

The afternoon arrived with the cruel clarity of alarm clocks. Shane had a 3 PM flight to catch for the West Coast road trip. The process of disentangling from the nest felt like a physical amputation.

Ilya moved first, driven by a need to be useful. He made coffee, and while Shane showered, he placed a call to the private chef he'd retained for Shane months ago - a discreet, talented beta named Laurent who handled meal prep for several professional athletes in the city.

"Laurent, it's Ilya. He leaves today for the road. The usual travel packs, please. High protein, complex carbs. But listen," Ilya's voice lowered, his gaze fixed on the closed bathroom door. "The last delivery report. You noted the chicken and rice portions were only half-eaten. The vegetable portions untouched. Is this pattern?"

A pause on the line. "It's been... yes, Mr. Rozanov. Over the last few weeks, since the, uh, increased stress, I'd say. Caloric intake is down about thirty percent from his baseline. He's picking at it. Very restrictive. It's not a macro shift; it's avoidance."

A cold knot formed in Ilya's stomach. Stress manifesting as control over the one thing Shane could always control: his diet. His fuel. His performance. "Can you make adjustments?"

Smaller, more frequent packs. More of the foods he gravitates to when he's calm. The mango slices he said were good. The almond butter added to some food. Do not make it a thing he has to think about."

"Understood."

He hung up as Shane emerged, dressed in travel gear, his hair damp. The vulnerability of the nest was gone, replaced by the focused, professional mask of Shane Hollander, Montreal's star player. The sight was a twist in Ilya's heart.

The goodbye was a quiet, aching thing in the foyer. No grand promises. Ilya framed Shane's face in his hands, his thumbs stroking over his cheekbones. "You eat what Laurent sends. You sleep. You call me when you land. Ya tebya lyublyu."

"Are you going to tell me what that means?" Shane whispered, his eyes bright and a silly smile growing on his face.

"Ah, yes. Russian lessons will start soon for you. First I think I'll teach you "Fuck me harder... very useful for you." Ilya said against his lips.

Shane laughed at that, pulling away for a few seconds. He kissed Ilya, once, soft and final. Then he shouldered his bag, gave a small, shaky smile, and walked out the door to the waiting team car.

The silence in the house was deafening.

Ilya didn't move for a long time. He loved the smell of his home. It was the scent of them together all over this room. He went to get ready and took a quick shower. He left the clothes from yesterday in Shane's hamper and pulled out a fresh outfit from his bag. He locked up the house and made his way to the airport, hoping that he wouldn't be noticed and be able to board his flight without incident.

Four hours later, Marly let himself in with the door code Ilya had given him previously. He found Ilya in the kitchen, staring blankly at the coffee maker.

“He got off okay?” Marly asked, dropping his bag.

“Da.”

Marly nodded, opening the fridge and pulling out two water bottles. He tossed one to Ilya. “So. What’s the plan, Roz? You’re not just gonna mope in empty house.”

Ilya caught the bottle, the cold shock a welcome anchor. “He got to his hotel so now I wait for him to have time for a call. We have games.” He took a swig. “I need a new agent. Mine has too many ties to Russian endorsements. People my father knew.”

Marly leaned against the counter, understanding immediately. “Cleaning house.”

“I am building a new one,” Ilya corrected quietly. “My rookie contract is almost up. I want to see the offers. All of them. Officially.” He didn’t say the rest, but the implication hung in the air: he was looking for a path, a team, a city that could potentially accommodate an impossible future. One that might, somehow, include Shane.

“Smart,” Marly grunted. “You want to leave Boston though? We have a good team, I think. And Hollander? He wouldn’t switch teams?”

“I don’t think so.” Ilya said, a faint frown touching his lips, “He overheard his GM say they would offer anything to keep him. But is true, they based their entire line to revolve around Shane. That, and he would not be too happy to leave Montreal.”

Marly whistled softly. “Still can’t believe it. You and Hollander. How the hell did you manage to pull that off. I mean look at him. Everyone wants him and that’s without him being an omega being known.”

“It is not a complication, he knows he’s mine.” Ilya said, though his chest tightened. “It is a fact.” He looked at Marly. “And if you talk about him like piece of meat again, I’ll rebreak your nose..”

Marly studied him, then nodded. “Fine, but you’re buying me the most expensive steak in this state tonight.”

“Done.”

The separation was a dull, constant ache. They worked at their communication like it was a new drill, deliberate and awkward at times they'd promised.. Ilya would text a picture of his terrible fast food orders to get a rise out of Shane. Shane would send a screenshot of a confusing play from the game tape, asking for his read. Ilya would call late at night, his voice a low rumble from his empty bed, and they would talk about nothing and everything.

It was during one of these calls that Shane shared the news, his voice bright with genuine happiness. “Hayden and Jackie just announced it. She’s pregnant again. Due in the off-season.” A beat. “And Scott texted. Kip had the baby. A boy. Seven pounds even. They’re naming him Henry.”

Ilya’s congratulations were automatic, sincere for Shane’s friends. But a sharp, ugly spike of jealousy, hot and immediate, lodged beneath his sternum. Shane was sharing joy with him, but the joy was about *other* people’s families, *other* people’s bonds. He wished, with a ferocity that shamed him, that Shane was flying to see him. That *they* were the ones sharing news that would make their friends cheer.

“That is wonderful,” Ilya managed to say, his voice even.

“I’m going to try to fly to see them during our break between Vancouver and Edmonton,” Shane said, already planning, his tone shifting into logistical mode. “It’s a tight turnaround,

but I think I can make it work for a really short visit.”

The jealousy curdled into a cold, hard lump. He would cross the continent for a newborn, but their own stolen days were measured in hours, begged from coaches with lies about sore shoulders.

“They will appreciate that,” was all Ilya said.

He didn’t voice the jealousy. He recognized it now for what it was: the old sickness, the possessive obsession, twitching in its grave. He let the feeling fester for a short second, acknowledged it, and then quietly packed it away. This was the work. This was the difference. Love was celebrating Shane’s joy for others, even when it highlighted his own absence.

Later, alone in his silent home in Boston, he stared at the ceiling. The future was a tangled knot. Shane’s roots were deep in Montreal. His own contract was a question mark. A new agent needed to be vetted, one with no ties to the shadows he was fleeing. They were two stars in separate, demanding orbits.

But for now, there was this: the daily text, the late-night call, the shared, silent understanding of what had been sacrificed and what was being slowly, painstakingly rebuilt. It wasn’t a nest. It wasn’t a binding claim. It was a thread, fragile but tenacious, stretched across a continent, holding the weight of all their complicated, damaged, relentless love. It would have to be enough. For now.

The thread between them thrummed with a new, quiet tension after the baby news. Ilya’s jealousy, though banked, simmered like a low-grade fever. It manifested not in accusations, but in a hyper-vigilant focus. His calls became more frequent, his questions more detailed. *Did you eat? What did Laurent pack? How many hours did you sleep?* The concern was genuine, but it was edged with a need to be the primary source of comfort, the first line of defense against a world that claimed so much of Shane’s time and energy.

Shane felt it. He heard the subtle shift in Ilya's voice, the way a simple question about his day could feel like an audit. Part of him, the part that still lived in the shadow of their prior dynamic, bristled. But the larger part, the part that remembered the man sobbing on the floor, understood. He answered with patience, sending pictures of his finished meals, detailing his days. It was an offering of transparency, a way to soothe the beast of Ilya's anxiety without surrendering to it.

The road trip was a grind. The win in Vancouver was followed by a brutal, travel-weary loss in Edmonton. Shane played well, but he felt hollow, his energy sapped. Alone in his hotel room after the game, the silence was oppressive. He pulled out his laptop, not to review tape, but to open the folder of blueprints and 3D renderings for his new house. He zoomed in on the master suite, on the clean lines of the walk-in shower, on the private patio overlooking the planned garden. This was his future. Solid. Independent. His.

His phone lit up with a call. Ilya.

"Are you looking at the plans for your house, or studying?" Ilya said by way of greeting, his voice a warm rumble in the quiet room.

Shane smiled, a real one, despite his fatigue. "How do you know that?"

"You get certain tone when you are thinking about lines and angles. Is softer. More... quiet. Am I right?"

Shane's breath caught. He *was* right, as usual. "Yeah."

"Good. Building is almost done, yes?"

Shane blinked, leaning closer to the screen. "Should be. I have an inspection next week that my mom will go to and then it should be done soon after."

A low, almost embarrassed chuckle. “Good for you, Mr. Real Estate. I have very smart Omega. I have been reading. About architecture. It is... interesting. I can see why you like it. Your mind works good with that type of information.”

The revelation made Shane’s stomach flip, a warmth spreading through Shane’s chest and he closed his eyes, just listening to Ilya. Ilya wasn’t just asking about his day; he was trying to learn his language. He was studying the blueprints of Shane’s dreams, not to criticize, but to help him build them stronger. The possessiveness was still there, but it was being reforged into stewardship.

“Thank you,” Shane whispered, his throat tight.

“Do not thank me. Just make sure the builder is not an idiot.” Ilya’s tone shifted, the gruffness returning. “You sound tired. More than usual.”

“Just a long flight. We play Calgary tomorrow.”

“Eat. Sleep, ptichka. I will let you go.”

But neither of them hung up. The silence stretched, comfortable now, filled with the shared vision of a sun-drenched patio that existed only on a screen and in their mutual imagination. Ilya stayed on the phone until he heard Shane’s breathing slow and the soft snores a few minutes later.

Back in Boston, Ilya closed the architecture textbook on his lap. The jealousy was still a cold stone in his gut, but he had found a way to move it. He couldn’t be the one giving Shane a child, not right now. It was a pathetic substitution, he thought sometimes. But it was action. It was a form of love that asked for nothing in return but the safety of the beloved.

His phone buzzed with a notification- an encrypted alert from the security system he'd had installed at Shane's construction site. Motion detected after hours. He opened the live feed, his body coiling. A lone figure, a kid by the look of it, trying the lock on the construction trailer. Ilya's finger hovered over the button to trigger the remote alarm and alert the private security firm he'd also hired.

Then he stopped. This was the old way. The controlling way. Taking over, handling it without a word, being the unseen protector. Shane had said he wanted the hunger, not a closed door.

He took a screenshot. He sent it to Shane with a simple text.

IGR- Site security alert. Kid at the trailer. Nothing serious. Do you want me to handle it, or do you want to call your project manager?

The response came a minute later.

Shane- I'll call Michael. He knows the local cops. Thank you for telling me. Its probably just a kid messing around.

It was a small thing. Insignificant. But Ilya leaned back in his chair, a different kind of warmth settling over him. He had shared a problem, not just a solution. He had offered control, not just taken it. The thread between them didn't feel like a leash he was holding; it felt like a line they were both holding onto, keeping each other from drifting into their separate darknesses.

In Calgary, Shane lay in the dark after dealing with the security alert. The talk with Ilya over the blueprints, the way he'd shared the security issue... it stirred the secret yearning awake. The memory of the other morning, of the condom, of the barrier, felt sharp again.

His heats were usually a distant, regulated event on his calendar, suppressed and managed, relegated to a week during the summer. The idea of going off his suppressants was always a risk. The risk was catastrophic. But the want... the want was a live wire. It wasn't just about a baby. It was about the most profound vulnerability he could offer. It was about giving Ilya something that couldn't be taken back, a biological truth. It was about seeing if Ilya, in that most primal moment, would choose the claim or the caution.

He knew it was a dangerous fantasy. It would be insanely irresponsible to have a baby while both of their contracts were about to be up for renewal. When he didn't have an idea on how to declare his omega status without losing everything. It would be crazy. Besides the fact that they hadn't fully discussed their relationship status, he didn't know how Ilya felt about babies. It would be unfair to pin this information on him after Shane had been going back and forth for so long about where to go with their feelings. It was unfair. It was everything they were trying to move beyond.

He rolled over, punching his pillow. This was the work, too. Not just managing Ilya's demons, but managing his own. His need for a proof so absolute it bordered on self-destruction at times.

They had their game the next night. Shane scored the game-winning goal, a wicked wrist shot top shelf. The arena noise was deafening. In the quiet of the phone later, Ilya's voice was full of a pride so fierce it was like another presence in the room.

"You were magnificent. A predator."

Shane, buzzing with post-game adrenaline and a deeper loneliness, closed his eyes. "I wish you were here."

The silence on the line was heavy. Then, Ilya's voice, rough with the same want. "I know, zayka. I know."

The thread on Ilya's sanity felt stretched sometimes, thin but strong. It held the weight of Ilya's anxiety of not being able to see Shane whenever he wanted, of shared security alerts and lonely hotel rooms. But he could not push for too much. Sometimes he could feel that

Shane missed him too. He could hear it in Shane's voice when he was having a bad night and was determined to be the one to help him.

The distance became a physical ache, a constant hum of wrongness in Ilya's bones. The "work" of healthy communication- the sharing of their day to day thoughts, the transparent conversation that they started having about their therapy sessions, began to feel like it was helping, but it was hard to be apart for so long.

Dr. Kostova said she was proud of his progress. She asked him to keep writing his thoughts when he felt overwhelmed and asked to limit Shane's calls. She was worried that Ilya was becoming too dependant on Shane to stabilize his moods. They were not fully mated yet and that could be mentally damaging to Ilya.

Ilya disagreed. They were practically bonded already in actions if not officially and he hoped that Shane would be ready for that soon. He expected that during the summer they would be able to spend more time together in a continuous stretch for the first time. He just had to make it until then.

"I am doing the things," Ilya stated flatly during one session, his back against the headboard of another anonymous bed. "I ask about him. I listen. I do not demand. I learn his classes so we can talk about them." He raked a hand through his hair. "And it changes nothing. The emptiness is the same."

"What does the emptiness feel like?" his therapist asked.

"It feels like he is forgetting," Ilya snapped, the words escaping before he could cage them. "He sends the pictures of his meals, he answers my calls, he talks about his games. He is fine. He is moving through his world, and I am... a chore on his checklist. 'Call Ilya. Reassure Ilya.'" The jealousy, now fully fermented, spilled over. "He flies across the country to hold another man's baby. He has time for that. He has the energy for that. For me, he has tired voice at the end of a long day."

There was a pause on the line. "You've mentioned this before- the comparison between the attention he gives others and the attention he gives you. What does that mean to you?"

“It means I am not a priority!” The outburst was raw, echoing in the empty room. He lowered his voice, venomous and pained. “It means his life is complete without me. He has his team, his friends, his new house, his... his future. I am a complication. A problem he has to manage. He misses the idea of me, perhaps. The sex. The comfort. But he does not *need* me. Not like I...” He trailed off, swallowing the rest.

“Not like you need him,” the therapist finished gently.

Ilya said nothing, which was confirmation enough. The core fear was laid bare- that his love was a bottomless, desperate need, while Shane’s was a manageable, compartmentalized affection. That he was, in essence, an exhausting burden. Something that was forgettable if not being beneficial, like he had been for everyone else his whole life.

“And the evidence for this?” the therapist pressed. “The phone calls he initiates? The way he shares his private plans with you?”

“Obligation!” Ilya fired back. “He is a good person. He feels responsible for the mess he is tied to. It is pity. Or it is... a transaction. He gives me pieces of his time to keep me calm, to keep me from becoming what I was. It is a strategy. He is managing me.”

He heard the distortion in his own logic, the paranoia of the old sickness twisting the new, careful threads between them. But feeling it and believing it were two different things. The loneliness was a more convincing argument.

After the session ended, he felt worse, not better. The professional had mirrored his thoughts back to him, and they sounded pathetic, small, and unlovable. He stalked around the hotel room, his skin too tight. He opened his laptop, not to the architecture texts, but to a private, encrypted folder. It held no illicit photos, but something equally intimate: his own notes. The journal he’d started.

He was studying Shane’s patterns like game tape, searching for a deviation, a sign of erosion or deepening need. All he saw was consistency. And consistency, to his starved heart, felt like indifference. Out of the 36 entries he’d made so far, 29 were focused on Shane.

His phone buzzed. A notification for a charity gala in Montreal next month. Shane's team was involved. Shane would be there, smiling in a tuxedo, surrounded by people who wanted a piece of him. Ilya would be elsewhere, playing a game in another city. Shane had invited him, along with Marlow but the schedule wouldn't allow it.

The spiral tightened. He needed a scent, a taste, a physical reminder that he was real in Shane's world. He went to his closet and pulled out the hoodie he'd taken from Shane's house weeks ago- the one Shane had worn, now carefully folded and stored in a sealed bag. He tore the bag open and buried his face in the fabric.

The scent was faint, almost gone. Just a ghost of honeysuckle under the clean smell of his own laundry detergent. It was worse than nothing. It was decay. It was proof that everything faded.

He threw the hoodie across the room. It landed in a silent heap.

He didn't call Shane that night. He knew his voice would betray the churning, needy darkness inside him. He sent a simple text:

IGR- Long day. Talk tomorrow. Sleep well.

The three dots appeared, lingered, then disappeared. No reply. Just a thumbs-up emoji an hour later.

Ilya stared at the screen, the blue light washing out his face in the dark room. The silence was killing him. He was jealous. At the teammates that got to see Shane everyday. At the group friends Shane trusted who he dropped his plans for and would get on a plane to visit it only for a few hours. jealousy. He had given it a shape: the shape of Shane living a full life without him. And he had no idea how to live inside it.

He opened the blueprints for Shane's house again, zooming in on the master suite. It was a large house. Built for a family. The master suite had definitely been planned for a couple. *You two weren't even speaking when the plans were being drawn.*

Had Shane designed this house without a thought towards him? Was this just a plan to have another alpha there-someone better, more dependable?

He quickly stood up and went to his medicine bag, taking an anxiety pill and downing the whole water bottle. They would have time together this summer. At least a few days to get important conversations out of the way.

The five-day wait was an exquisite form of torture. Each hour stretched, rubbery and dense. Ilya moved through his own games in a fog of focused fury, channeling all the pent-up frustration and jealous longing into brutal, efficient play. He scored, he hit, he dominated- all while a clock ticked in the back of his skull, counting down to the moment the final buzzer would sound and he could shed the uniform and become just a man racing toward his mate.

They were out of the playoffs. It was not a surprise since he'd missed a week almost. He was still one of the best players of the league of course, but he didn't exactly dominate the game like he'd done for the past 3 years. This year Shane was definitely going to be winning the awards race and Ilya didn't care too much at this point.

Shane, two time zones away, was no better. He played well, but his focus was split. The ice felt like a waiting room. He caught himself staring at the arena clocks during shifts, calculating the shrinking distance between now and then. His skin felt too sensitive, as if already anticipating the scrape of Ilya's stubble, the bite of his hands.

The reunion was not poetic or tender. It was a collision.

Ilya's flight landed late. He took a car directly to the hotel he'd booked- a different, discreet one a few blocks from where the all star teams were lodging. He'd texted the room number. He let himself in, dropped his bag just inside the door, and stood in the center of the dark suite, vibrating with an energy that had no outlet.

The electronic key beeped. The door opened.

Shane stood there, backlit by the hallway light, still in his team-issue track suit, pacing the room. He looked rumpled, tired, and so beautiful it stole the air from Ilya's lungs.

For a suspended second, they just stared, drinking each other in across the dim room. The distance, the jealousy, the silent fears- they all compressed into that single, silent point of connection.

Then Ilya dropped his bag. It hit the floor with a soft thump. They moved at the same time.

It wasn't a walk, it was a closing of distance in two strides. Ilya's hands were on Shane's face, Shane's were fisted in Ilya's shirt, and their mouths crashed together with a hunger that was five days, five weeks, a lifetime in the making.

The kiss was not tender. It was devouring. A clash of teeth and tongue and desperate, shared breath. Ilya tasted the faint mint of Shane's toothpaste and the unique, essential flavor of him. Shane tasted coffee and the long flight and Ilya. They stumbled further into the room, a four-legged creature of pure need, mouths locked, hands pulling and clutching. Ilya backed Shane against the nearest wall, the impact shuddering through them both, but they didn't break the kiss. It deepened, turned wetter, more frantic. Ilya's hands slid from Shane's face down his neck, his shoulders, gripping hard enough to bruise, as if to verify that his mate was really there. Shane moaned into his mouth, the sound vibrating against Ilya's tongue, and his hips jerked forward, seeking friction.

Ilya tore at the zipper of Shane's track jacket, shoving it off his shoulders. Shane yanked Ilya's Henley up, breaking the kiss only long enough to pull it over his head before their mouths found each other again, more desperate than before. They shed layers in a frantic, uncoordinated dance, pants kicked away, socks lost, until they were both bare, skin to searing skin, pressed between the wall and Ilya's relentless body.

Ilya's mouth left Shane's to blaze a trail down his throat, sucking a dark mark into the tanned skin over his pulse. Shane's head thumped back against the wall, a guttural "Ilya" ripped

from him. His hands were everywhere- in Ilya's hair, clawing down his back, gripping his ass to pull him closer, harder.

"Bed," Ilya growled against his collarbone, his voice unrecognizable.

They didn't make it to the bed so much as fall onto it in a tangled heap of limbs. Ilya rolled, pinning Shane beneath him, and the kissing began anew, slower now but no less intense, a rediscovery of territory. Ilya worshiped him with his mouth, the shell of his ear, the flutter of his eyelids, the strong line of his jaw, the sensitive dip between his pectorals. He took one nipple into his mouth, swirling his tongue until Shane was arching off the mattress with a broken cry, then gave the same devoted attention to the other.

But when his mouth moved lower, over the quivering plane of Shane's stomach, he stopped. He lifted his head, his eyes, black with desire, meeting Shane's hazy, pleading ones.

"No," Ilya said, the word a soft, dangerous command.

He moved back up Shane's body, kissing him deeply, before shifting to his side. He propped himself on an elbow, his free hand beginning a slow, torturous exploration. He traced the lines of Shane's ribs, the curve of his hip, the inside of his thigh. He wrapped his fingers around Shane's erection, which was already leaking and painfully hard, and gave one long, smooth stroke that made Shane sob.

Then he let go. He spent the next hour in a masterclass of exquisite torment. He would touch, then retreat. Kiss, then deny. He used his hands, his mouth, the rough friction of his own body, to bring Shane to the very precipice of release, over and over, only to pull him back with a murmured "Nyet, not yet," or a stilling hand. He learned every gasp, every twitch, every pleading whimper that signaled Shane was about to fall, and he became a sculptor of that edge, keeping him suspended in a state of agonized, rapturous need.

Shane unraveled beautifully. He became a writhing, begging mess. Tears of frustration leaked from the corners of his eyes. "Please, Ilya, please... I can't... just let me..."

“What do you want?” Ilya murmured against his throat, his own body a tightly coiled spring of denied pleasure.

“You. I want you. Fuck me. Please, just fuck me, hard.”

The raw need in Shane’s voice, the surrender, was what finally broke Ilya’s control. With a growl, he reached for the nightstand, fumbling for the condom. But Shane’s hand shot out, gripping his wrist. His eyes, though glazed with pleasure, held a shocking clarity, a desperate challenge.

“No. Just you. I want to feel you.”

The words hung between them, a grenade with the pin pulled. Ilya stared, his heart hammering against his ribs. It was everything he wanted, everything he feared, the ultimate claim and the ultimate risk. He saw not just desire, but a test in Shane’s eyes. *Choose me. Choose this. Choose us.*

He didn’t reach for the drawer again.

He positioned himself, the broad head of his cock pressing against Shane’s entrance, slick with pre-come and the evidence of their long edging. He looked down, meeting Shane’s gaze, and pushed inside in one slow, relentless, breathtaking inch.

The feeling was catastrophic. The heat, the tightness, the shocking, barrier-less intimacy of it. Shane cried out, his body arching, taking him deeper. Ilya buried his face in Shane’s neck, groaning as he sheathed himself fully, feeling Shane’s body clutch around him in spasms of overwhelmed sensation.

He began to move, setting a deep, pounding rhythm that shook the bedframe. It was hard, almost violent, a physical expression of all the pent-up longing and fear. Each thrust punched a ragged sound from Shane’s lungs.

“Harder,” Shane begged, his nails digging into Ilya’s back. “More, Ilya, please, I need more...”

It still wasn’t enough. The angle, the depth- Shane needed something else, something final. Ilya understood. In one fluid, powerful motion, he gripped Shane’s hips and flipped them over.

Now Shane was straddling him, impaled, looking down with wild, blown pupils. He braced his hands on Ilya’s chest and began to move, finding a frantic, riding rhythm, taking Ilya even deeper. His head fell back, cords standing out in his neck. It was glorious, but the begging continued, a broken litany.

“Knot me... please, Ilya, I need it... need you to... claim me...”

The words were the final key. Ilya’s control shattered. With a roar that was pure possession, he surged up, wrapping his arms around Shane and rolling them again, pinning him beneath his weight. He drove into him with a final, brutal pace, each thrust aimed now for that deepest, most primal connection.

The pressure began to build, an insistent, swelling fullness at the base of his cock that was both biological and spiritual. Shane felt it, his eyes flying wide with a mix of terror and ecstasy. “Yes... yes...”

With one last, searing thrust, Ilya pushed forward and held. The knot swelled, locked, tied them together in a searing, exquisite stretch that was beyond pleasure, beyond pain, it was a fusion. Ilya’s orgasm ripped through him, endless waves of release that seemed to pull Shane’s own climax from the very roots of his soul. Shane screamed, his body clamping down in rhythmic, vice-like pulses around the knot, milking it, welcoming it.

Ilya collapsed, his full weight a final anchor, his face buried in the sweat-damp hollow of Shane’s throat. They were fused, pulsing, utterly joined. The world ceased to exist outside the frantic beat of their hearts and the profound, binding truth of their bodies.

As the waves subsided, leaving them trembling and breathless, knotted together in the wrecked sheets, Ilya lifted his head. He looked into Shane's utterly shattered, bliss-filled face. No barriers. No secrets. Just the raw, terrifying, magnificent truth of what they were, and what they had chosen.

He didn't make the mistake of calling him mate again. He didn't need to. The word was now a physical fact, throbbing between them. He simply brushed his lips against Shane's, a whisper of a kiss, and whispered, "Moy."

Mine.

Time lost all meaning. There was only the slow, shared rhythm of their breath, the occasional aftershock that made them both gasp, and the profound, inescapable fullness that bound them together. Ilya remained perfectly still, his weight carefully distributed, his arms a secure cage around Shane. He could feel the frantic hammer of Shane's heart gradually slowing against his own chest, settling into a heavy, languid thump. Shane's eyes were closed, his face slack, lips slightly parted. He had floated away, submerged in the blissful, weightless void of subspace.

Ilya monitored him with a fierce, silent focus. He counted breaths, noted the healthy pink flush returning to Shane's skin, felt the last tremors of overstimulation fade into total boneless relaxation. This was a gift, this utter surrender, and Ilya guarded it jealously. He pressed a kiss to Shane's damp temple, inhaling the scent of sweat, sex, and the fading, sweet haze of his omega's release.

Slowly, infinitesimally, the demanding swell at the base of his cock began to soften. The tie loosened its urgent grip. Ilya waited until it was safe, before he finally, carefully, withdrew. A soft, sensitive whimper escaped Shane's throat at the loss, but he didn't stir from his deep headspace.

Gently, Ilya gathered him up. Shane was pliant, his limbs heavy and loose as Ilya lifted him, cradling him against his chest. He carried him into the bathroom, where he turned on the shower since it seemed impossible for either of them to disconnect long enough to let Ilya start a bath. He stepped into the large glass enclosure, adjusting the water until it was a perfect, heavy cascade of heat.

He stepped under the spray, holding Shane close, letting the water sluice over them both, washing away the physical evidence of their coupling. The water was a shock of sensation on oversensitive skin. Ilya reached for the soap, working up a gentle lather in his hands. He began to wash Shane with a methodical, worshipful tenderness. He started with his hair, massaging his scalp, rinsing the suds away with a cupped hand. He soaped his back, his arms, the long line of his legs, every touch meant to ground, to soothe, to communicate care without words.

As he washed Shane's chest, his thumbs brushing over his nipples, a change began. Shane's breathing hitched, deepened. A faint tremor returned to his limbs. His lashes fluttered. Ilya watched, his own heart aching, as awareness slowly seeped back into Shane's features. The faraway peace blurred, sharpened into confusion, then softened into a dazed, weary recognition. His eyes, hazy and beautiful, focused on Ilya's face.

"Hey," Ilya murmured, his voice a low rumble under the patter of the water. "Welcome back, Lyubov' moya."

Shane blinked water from his lashes. A slow, wobbly smile touched his lips. He leaned forward, resting his forehead against Ilya's collarbone, nuzzling there. "Ilya."

The word was a sigh of homecoming. Ilya turned them, bracing Shane against the cool, tiled wall, the water cascading over their shoulders. He kissed him then, not with the devouring hunger of before, but with a deep, searching sweetness that spoke of gratitude and awe. Shane responded lazily, his mouth soft and yielding.

The kiss deepened, and the embers of desire, banked but never extinguished, glowed hot again. Ilya's hands slid down Shane's slick back, over the curve of his ass, gripping and lifting. Shane understood, wrapping his legs around Ilya's waist with a fluid grace that belied his earlier exhaustion. The new position brought their bodies into exquisite, full-length contact.

Ilya reached between them, his fingers finding Shane's vaginal entrance, now slick with water and the natural readiness of his body. He pressed one, then two fingers inside, working him open with a slow, patient thoroughness that made Shane moan into his mouth. The preparation was different now- not for a frantic, knotting claim, but for a deeper, more encompassing intimacy. They rarely made love like that so Ilya focused on Shane's face for permission.

When he was sure Shane was ready, Ilya aligned himself. He caught Shane's gaze, holding it as he pressed forward, not into the familiar, clenched heat of before, but lower, into a tighter, channel. A sharp, surprised inhale from Shane. A slight, instinctive tightening.

Ilya stilled, completely. He kissed Shane again, swallowing the faint hiss of discomfort, kissing his jaw, his throat. "Shhh," he whispered against his skin. "Easy. Just breathe. Take me. Just like this."

He waited, letting Shane's body adjust to this new, different fullness. The water beat down on them, a warm, insistent rhythm. Slowly, the tension bled from Shane's shoulders. He relaxed around Ilya, a slow, deliberate yielding that was more profound than any frantic taking. Ilya began to move, a slow, rolling thrust of his hips that sank him deeper with each pass.

This was not fucking. This was something else. A claiming, yes, but also a revelation. Each stroke was a discovery of new, untouched territory. The angle was different, the sensations startlingly intimate. Shane's arms tightened around Ilya's neck, his face buried against his wet skin, his breaths coming in hot, ragged puffs. The slight pain had transmuted into a deep, stretching pleasure that seemed to resonate in his very core.

Ilya set a relentless, deep rhythm, using the wall for leverage, the water making their skin slide together with a slick, sensual friction. He forced Shane's face away from his neck to gauge his reactions. He watched Shane's face, mesmerized by the play of overwhelmed pleasure, by the trust that allowed this final vulnerability. He felt a different kind of peak building, not the explosive, possessive crest of the knot, but a slower, warmer tide of connection that felt just as binding.

When release took them, it was a shared, shuddering sigh rather than a roar. Ilya spilled deep inside his mate, his own climax triggering Shane's, a softer, rolling wave that left them both trembling and clinging to each other under the relentless, cleansing spray.

For a long time, they just stood there, entangled, breathing, as the water cooled around them. Ilya finally reached out and shut it off. The sudden silence was loud. He reached for a large, fluffy towel, wrapping it around Shane before securing one around his own waist.

He carried a boneless, satiated Shane back to the bed, careful to avoid the dirtied areas. They collapsed onto it, damp and spent, facing each other. No words were needed. Ilya pulled the covers over them and gathered Shane close, tucking his head under his chin. Shane's hand came to rest over Ilya's heart, his breathing evening out into sleep within minutes.

Ilya lay awake in the dark, listening to that breath, feeling the warm weight in his arms. The jealousy, the distance, the fear, the anxiety- they were gone, banished for now by the overwhelming, physical act of what they had shared. He had claimed, and been claimed, in almost every way possible. The emptiness was gone, filled to bursting. He pressed his lips to Shane's hair and finally, for the first time in weeks, slept a deep and dreamless sleep.

The deep, post-claim sleep was absolute, but Ilya's internal clock- and a persistent, tender hunger, woke him hours later. The room was still dark, the city outside a silent, distant hum. Shane was a warm line against his side, breathing deeply, his face smooth and untroubled in sleep.

Ilya watched him for a long moment, the possessive ache in his chest softening into something sweeter, more reverent. He wanted to worship. Silently, he slid down the bed, the sheets whispering. He nudged Shane's legs apart with his shoulders and, without preamble, took him into his mouth.

Shane woke not with a start, but on a slow, cresting wave of pleasure. A deep, confused groan vibrated in his chest, his hips lifting instinctively into the wet heat. "Ilya...?" His voice was thick, disoriented.

Ilya hummed in response, the vibration earning a sharp gasp. He worked him with a devoted, languid pace, all slow suction and swirling tongue, rebuilding the pleasure from the ashes of their earlier exhaustion. Shane's hands fumbled down, tangling in his hair, not guiding, just holding on as he was pulled fully awake by sensation.

When Shane was fully hard, trembling on the edge, Ilya drew off with a wet sound. He brought his hand down, his fingertips gently seeking the other, more familiar entrance, wanting to prepare him, to open him up for more.

The moment his finger made contact, Shane's body changed. The pliant, melting tension vanished. His thighs stiffened, a subtle but definite flinch running through him. He didn't pull

away, but the welcoming heat was gone, replaced by a guarded tightness.

Ilya froze. He lifted his head, looking up the length of Shane's body. Shane's eyes were open now, watching him in the dim light. There was no fear, but a clear, quiet hesitation. The memory of the shower- the newness, the slight pain, the overwhelming fullness was still too present. His body was saying *not there, not yet*.

Without a word, Ilya withdrew his hand, his eyes never leaving Shane's. He saw the flicker of relief, of gratitude. Then he lowered his head again and took Shane back into his mouth, redoubling his efforts. This was what was needed. This alone.

He used his lips, his tongue, the gentle pressure of his throat, until Shane was arching off the bed with a broken, surrendering cry, his release flooding Ilya's mouth. Ilya drank him down, soothing him through the shudders with soft, flat presses of his tongue until Shane went limp, boneless and spent.

Ilya moved back up the bed, gathering Shane into his arms. He pulled the covers over them both and arranged Shane against his chest, their legs tangling, again. Shane's head found its home in the hollow of Ilya's shoulder, his breath slowly steadying.

For a long time, they just lay there in the dark, staring at each other from inches away. Ilya traced the arch of Shane's eyebrow, the curve of his lip. Shane's finger drew idle circles over Ilya's pectoral.

"You've killed me, Rozanov." Shane said with a silly smile. After a moment, "I missed you," Shane whispered, the words a puff of air against Ilya's skin. "It's... harder when you're gone. Everything is."

"I know," Ilya murmured, his thumb stroking Shane's freckles. "My mind, it becomes a bad place. I watch the clock. I read your texts too many times."

"I could tell." Shane smiled, a small, sad thing. "You asked about my lunch three days in a row. I read it through all the messages when you're anxious."

“I was... checking.” Ilya admitted, no defensiveness left in him. “It is a habit I am trying to break. It is not control. It is... fear.”

“I know.” Shane shifted, pressing a soft kiss to the center of Ilya’s chest. “We’re both... figuring it out.”

The silence returned, comfortable now, filled with the warmth of skin and the rhythm of shared breath.

“The summer,” Ilya said after a while. “What are your plans?”

Shane’s finger stilled its circling. “Quiet. I have the cottage on the lake that will be finished. Just... training on my own. Peace. No media, no schedule.” He took a slow breath. “My parents might come up for a week. Maybe Hayden and Jackie and the baby, if they’re up for it.”

He fell quiet. Ilya waited. He could feel the unspoken question hanging in the space between them. He could see it in the way Shane’s eyes searched his, in the slight catch in his breathing.

Ask me, Ilya thought, pouring the permission into his gaze, into the steady stroke of his hand on Shane’s back. *Ask me to come*.

But Shane’s courage seemed to falter. The invitation trembled on his lips, then retreated. Asking Ilya to invade his private, peaceful sanctuary for two whole months was a vulnerability of a different magnitude. It was one thing to steal nights in hotel rooms; it was another to share the mundane reality of a whole summer. What if Ilya grew bored? What if the closeness became claustrophobic? What if he said no?

“It will be good for you,” Ilya said softly, when it was clear Shane wouldn’t ask. “The quiet. You need it.” He leaned in and kissed him, a slow, lingering promise. “And I will be

wherever you want me to be. A phone call away. Or a flight away. The distance does not matter if I know you are happy.”

It was both a gift and a subtle push. *I am giving you the out, but I am telling you I would cross any distance.*

Shane’s eyes shimmered in the dark. He understood. He kissed Ilya back, pouring a tumult of gratitude and frustration and longing into it. The question remained unasked, but it lived between them now, a shared, fragile possibility hanging in the pre-dawn air, as palpable as the scent of their skin and the echo of their heartbeats.

The grey light of a rainy dawn found them still tangled, but the clock was a tyrant. Ilya’s flight was in three hours. The warm, sleepy bubble they’d built was already thinning, pierced by the harsh reality of itineraries and obligations.

Shane felt it first, a deep, hollow ache blooming beneath the pleasant soreness. A few hours. After weeks of starving, they’d been given a feast and then told to stop after the first course. He was wrung out, emotionally porous, every nerve ending raw from the intensity of their reunion and the looming separation. He watched Ilya dress with a silent, sinking sadness, memorizing the way his shirt stretched across his shoulders, the efficient click of his watch clasp.

The goodbye happened at the hotel room door yet again. They stood facing each other, the space between them already feeling like a chasm. No words seemed adequate.

Ilya reached for him first, one hand cupping the back of Shane’s neck, his thumb stroking the sensitive skin just under his jaw. “Look at me,” he commanded, his voice low.

Shane’s eyes, which were already threatening tears, snapped up and locked onto his. Ilya leaned in and captured his mouth in a kiss that was not sweet, but fierce. A branding. A promise and a punishment for leaving. Shane kissed back with equal desperation, his hands fisting in the front of Ilya’s jacket, trying to pull him back into the room, back into the nest, back into the world where they were the only two people that mattered.

When they broke apart, both were breathless. Ilya kept his hand on Shane's neck, holding his gaze. A slow, wicked smirk touched his lips. "I love," he murmured, his thumb stroking his freckles, "how easily you go soft and sweet for me. How you just... float away. Is a beautiful thing to watch."

The words, so intimate and possessive, cut through the sadness with a spark of familiar heat. Shane huffed a weak laugh, shaking his head. "You're an asshole."

"Your asshole," Ilya corrected, his smirk softening into something more genuine. He pulled him in for one last, searing kiss- softer this time, a silent repository for all the words they didn't have time to say. *I'll miss you. Be safe. Wait for me.*

Then, he let go. He opened the door. "I'll see you later," he said, the words an anchor. "Same team finally."

Shane nodded, unable to speak past the lump in his throat. He stepped out into the hallway, the door clicking shut behind him with a sound of terrible finality. He stood there for a moment, leaning his forehead against the cool wall, gathering the shattered pieces of his composure before he had to walk back into his real life.

Inside the room, Ilya did not move immediately. He stood in the silent emptiness, now suffused with their scent and the ghost of their heat. He took a slow, deep breath, committing it to memory. Then, he collected his bag.

His ride to the other hotel was a blur of grey rain. In the back of the car, he pulled out his phone.

IGR- The way you taste is going to haunt me. I can still feel you on my tongue.

IGR- At the All-Star game. When we are in same locker room. I am going to find you in showers. I am going to push you against the tiles and make you come so quietly you have to bite my shoulder to stay silent while our team is on other side of wall.

IGR- I want to fuck you on the bench. After everyone leaves. Where they all sit and talk strategy. I want you to smell like me and ice and come when you go back to your hotel.

They were a promise: the separation was temporary. Shane felt the heat bloom over his face as the car parked in front of the hotel. He paused to sign some jersey's and other memorabilia for the fans waiting so late at night. He noticed a few of posters for the all star team and several of them had Ilya's signature already. He felt himself blush again and went over to the small group and signed, the posters had them right next to each other, obviously photoshopped, but Shane hoped he could get a copy for himself.

Tomorrow night would be a first, it would be different. They wouldn't just be stealing hours in a hotel. They would be on the same bench, in the same team, a unit in front of the entire world. It was a test, and a tantalizing glimpse of maybe a future that felt, for the first time, tantalizingly within reach. He made his way to the hotel doors, signing a few more things, a determined smile on his face. The waiting was agony. But the prize was worth it.

The All-Star practice ice was a symphony of casual skill, a showman's playground where the league's best glided through drills with a flashy, effortless grace. Then there was Ilya.

As captain, he ran the practice not like a showcase, but like a war council. The easygoing atmosphere evaporated the moment he blew his whistle. His voice, a sharp, carrying baritone in Russian-accented English, cut through the chill air. "Enough circles. We are not here for figure skating. We play tomorrow. We play to win. First line, with me. Let's go."

Shane felt a thrill that had nothing to do with the temperature. This was Ilya unchained in his element—not the possessive lover or the tormented man, but **Kapitan** Rozanov, a force of pure, demanding will. He didn't yell. He commanded. And the other superstars, used to being the center of their own universes, fell in line, intrigued by the shift in gravity.

When Ilya skated to the wing, ceding the center ice position to Shane with a single, pointed nod, it was a statement louder than any speech. He was the captain, but he was building his attack around Shane. The trust, the strategic deference, made Shane's chest tighten with a fierce, proud warmth.

And then they started to play.

It was like magic. It was better- inevitability. From the first puck drop of the scrimmage, they moved as a single organism. Ilya, on the wing, was a relentless hunter, checking opposing players with a vicious intensity that created turnovers before the opposing line could blink. He'd strip the puck, and without looking, fire a no-look, tape-to-tape pass to the space Shane was already exploding into.

Shane, at center, became the calm, lethal eye of the hurricane Ilya created. He received those passes in stride, his head always up, reading the entire sheet of ice. He didn't need to search for Ilya; he just *knew*. When he curled behind the net, drawing defenders, Ilya was already slicing to the far post, his stick clattering on the ice for a split-second before the puck arrived from Shane's backhand.

They communicated in a language of glances, of subtle shifts in posture. A tilt of Ilya's head meant he was cutting across the slot. A tap of Shane's stick on the ice meant he was holding, waiting for the seam to open. They anticipated, compensated, and amplified each other's instincts in a way that left the other players, even these elite talents, glancing at each other in open astonishment.

During a water break, Bennett, the veteran goalie for their squad, skated over, his mask tipped back. "Holy shit, guys. That's... that's not fair." He nodded at Ilya. "Rozanov, we just run everything through you two. You," he pointed at Shane, "you do your magic, Pretty boy."

Shane blushed at the nickname that had started in his own team a few weeks ago when a commercial he shot started airing. A few other players murmured agreement. Leverage the unstoppable chemistry. Build the entire strategy around the two players who were quite literally reading each other's minds.

Ilya took a long pull from his water bottle, his gaze sweeping over the group. He shook his head, a firm, definitive motion. "No."

The group fell silent.

"This is All-Star game. Is for show, yes, but also for respect." His eyes found each of them. "You are all here because you are best. You all deserve spotlight." He gestured between himself and Shane. "What we have... it works because it is surprise. Because it is new. If we

make it only us, they will adjust. They will shut it down. And you,” he pointed his bottle at the others, “you will stand and watch. That is not winning. That is vanity.”

He skated a few feet away, drawing a quick X on the ice with his skate. “We play as a unit. We move puck. We create for everyone. What we have,” he nodded again to Shane, a flicker of something intensely private passing between them before his captain’s mask slid back into place, “it opens ice. It creates chaos. We use that chaos for all of us. Not just for me and Hollander.”

It was a masterclass in leadership. He’d acknowledged their unique synergy, praised the team’s talent, and presented a unified, more dangerous strategy- all while refusing to hog the glory. The players exchanged looks, then nods. The message was clear: follow this guy, and everyone eats.

As they lined up for the next drill, Shane fell in beside Ilya. Under the cover of the scraping skates and shouted instructions, he murmured, voice low, “You’re a pretty good captain, Rozanov.”

Ilya didn’t look at him, but a corner of his mouth quirked up. “I am good at many things, Hollander,” he said, his tone dry. “Leading men to victory is only one of my talents.”

He shoved off towards his position, leaving Shane smiling at his back. The ice felt different beneath his blades.

The All-Star game was a circus of skill and showmanship, but for their line, it had become something else: a declaration. The chemistry between Ilya and Shane wasn’t just good; it was telepathic. They built their team’s four-goal lead not with flashy solo efforts, but with a series of subtle, devastating plays that spoke of a shared hockey brain.

Before the puck drop, Marly had glided over during warmups, knocking his glove against Ilya’s chest. “Try to blink, Rozy. Your eyes are gonna get stuck on him. We get it. You like the view.”

Ilya just grunted, his gaze already tracking Shane, who was laughing at something Pike was saying from the bench. *Pike*. Ilya suppressed an eye-roll. How that talentless agitator had wormed his way onto the roster was a mystery, but if Shane's smile was that bright because of him, Ilya would tolerate it. For now.

The game itself was a masterpiece of their unspoken language. When Shane snapped a wicked wrist shot top shelf for his hat trick, the arena erupted. Ilya reached him first, cutting through the celebrating crowd of their teammates. He grabbed the back of Shane's helmet, yanking him close, and planted a loud, smacking kiss on the side of the cage, right by his ear. "Moy genial'nyy tsentr," he growled, the Russian lost in the noise.

The fans roared, not with shock, but with delight. It was classic Rozanov- unexpected, bold, a touch antagonistic even in celebration. The "rivals" narrative made it perfect theater. Shane, flushed and grinning inside his helmet, shoved him away playfully, the moment feeding the energy of the entire building.

With two minutes left, the game was effectively over. Their team was dominating. Ilya stole the puck from behind the line, feeling the clock wind down. He saw Shane, hovering near the far blue line, Ilya tapped his stick on the ice three times in rapid succession- *tap-tap-tap*, a signal they had discovered that worked during practice for some odd reason. They were just too connected.

Shane's head turned, not all the way, but just enough. He knew. He began a half-turn, ready to receive the breakout pass and carry it into the offensive zone to kill the clock.

The pass left Ilya's stick, crisp and perfect, heading for Shane's tape.

But Shane didn't focus on the puck. His eyes, visible through his visor, found Ilya's across the ice. A huge, triumphant, *shared* smile broke across his face. It was a split-second of pure, unguarded connection- a *look what we did*.

That split-second was all Dallas Kent needed.

Kent, a hulking defenseman known for his punishing, often late, hits, saw the distraction. He launched himself, a freight train of bad intentions. He didn't go for the puck. He went for the man.

Ilya's world narrowed to a horrifying silent film. He saw Kent's trajectory. He saw Shane, still smiling, turning his head back just as the massive shoulder connected.

The sound was sickening. A brutal, wet crunch of equipment and body meeting the unyielding boards, followed instantly by the sharp, spiderweb crack of the plexiglass. Shane's body went limp, crumpling against the boards before sliding in a boneless heap to the ice. His stick clattered away.

The arena's celebratory noise cut off as if severed by a knife.

For less than a heartbeat, there was absolute silence. Then, the whistle blew, shrill and desperate.

Ilya was already moving. He covered the distance in a blur of speed he didn't know he possessed, his skates throwing up a spray of ice. He shoved Kent away with a vicious, two-handed push that sent the bigger man stumbling, not caring about the penalty, not caring about anything but the still form on the ice.

He dropped to his knees, his gloves off, his hands hovering over Shane. Shane looked unconscious, but his eyes were dazed, blinking rapidly against the pain. A thin trickle of blood was already seeping from his hairline down his temple, stark against the white ice.

"Baby, don't move," Ilya heard himself say, his voice strangely calm, a direct contrast to the tsunami of terror roaring in his ears. He framed Shane's helmet with his hands, holding him still. "Look at me, Shane. Open your eyes!"

The medical team swarmed around them, pushing Ilya back with firm hands. He resisted for a moment, a growl building in his throat, more medics surrounded them, finally pulling Ilya away. Suddenly, Marly was behind him, pulling him further away by his chest. "Calm the fuck down. You're making it obvious."

As they carefully stabilized Shane's neck and loaded him onto the stretcher, Ilya stood frozen just outside the circle of activity. The raucous All-Star game was now a silent, grim tableau. He looked down at his own hand, the one that had made the pass over his face. He saw a small, red smear on his palm- Shane's blood, transferred from his temple.

The world did not go red. It went white. A silent, blinding static of pure rage that erased the arena, the noise, the rules, everything but the target: Dallas Kent, who was already being escorted towards the penalty box with a smug, unaffected shrug.

Ilya's body moved before his mind could engage. He took two powerful strides and launched himself into a full-speed charge, his skates biting into the ice like claws. The distance closed in a heartbeat.

Marly, from his spot on the blue line, saw the murder in Ilya's eyes a second too late. "ROZ, NO!" he bellowed, pushing off in desperate pursuit.

Ilya didn't hear him. He hit Kent from the side, a brutal, illegal check that sent them both crashing into the boards with a thunderous impact. Before Kent could even register the attack, Ilya had him by the jersey, hauling him down to the ice. He didn't throw a single hockey punch- those were for games. These were street blows, vicious and precise, driven by a year's worth of possessive fear and five minutes of sheer terror. A right cross split Kent's lip. A left hook glanced off his brow.

Ilya snarled unintelligible words, guttural Russian-English hybrid lost in the chaos as he drew his fist back again.

Then, weight descended on him. Marly wrapped his arms around Ilya's chest from behind, hauling with all his strength. "That's enough! Ilya, STOP!"

Two other players- a goalie and a massive defenseman from Edmonton- piled on, grabbing his arms. It took all three of them to peel Ilya off, his skates scrambling for purchase on the ice, his eyes still locked on a dazed, bleeding Kent. The dam had broken. Seeing their captain erupt, other players dropped gloves, old rivalries and team loyalties igniting. The pristine All-

Star game ice became a war zone of shoving matches and wild swings as referees blew whistles uselessly and linesmen waded into the fray.

It took two hours. Two hours of closed-door meetings with furious league officials, of cold legal language outlining fines for conduct detrimental to the game, of a stony-faced suspension handed down. Fifty thousand dollars. Two games. Ilya signed the paperwork without reading it, his knuckles raw and swollen.

The moment he was released, he cornered a harried-looking arena medic. “Hollander. Which hospital?”

The medic, intimidated by the intensity rolling off the big Russian, stammered the name. Ilya was already moving, shoving through a service exit into the cool night air. He spotted an Uber idling nearby, its driver staring at his phone. Ilya yanked the back door open.

“Drive. Now. Mount Rainer hospital.” He shoved a wad of cash through the partition.

Fifteen minutes of agonizing silence later, the car pulled under the bright ER awning. Ilya was out before it fully stopped, ignoring the driver’s shout. He slammed through the automatic doors, his hockey bag still slung over his shoulder, his face a mask of dried blood - Kent’s or His own and stark fear.

The receptionist looked up, her eyes widening. “Sir, you can’t-”

“Shane Hollander. He was brought in. Where is he?”

His voice, low and frayed, brooked no argument. She checked her computer, gave him a room number on the neurology floor. He took the stairs three at a time.

The hallway was quiet, a stark contrast to the arena’s roar. The smell of antiseptic clawed at his throat. He found the room, the door slightly ajar. His hand, trembling slightly now that the adrenaline was leaching away, pushed it open.

The room was dim. Shane lay in the bed, propped up on pillows. He was asleep. A stark white bandage was taped to his temple, and the beginnings of a spectacular bruise bloomed around his left eye. He looked pale, small, but the monitors showed his strong heartbeat.

For a long moment, he just stared at Shane from across the room. Ilya took a single, shaky step into the room, letting the door sigh shut behind him, sealing them in a new, fragile kind of silence.

The sight of Shane in the hospital bed stopped Ilya's heart. The vibrant, powerful athlete was reduced to a pale figure against white sheets, made smaller by the bulky padding strapped around his chest and the stark bandage on his temple. The monitors beeped a soft, rhythmic counterpoint to the roaring guilt in Ilya's ears.

He stepped inside, letting the door click shut. Without a word, he turned the lock. The world outside- the league officials, the fines, the press- ceased to exist. He moved to the windowed wall and yanked the privacy curtain along its track with a sharp rasp, enclosing the bed in a thin, beige cocoon.

Only then did he approach.

He stood over Shane, his shadow falling across the bed. The urge to touch, to verify he was whole, was a physical ache. He reached out, his hand trembling slightly, and brushed the pad of his thumb with infinite gentleness over Shane's unbruised cheek. The skin was warm.

Shane's eyelids fluttered. They opened, unfocused for a moment, before landing on Ilya. A slow, loopy grin spread across his face, utterly incongruous with the setting. "Hey," he slurred, his voice thick. "There you are."

"Here I am," Ilya whispered, his own voice rough.

"I feel great," Shane announced, his words running together. "They gave me the good stuff. Like... floating. No pain. It's awesome." His heavily-lidded gaze wandered over Ilya's face,

noting the dried blood, the grim set of his mouth. “You look mad. Don’t be mad. S’not your fault.”

But it was. The words were a knife twist. *If he hadn’t looked at me. If I hadn’t smiled. If I had just kept my eyes on the play.* “It is my fault,” Ilya said, the words ash in his mouth.

Shane shook his head, a clumsy, exaggerated motion. “Heeyyyyyyyyy! Nuh-uh. Was gonna ask you something. Important.” He blinked, trying to focus. “After the game. Was gonna ask... to come. To the cottage. This summer. Just us.” A dreamy sigh escaped him. “Wanted you there. For my heat. Wanted it to be you.”

The confession, delivered with the unvarnished honesty of the heavily medicated, struck Ilya with the force of a physical blow. He actually swayed on his feet. The cottage invitation was one thing- a hope he’d sensed but hadn’t dared claim. But the heat... That was a surrender of a different magnitude. It was above the biological need, trust, and vulnerability fused into the most profound offer an omega could make.

And he had ruined it. He had made this moment happen in a sterile hospital room, not in the soft light of a warm hotel room. The promise was now tangled with wires and bandages and the smell of antiseptic.

“Shane...” Ilya’s voice broke. “I was so worried. So scared when you didnt move.” He couldn’t form his thoughts correctly. The guilt was a crushing weight, and the gift Shane was offering felt like a jewel he’d dropped in the mud.

Shane’s grin faded slightly, sensing the shift. His drugged brain tried to navigate the storm on Ilya’s face. “S’okay,” he mumbled, his eyes drifting closed again. “We can still go. When I’m not... I’m not broken.” He reached out a clumsy hand, patting the air until it found Ilya’s wrist. His grip was weak. “Don’t be sad. Just stay.”

Ilya turned his hand, lacing their fingers together. He brought Shane’s knuckles to his lips, pressing a desperate kiss against them. He stayed there, kneeling by the bed, holding the hand of the drugged, trusting man who had wanted to give him everything, while the monitors beeped on, measuring a heartbeat that Ilya felt solely responsible for protecting, and had, in one moment of shared pride, failed.

Ilya stayed on his knees, holding Shane's hand, the weight of the confession settling over him. The guilt was a cold stone, but Shane's warm, clumsy fingers in his were a tether.

Shane's eyes fluttered open again, his gaze swimming around the room before landing on Ilya with renewed, druggy interest. "Your face is all... swoopy," he announced, his words syrupy slow. "Like a really mad painting. A sexy, mad painting."

Ilya couldn't help it- a faint, pained huff of air escaped him, almost a laugh. "Thank you, I think."

"I'm serious." Shane's head lolled against the pillow. "When I'm in heat. At the cottage. I'm gonna climb you like that painting. You'll be my tree. A big, grumpy, Russian tree." He nodded sagely, as if this were a profound plan. "Gonna lick you. Like a lollipop. Everywhere. For hours. Days. 'M gonna be so... sticky."

Ilya felt a hot flush creep up his own neck, a bizarre mix of anguish, tenderness, and sheer, unadulterated shock. "Zayka, you are on many drugs."

"The best drugs," Shane agreed happily. He tried to wave his free hand expansively and winced as the motion tugged at his IV. "Ow. Okay, no waving. But the heat thing. I've been thinking. A lot. Usually I just... you know. Handle it. But with you..." He leaned in conspiratorially, though his voice remained a stage whisper. "I wanna do it all. The stuff in the books that Rose got me. I wanna be like... a monkey. A sexy monkey. Just hanging off you and screaming."

Ilya had to press his forehead against their joined hands to hide his face. His shoulders shook. It wasn't quite laughter; it was the hysterical release of unbearable tension. "You are insane."

"I'm inspired," Shane corrected, supremely confident. He sighed, a contented, blissful sound. "I'm gonna make you so tired. You'll be like... a noodle. A big, strong, useless noodle. And I'll feed you soup. Noodle soup! For the noodle!" He giggled at his own joke, the sound utterly goofy and unselfconscious.

“I think you should rest, sweetheart,” Ilya managed, his voice muffled against Shane’s skin.

“Good. ‘Cause I’ll be busy. Being a monkey.” Shane’s energy was flagging, his blinks growing longer. “A monkey who loves his tree. My grumpy, beautiful tree who is crrazzzyyy.” His eyes drifted closed, the silly grin softening into a sleepy smile. “Don’t be mad at the tree, okay? The tree is good. The tree is the best.”

He was asleep again within seconds, his breathing deepening, his hand going slack in Ilya’s grasp.

Ilya slowly raised his head. The raw, desperate guilt was still there, a fundamental truth he would have to reckon with. He carefully unfolded Shane’s fingers and stood, his joints protesting. He didn’t leave. He pulled the single, uncomfortable chair close to the bed, sat down, and resumed his vigil. He watched the steady rise and fall of Shane’s padded chest, listened to the beeping monitor, and committed every insane, perfect, drugged-out word to memory. The world outside could wait for a few minutes.

Chapter End Notes

Well this was fun to write. While at work. When I’m supposed to be super responsible... My assistant is a freaky deaky. Now I have two gay besties to help me with the smut 🙄🙄 First of all, to everyone asking if Shane is pregnant already: I see you. I hear you. I am lovingly placing that question in a locked box and sliding it across the floor for later.

Maybe he is...Maybe he isn’t...Maybe Shane is just having the most omega-brained month of his entire life.

Maybe Ilya has finally broken both of their self-control meters beyond repair.

Who can say? Certainly not me. I am innocent.

What I will say is that Shane’s feelings around pregnancy, heats, claiming, and vulnerability are becoming a lot harder for him to ignore. He can rationalize all he wants about timing, contracts, his omega status, and whether it’s responsible, but the want is there now. Loudly. And Ilya, for once, is trying very hard not to take more than Shane is ready to give, which makes everything messier because Shane may actually want him to stop being so careful. *wink wink*

Also, yes, Ilya being on the same team as Shane for the All-Star game did something irreversible to both of them. That chemistry was dangerous enough before they were emotionally attached. Now? Disaster. Beautiful disaster.

Questions for the comments because I am nosy:

❤️ Do you think Shane actually wants a baby right now, or does he want the proof of being chosen?

❤️ Was Ilya right to hold back and be careful, or is Shane going to have to finally use his words?

As always, thank you for reading and screaming with me. I love y'all ❤️ Next chapter will be Friday. Maybe Thursday if the vibes are right lol

Chapter 31: Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Hi y'all! ❤️

Before we begin, I have some very important people to thank.

First, a huge thank you to my incredible beta reader for putting up with me and my run on sentences.

Also, a massive thank you to my two resident gays who continue to answer all of my very specific questions with alarming enthusiasm and somehow make every scene even better. You two are absolute legends.

Now... I'd also like to acknowledge my sister.

She read this chapter and told me I should take out some of the steamier scenes.

My beta reader and my bestie both immediately told me, and I quote, "Absolutely not!" and "It's part of the plot"

So naturally, I listened to the more logical people.

You're welcome. 😊

Now enjoy these two idiots finally getting some uninterrupted time together. They've earned it.

(Probably.)

Chapter Notes

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

The stale, antiseptic air of the hospital room had become a secondary prison. For thirty minutes, Ilya had stood rooted to the spot by the window, a silent sentinel watching the slow, metronomic rise and fall of Shane's chest beneath the thin hospital blanket. The omega was asleep again, the powerful painkillers pulling him under a soft, merciful tide. The angry purple swelling around his temple, the stark white of the bandage, the unnatural pallor of his skin- each detail was a hot brand pressed against Ilya's mind. He had catalogued them all, the grim proof of failure.

The murmured conversation outside the door had been a low, persistent hum for the last ten minutes. Yuna's voice, sharp with maternal worry, David's calmer, grounding tones, and the measured, clinical responses of the doctor. They were discussing scans, concussion protocols, long-term implications for an athlete. Ilya understood every third word, his English folding under the weight of his own panic. His brain. They are talking about his beautiful, strange, brilliant brain.

The handle of the door jiggled slightly. A testing turn. Ilya's own body went wire-tight, they were finished. They were coming back in.

His gaze snapped from the door back to Shane. Peaceful. Vulnerable. *His*. This stress could all over with just two small bites. In less than a couple of minutes, he could tie Shane to him forever. The thought was a reflex, a deep, primal current that ran beneath the newer, more fragile layer of his therapy-born restraint. The promise he'd made- to respect boundaries, to not touch without permission, felt like a physical barrier thrumming with voltage. But they were about to be interrupted. The sanctity of their stolen time was about to shatter yet again.

He moved quickly. Three long strides carried him to the bedside. Up close, he could see the faint dusting of freckles across Shane's nose, the dark fan of his lashes against his cheeks, the soft, parted bow of his mouth. The scent of him, muted by hospital sterility and pain, but still fundamentally Shane, the unique, warm signature that existed in the back of Ilya's throat as 'home' - was almost unbearable.

Ilya bent, the world narrowed to the space between their lips. He didn't dare touch him anywhere else, his hands clenched into white-knuckled fists at his sides. The kiss was a ghost of a thing, a brush of warmth so soft it was less a physical act and more a transfer of a promise to be back soon, a desperate sealing of a vow. As he pulled away a millimeter, his lips moved against Shane's skin.

"Ya tebya lyublyu," he whispered, the Russian words rough and guttural in the quiet room. A confession not for Shane to hear, but for himself. A truth so absolute that he had to use a language Shane didn't understand, like a secret planted in the soil of his sleep.

The door handle turned fully. Ilya was a shadow detaching itself from the bed. He was at the room's other door, a private bathroom, in two heartbeats. He slipped inside, leaving it cracked just enough to see Yuna and David re-enter, their focus immediately going to their son. The

moment their backs were turned, he flowed out into the empty hallway, a phantom in a designer suit, and was gone.

The return to his hotel room had escalated torment. The silence was like a heavy weight on his chest. The space, which had felt claustrophobic before, now opened like a chasm. Every second that ticked by on the stark digital clock was a second Shane was in a world where Ilya was not present, not watching, not ensuring his safety. He paced, the expensive carpet wearing a path. He poured a vodka shot, stared at it, poured it down the sink. His skin felt too tight, his senses hyper-alert yet receiving no input. The ghost of Shane's scent on his skin was a torture device. He took one of the small, white emergency pills from the bottle in his pocket, dry-swallowing it with a grimace. It would blunt the sharpest edges of the panic, but it did nothing to fill the hollow, howling void where his connection to Shane should be.

He didn't sleep. He watched the sky lighten from black to bruised purple to a sickly gray, each shade a dull copy of the sunrise they'd watched Shane's bed for what seemed like a lifetime ago.

At 8:17 AM, his phone buzzed with a summons, not from Shane, but from the Raiders' front office.

Coach Brannigan- Meeting. Now.

Ilya opened the video link to the meeting and looked into the coach's office. The room was all polished oak and framed jerseys, the smell of leather and stale coffee. Brannigan, a grizzled alpha with a reputation for bluntness, didn't offer him a seat.

"Rozanov."

Ilya nodded, leaning against the hotel headboard, his arms crossed. A defensive posture he didn't bother to disguise.

"You want to explain to me what the hell that was last night?" Brannigan began, tossing a newspaper on his desk within view of the camera. On it was a frozen frame from the game broadcast: Ilya, face a mask of feral rage, being physically restrained by two teammates as

medical staff attended to Shane on the ice. “You looked like you were about to fucking kill someone because Hollander took a hit. A legal hit.”

Ilya’s jaw worked. “It was a late hit. Blindsided someone who didn’t have the puck.”

“It’s hockey. It happens. Your reaction was not warranted.” Brannigan leaned forward, his posture full with dominance and frustration. “It was personal. The media is already sniffing. They’re asking questions we don’t have answers for. So I’m asking you: what is your deal with Shane Hollander?”

The air in the room thickened. Ilya held the coach’s gaze, letting the silence stretch, letting the man feel the cold, controlled danger radiating from him. When he finally spoke, his voice was low and utterly flat. “If my game play is not affected, is not your concern.”

“The hell it isn’t! That *display* affects the team! It’s a distraction!”

“My points. My time on ice. Look at them,” Ilya said, each word a chip of ice. “Then tell me I am distracted.”

Brannigan’s face flushed. He was an alpha used to compliance. Ilya’s quiet, unyielding defiance was a language he didn’t understand. “This isn’t over, Rozanov. Whatever this is, you bury it. Deep. Or there will be consequences.”

Ilya pushed off the bed. The meeting was over. He had said all he would say. “I am here to play hockey. I play hockey. That is all. If you have a problem with me, trade me.”

He turned the meeting off and flung his phone on the bed. It would be a bluff. The teams owners were not going to let him go. The more penalty time, the more unhinged interviews he did, the more revenue he made for the team. His jerseys always sold out. They would be stupid to let him go.

He navigated to Shane’s contact and typed-

IGR- How is your head this morning?

He stared at the screen, the little icon showing the message was delivered. He imagined Shane's phone, perhaps on his bedside table in that hospital room, lighting up with his name. A little pulse of *I am here. I am thinking of you.*

One minute. Two. Five. The screen remained unchanged. Delivered. Not Read.

A cold trickle, distinct from the earlier panic, began its seep into his veins. Maybe Shane was still sleeping. Maybe his parents had his phone. Maybe the painkillers...

He pulled up his contacts. He had the Hollander's contact information stored, acquired through his previous means. His thumb hovered over Yuna's number. But what was the protocol? What narrative existed in the Hollander household this morning? Had Shane told them about the man who burned another man alive for him-the full story? About the trackers, the surveillance, the desperate, broken alpha who was trying, *trying*, to be something softer? Or was Ilya still just "Rozanov," the rival, the inconvenient Russian complication?

He couldn't risk it. A wrong move now could unravel everything.

He shoved the phone back into his pocket. The hollow space inside him was no longer howling. It was freezing over, a silent, expanding tundra. He had kissed him. He had whispered the truth into his skin. He had walked away.

And now, there was only silence. A void where an answer should be. And in that void, the old, familiar demons began to stir, whispering that respect and distance were luxuries for men who hadn't already lost everything once before.

He felt his anxiety rising. Ilya moved through it with a cold, military precision, folding shirts and stacking them in his open suitcase with a rigidity that betrayed the tremor in his hands. His flight to Boston wasn't for three hours. His plan, carved into his mind with the sharp edge of necessity, was to return to the hospital. To see him. Just a glimpse from the doorway. To

confirm with his own eyes that the color was returning to Shane's face, that the rhythm of his breathing was strong and even. He had already calculated the risk: the Hollanders might be there. The nurses might recognize him. It didn't matter. The compulsion was a physical ache, like a ghost-limb throbbing for its missing half.

A sharp, perfunctory knock at the door shattered the sterile silence. Before he could answer, it opened. Marly stood there, his usual easy-going demeanor replaced by a tense, watchful concern. He held his tablet like a shield.

"Ilya. You need to see this."

"I am packing."

"It's about last night." Marly insisted, stepping inside and closing the door. He didn't wait for permission, navigating to the sports channel and turning the volume up before handing the tablet over.

Ilya's hands wanted to refuse. His eyes betrayed him, locking onto the screen.

There it was, in high-definition, multi-angle slow motion. Kent- a hulking alpha with a reputation for clean, brutal hits -lining up Shane as he cut across the neutral zone with the puck. The contact was shoulder-to-head, a fraction of a second late. Shane's body went limp, a marionette with its strings cut, before crashing into the boards in a horrifically boneless heap.

The broadcast cut to a different camera. This one was trained not on the fallen man, but on Ilya. It captured the exact moment his brain processed the sight. The transformation was terrifying. His face, usually a mask of arrogant, the playful smile on his face, dissolved. His eyes widened, the pupils swallowing the ice-blue irises into pools of pure black fury. A snarl ripped from his throat, inaudible over the crowd noise, a raw, animal sound that had no place on a hockey rink. He dropped his stick, ignored the play completely, and launched himself across the ice not towards the puck, but towards the other player. It took two teammates- big, strong alphas themselves, and Marly wrapping their entire bodies around him to haul him back, his skates scrambling against the ice, his gaze never leaving Shane's motionless form.

“- an absolutely vicious reaction from Rozanov,” a commentator’s voice, slick and excited, filled the hotel room. “You have to wonder what’s behind that. These two have been dueling since they were teenagers.”

Another voice, calmer, analytical, chimed in. “Look at the history. World Juniors. World Championships. They’ve been mirror images, pushing each other to the absolute pinnacle of the sport. There’s a deep, deep respect there, even beneath all the rivalry. You don’t react like that for just anyone. These are the sports two most valuable players, they’re equal, so I’d bet seeing his counterpart go down like that must be worrisome for even someone like him.”

A third clip, from a different network. A former player, an older beta, nodded sagely. “I’ve been saying it for years. The rivalry between Hollander and Rozanov is the best thing to happen to hockey in a generation. It’s built on a foundation of pure respect from what I’m seeing now. Rozanov wasn’t thinking about the game. He was seeing Hollander as a teammate, a young player like himself.”

Respect. The word echoed in the plush, quiet room, a sickening parody of the truth. They were building a narrative, a clean, heroic, sportsmanly myth out of the tangled, bloody wreckage of his obsession. They were painting his feral, possessive terror as noble admiration.

Ilya felt bile rise in his throat. His fingers clenched around the edge of the tablet.

Marly was watching him carefully. “They’re eating it up, Ilya. The ‘fierce respect’ angle. The ‘warrior’s code’ thing. It’s playing really well. Better than... other explanations might.”

Ilya understood the subtext. Better than the truth of a toxic bond, of surveillance and fire and a love that had curdled into something dangerous. The media was offering him a shield, a palatable lie to hide behind. He should have felt relief. Instead, he felt violently ill.

Another channel. A slow-motion replay of his face, frozen in that scream of rage. A caption below: *ROZANOV’S INSTINCTIVE LOYALTY*. The disconnect was so profound it was dizzying.

He thrust the tablet back at Marly. “They understand nothing,” he said, his voice gravel.

“Maybe,” Marly said softly, taking the tablet. “But this narrative... it might give you some space. Some breathing room. People aren’t asking the wrong questions right now.”

Space. Breathing room. Concepts that felt alien. The only space that mattered was the distance between his hotel and Shane’s hospital room, and it was a distance that screamed in his veins.

His phone, face-down on the dresser, remained dark and silent. No response. The void of it was louder than all the commentators in the world.

“I have to go,” Ilya said, turning back to his suitcase. He zipped it with a final, sharp sound.

“The airport?” Marly asked.

“No,” Ilya said, his back to his friend. He picked up his keys, his wallet, the small bottle of pills. “First, the hospital.”

Marly didn’t try to stop him. He just sighed, a heavy sound of resigned understanding. “Tell him... tell him we’re all thinking of him. That hit would’ve knocked anyone down.”

Ilya gave a short, sharp nod. He would tell him nothing of the sort. He would stand in the hallway, a shadow and he would look. He would feed the starving, terrified thing inside his chest with a single glimpse. And then he would get on a plane all the way back to Boston. Alone.

The text arrived as he got on the elevator. A single word, stark against the sterile white of his phone screen.

Shane- hi.

Ilya's entire world, which had been vibrating on the edge of a catastrophic fracture, stilled. The air rushed from his lungs in a soundless, punched-out gasp. He stared at the screen, the two letters burning into his retinas. *Hi*. The most mundane, the most monumental word in the English language. It was a lifeline thrown into a maelstrom.

"Out," he said, the word a cracked whip in the silent room.

Marly, who had been hovering by the door watching the news analysis with a furrowed brow, blinked. "What?"

"Get out. Now." Ilya didn't look up from the phone. His thumb was already moving, finding the FaceTime icon, his heart a frantic, caged bird against his ribs. The need to **see** him was more urgent than oxygen.

Understanding dawned on Marly's face. He didn't argue, just gave a curt nod and slipped out, closing the door with a soft, final click.

Ilya's hand was steady as he initiated the call. A miracle of will. The ringing tone echoed in the empty room, each pulse a lifetime. One ring. Two. His throat tightened. What if it was a mistake? What if it was Yuna, or David, checking his phone? What if he'd changed his mind-

The screen flickered. Connected.

And there he was.

Shane. Propped up in what looked like a guest bed, pillows piled behind him. The harsh, unforgiving light of the hotel room was gone, replaced by the softer, diffused glow of a bedroom lamp. The bruise on his temple was a lurid, violent splash of color against his unusually pale skin, the bandage stark. But his eyes... his eyes were clear. The fog of pain and concussion had receded, leaving the familiar, intelligent, guarded brown gaze that Ilya

knew like the map of his own soul. He looked exhausted, shadows pooling beneath his eyes, but he was present. He was *Shane*.

“Bozhe moy,” Ilya breathed, the Russian prayer slipping out unbidden. He drank in the sight, a man in a desert finding an oasis. “You are... you look...”

“Like I got hit by a truck?” Shane finished, his voice a little rough, a little thin, but his. A ghost of a smile touched his lips, then vanished. “Hi.”

“Hi,” Ilya echoed, the word feeling absurdly inadequate. He leaned closer to the screen, as if he could bridge the digital divide through sheer force of need. “I have been... I was...” He couldn’t articulate the scale of the panic. It would sound like what it was: madness. He settled for the raw, unvarnished truth. “I was very worried.”

“I’m okay,” Shane said, and it sounded like he was reciting a doctor’s report. “Concussion, grade two. A few bruised ribs. Nothing’s broken. They want me to take it easy for a week, no screens, no stimulation.” He gestured vaguely at the phone, a wry twist to his mouth. “I’m already failing that. But I’ll be cleared for playoffs.”

The calm, factual delivery was so quintessentially Shane. But Ilya’s instincts, honed to a razor’s edge by obsession, caught the subtle tension in his jaw, the way his eyes didn’t quite hold the screen.

“A week,” Ilya repeated, his voice low. “That is... very fast.” The image of Shane’s limp body on the ice flashed behind his eyes. The thought of him being cleared to step back onto that ice, into that violence, so soon, sent a fresh wave of cold dread through him. He wanted to demand, to forbid. The old, possessive alpha rose in his chest, snarling. He forced it down, his knuckles white where he gripped the phone. “You are sure?”

“The doctors are sure,” Shane said, a defensive edge creeping into his tone. It was the same tone he’d used when insisting he could handle his suppressants alone, that he didn’t need monitoring. A tone that walled Ilya out. He looked down, picking at the edge of the blanket. A long, heavy silence stretched between them, filled only with the faint static of the connection.

Then Shane looked up, but not at the camera. His gaze was fixed somewhere over his phone, his expression shifting into something uncertain, vulnerable. “Ilya,” he began, then stopped. He swallowed. “Last night... in the hospital. I have this... fuzzy memory. It’s probably just the drugs.” He finally met the camera, his eyes searching Ilya’s pixelated face. “Did you... were you there? At some point? Or was I dreaming?”

“Yes,” Ilya said, he couldn’t help the smile when he thought about how his usually calm, boring omega had acted while high. The word simple and heavy as a stone dropped into still water. “I was there. You were...very happy to see me. I could not stay too long.”

A complicated wave of emotion passed over Shane’s face- relief that his memory had an anchor, followed swiftly by a deep, flustered embarrassment. A soft groan escaped him, and he pressed the heel of his hand to his forehead, wincing slightly at the pressure on his bruise. “God,” he muttered, the sound thick with frustration. “Okay. Yeah. I thought... it felt real.”

Then, abruptly, he lowered the phone. The screen on Ilya’s end dissolved into a chaotic, blurry swirl of blue- the fabric of Shane’s t-shirt, the indeterminate shadows of the room. Ilya was left staring into this intimate, abstract void, the sudden loss of Shane’s face a physical shock. He could hear Shane’s unsteady breathing, a little shaky, a little overwhelmed.

“Solnyshko?” Ilya asked softly, the endearment slipping out into the blue blur. “Are you... is this too much?”

There was no verbal answer. Just the soft, ragged sound of Shane’s breath, and the profound, aching silence of a man hiding from the camera, and from the unbearable weight of being seen. “Um, I said some...”

Ilya fully grinned then, enamoured at the embarrassed flush crossing his face. “What? Do you not want to, what was it...” Ilya narrowed his eyes playfully, tapping his temples as if searching for the words, “oh now I remember! You want to ‘climb me like a tree’ I’d like that very much though. We cannot forget that very important detail of your speech.”

The blue blur on the screen trembled slightly with Shane’s shaky exhale. Ilya’s grin softened into something tender, aching. He could picture it perfectly: Shane’s face buried in the pillow, the tips of his ears flushed a brilliant, mortified red. The memory of last night- Shane, dovey and grinning, his words slurry but devastatingly clear, was a treasure Ilya would hoard

forever. It was a glimpse of the unguarded, unfiltered omega he'd only ever seen in fragments, a side Shane's brilliant, analytical mind usually kept under lock and key.

"Shane," Ilya said, his voice dropping into a low, soothing register meant to calm spooked omegas. The blue blur on the screen trembled slightly with Shane's shaky exhale. Ilya's grin softened into something tender, aching. He could picture it perfectly- Shane's face buried in the pillow, the tips of his ears flushed a brilliant, mortified red. The memory of last night- Shane, doozy and grinning, his words slurry but devastatingly clear, was a treasure Ilya would hoard forever. It was a glimpse of the unguarded, unfiltered omega he'd only ever seen in fragments, a side Shane's brilliant, analytical mind usually kept under lock and key.

"Shane," Ilya said, his voice dropping into a low, soothing register meant to calm spooked animals. "milyy moy. Look at me. Please."

There was a long pause, then the phone shifted. Slowly, Shane brought it back up. His face was indeed flushed, his eyes screwed shut for a second before he forced them open, meeting Ilya's gaze with a look of pure, agonized chagrin.

"I didn't... I mean, I *might* have said... things," Shane mumbled, the words tripping over each other. "The drugs, they... my filter was just... gone. Completely offline."

"I know," Ilya said, his smile gentle. "And it was the most honest, wonderful thing I have ever witnessed. You were... luminous." He let the sincerity bleed into every syllable, needing Shane to understand this wasn't mockery. It was reverence. "You asked me to stay. You told me you missed my voice. You said..." He paused, watching Shane's eyes widen in dawning horror. "You said many true things your brilliant, overthinking brain would never normally permit you to say."

Shane groaned again, dropping his forehead against the phone's camera with a soft thump, once more obscuring Ilya's view. "Oh my god. Stop. I'm dying."

"You are not dying. You are embarrassed. There is difference." Ilya waited, giving him space. When Shane remained hidden, he continued, the playful lilt leaving his voice, replaced by a solemn gravity. "Shane. Listen to me. If remembering this... makes you want to take back the invitation, to pull away again, I will understand. I will hate it, but I will understand. My promise stands. You set the pace."

The blue fabric stilled. Shane's breathing, loud in the speaker, evened out slightly. He didn't move the phone.

"But," Ilya continued, the word a soft confession in the quiet, "I hope you do not take it back. I hope you let it be what it was: a gift. A moment of truth. Nothing to be ashamed of."

Another minute stretched. Then, with palpable effort, Shane lifted the phone. His face was still pink, but the raw embarrassment was being wrestled under control, replaced by a familiar, cautious thoughtfulness. He bit his lower lip, a nervous habit Ilya hadn't seen in months. It sent a pang of fierce longing straight through Ilya's chest.

"You're not just... saying that?" Shane asked, his voice small. "Because I was hurt? Or because you feel... obligated?"

The question was a blade, cutting to the heart of every doubt- Ilya's pathological protectiveness, his confusing obsession with devotion. Shane was seeking the assurances that he needed, searching for the hidden angle.

Ilya made sure his face showed nothing but stark, open honesty. "No obligations. No pity. I am saying it because I can't think of anything that I would want more than to spend time with you, alone, for longer than a few hours. Because I have missed *you*. Not just the fucking, but the... the daily noise of you. I would love to just be with you. The stupid jokes, silence while you think, I want to see that in person instead of phone." Ilya paused, hoping that the words were coming out right. "I am saying it because I want to hear all of it, always. High, sober, angry, happy. All of it. I cannot think of anything I'd rather do."

Shane studied him, his intensity focusing through the screen, parsing Ilya's micro-expressions for truth. Seemingly satisfied, the tension in his shoulders eased a fraction. He reached up and tugged on an eyelash, something that Ilya knew was something of a self-soothing gesture when he was getting overwhelmed. "So... the summer. What I said about... maybe spending some of it. Together. You meant that? You want that?"

The answer was a reflex, a truth so fundamental it bypassed his brain and came straight from his marrow. "Yes." No hesitation. No calculated pause. "Any part. All of it. A day, a week,

just tell me when I can book the flight.”

A real, fragile smile finally touched Shane’s lips, smoothing the worry from his brow. “Okay. Okay, good. Because I... I think I do too. My doctor and I are... she’ll be happy that I’m having a full heat.” A furious blush spread across his face. “For... obvious reasons. But I think if you want-if you can stay for maybe two weeks, we can, I don’t know. Maybe ease into things?”

Of course. Structured, safe, managed. It was so perfectly Shane it made Ilya’s heart squeeze. “I will follow any plan,” Ilya vowed. “Any rules. You write the plan, solnyshko. I will be your most obedient servant.”

The smile grew a little wider, a little more real. “Don’t push it,” Shane said, but there was no heat in it.

From the blurry background of Shane’s screen, a distant sound filtered through: a door opening, the murmur of voices - Yuna’s distinct cadence, David’s lower rumble. Shane’s eyes flickered away from the camera, the moment shattering.

“I have to go,” he said, the regret clear in his voice. “They’re back.”

“Call me,” Ilya said instantly, the words a plea and a promise woven together. “Tonight. When you can. We will make the plan.”

“I will,” Shane whispered. He looked at Ilya one more time, his gaze soft, unguarded. “Bye, Ilya.”

“Spokoynoy nochi, solnyshko,” Ilya murmured.

The call ended. The screen went dark, reflecting Ilya’s own face back at him- exhausted, hollow, but for the first time since the game, alight with a fragile, burning hope. He stared at the silent phone in his hand, the ghost of Shane’s shy smile imprinted on his vision. This was

good. they had a plan- now just to wait. A call to receive tonight. And a summer, however fractionally offered, that stretched before him like a promise of salvation.

A few hours after Ilya landed and made it to Boston, Shane had still not called, but with a soft, sequential buzz of text notifications. Ilya, who had been staring at the same page of a book for forty-five minutes without absorbing a word, snatched his phone from the desk.

Shane- Headache. Can't do voice. But I'm here.

Shane- Doctor Morrison came by the house. Said I'm on track.

Relief, sharp and clean, cut through Ilya's constant low-grade anxiety. He typed back, his fingers clumsy with haste.

IGR- This is good. What is the track?

Shane- Rest this week. Light skating in 7 days. No contact. No full game for probably 10-14 days. But I'll be on the bench for the playoffs if we make it.

IGR- You will make it.

It was a statement of faith in his ability, not just for the sport. Shane's team would advance because Shane had been having such a great season, they were in the perfect position to advance, even if Shane would miss a few games.

Shane- Your flight. To Ontario. We should lock it in? I mean if you still want to.

IGR- I have already looked. June 28th. Arrives 3:15 PM. I figured it would give us enough time to do the interviews and everything after one of us wins the cup.

Shane- You didn't book it yet?

IGR- I was waiting for your ok.

Shane- Right. Okay. Well, if you're sure, booking the tickets sounds like a plan.

Shane- I'll pick you up.

IGR- You do not have to.

Shane- I want to. The cottage is about an hour away. We've never driven together before, so it might be nice.

The texting paused. Ilya watched the text bubbles go on and off for a minute.

Shane- Plus I think I want to spend every minute with you that I can for however long you want to stay.

A faint, aching smile touched Ilya's lips. Of course. Shane was engineering this, building a safe space for the both of them. His car, a space he controlled, was the perfect first for Shane.

IGR- I will book it now.

There was a pause. Ilya could imagine him, propped up in bed, ice pack on his temple, calculating.

Shane- That's 7 weeks from now.

Shane- 12 if... if both our teams go all the way.

IGR- I know.

Shane- It's a long time.

IGR- We have survived longer separations.

IGR- This one has an end date. And a plan. Is different.

The silence that followed was contemplative, not empty. Ilya could feel the weight of the unspoken history in it- this *was* different. This was the promise of a solid stretch of time, just the two of them, together.

Shane- Yeah. It is different.

Shane- I have to sleep. The light from the screen is... not great.

IGR- Go. Sleep, dorogoy.

Shane- I know.

Shane- Goodnight, Ilya.

Ilya stared at the final message. *I know*. Not an echo, not a reciprocation, but an acknowledgment. An acceptance of the truth, if not yet a readiness to hold it. It was enough. It was more than enough.

He booked the flight immediately, the confirmation email appearing like a talisman in his inbox.

For the first time in years, Ilya Rozanov had a future to look forward to. He had a date. A plan. A framework. He had the ghost of a smile that belonged only to him, and the quiet, certain knowledge that in a few weeks, he would step off a plane and into the environment of Shane Hollander's favorite place on earth, and the long, careful work of coming home would begin.

The hit came in Game Five of the second round, a ruthless, legal check into the boards that drove the breath from Ilya's lungs and sent a lightning bolt of white-hot agony through his ribs. He heard the **crack** more than felt it, a sickening, internal sound. He finished the shift on pure, snarling instinct, but when he got to the bench, the team doctor took one look at his ashen face and shallow breathing and shut him down.

"No fracture, but you've got a hell of an intercostal sprain, maybe a cartilage separation. You're done."

Boston lost the game. They lost the round two days later with Ilya in a suit, watching from the press box, a constant, dull throb in his side that was nothing compared to the hollow ache of elimination. The medication helped with the pain, but it did nothing for the silence. The season was over.

He flew back to his sterile Boston apartment and did the only thing he could: he became a spectator.

He watched every remaining Montreal game. He saw Shane return to the lineup in the Eastern Conference Finals, wearing a full cage, moving with a calculated caution that spoke of lingering headache and medical caution. He saw the moment, midway through Game Three, when the caution fell away, and the old, brilliant, instinctual Shane re-emerged, weaving through defenders with that impossible grace. Ilya's own ribs twinged in sympathy with every hit Shane took, but a fierce, burning pride eclipsed the pain. *That is my omega. Look at him.*

The Stanley Cup Final was a spectacle. Montreal versus Vegas. Ilya watched from his dark living room, a single glass of water in his hand. He saw the sweat, the blood, the sheer desperation. He saw Shane, in Game Six, with the series tied 3-3, take a pass at the blue line, dance around a hulking defenseman, and snap a shot that rang off the crossbar and in. The arena erupted.

Ilya didn't move. He just watched, a faint, unbreakable smile on his face as the clock ran down, as the Montreal players flooded the ice, a wave of red and blue and screaming joy. The camera found Shane, helmet off, hair plastered to his forehead, his face a sublime canvas of shock, exhaustion, and dawning, incomprehensible elation. He was swept into a crush of teammates, bear-hugged, head-rubbed, a prized possession of the mob.

Then the camera panned. It found Yuna and David Hollander, being escorted down to the ice. Yuna was crying, her hands pressed to her mouth. David had an arm around her, his own eyes bright. They reached Shane, and the three of them embraced, a tight, private unit in the middle of the public frenzy. A family, a foundation.

Ilya's smile didn't falter, but the silence in his apartment became auditory, a high-pitched ring in the aftermath of the broadcast's roar. He remembered his own Cup win, a year ago. The noise, the confetti, the crushing weight of the trophy on his shoulders. And the profound, gutting loneliness that had followed him off the ice. No family. No one whose eyes sought

only him in the crowd. Svetlana had been there that night, too, a fierce, loving comfort in the aftermath. But it wasn't the same.

He pushed the memory out. This was not his night to mourn old ghosts. This was Shane's.

Later, after the trophy had been hoisted, the photos taken, the initial chaos channeled toward the locker room, his phone buzzed on the coffee table. A FaceTime call. The caller ID made his heart stutter: **SHANE**.

He answered. The screen was a chaotic, blurry jumble of celebration. The noise was a wall of sound- shouting, laughter, the clang of lockers, the hiss of showers, music blaring. He couldn't see a face, just flashes of red fabric, bare shoulders, the gleam of the Cup passing somewhere in the background.

"Ilya?!" Shane's voice, breathless and grinning, fought to rise above the din.

"I am here!" Ilya called back, holding the phone closer, as if proximity could bridge the chaos.

"I can't- hold on-" The image swirled, then stabilized slightly. Shane had wedged himself into what looked like a equipment alcove, the noise marginally dampened. His face was flushed, his eyes blazing with a light Ilya had never seen before. The Stanley Cup was visible over his shoulder, being kissed by a passing teammate. "Did you see?"

"I saw everything," Ilya said, and he knew his own voice was too soft, too full of a devotion that had no place in this cacophony, but he didn't care. "You were magnificent."

Shane's smile was incandescent. "It doesn't feel real! My head is- God, everything is so loud-" He winced, but it was a happy wince. The concussion sensitivity, amplified by a thousand.

"I know. Do not stay on the phone. Go. Be with your team."

“I wanted to hear your voice,” Shane said, the words rushed, earnest.

It was not just noise. It was the soundtrack of Shane’s ultimate triumph, and he was choosing to share the raw, overwhelming heart of it with Ilya. The gesture was worth more than any quiet, private call later could ever be.

“I’m so proud of you, Hollander,” Ilya said.

Shane blushed hard, almost preening at the compliment. “Okay, I gotta- they’re looking for me- next week, right?”

“June 28th,” Ilya confirmed, the date like a lifeline thrown across the roaring sea between them.

“Okay! Bye!”

The call ended as abruptly as it began, swallowed by the celebration. Ilya lowered the phone. The silence of his apartment rushed back in, but it was different now. It was no longer empty. It was filled with the echo of that glorious, shared noise, and the palpable, ticking countdown of the days.

Svetlana found him an hour later, letting herself in with her key. She took in the dark room, the TV playing recaps of the game, of Montreal going crazy with fans on the streets and bars, the man sitting perfectly still on the couch. “You watched?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“He called. From the locker room.”

Svetlana's eyebrows shot up. A slow smile spread across her face. "That's my boy." She came over, squeezed his shoulder. "You okay?"

Ilya looked at her, then out the dark window. The hollow ache was still there, the loneliness a familiar coat he could not shed. But beneath it, warm and steady, was that new thing: a patient, waiting pride.

"I will be," he said. And for the first time, he almost believed it.

The Stanley Cup parade was a riot of noise and color on the muted television screen, a stark contrast to the methodical silence of Ilya's penthouse. Red and blue confetti swirled over a sea of ecstatic faces in Montreal. Shane, perched on the back of a convertible, looked simultaneously overwhelmed and radiant, holding the Cup aloft with a wide smile while sitting between JJ and Hayden. Ilya watched for a moment, a familiar, complicated pride tightening his chest, before turning back to the open suitcase on his bed when the camera focused on other team members.

Packing for spending an extended time with Shane was not easy. The question- what does one pack when the plan is to be naked most of the time?- was both a genuine question that he had not guideline for and he didn't want to assume anything. He moved through his large closet trying to come up with different outfits to cover all options.

He started with the lounge wear: soft, expensive cotton pants, a hoodie he knew Shane really liked, a few thin, worn in t-shirts. Clothes for comfort, not for performing. Next, workout gear- a concession to the reality of their bodies and the shared, ingrained need for movement. He packed his own coffee, the particular bitter Russian blend Shane had once grimaced at but Ilya still liked it. He grabbed shoes and underwear, his electronics, and his journal.

Then, his hand hovered over the small, discreet toiletry bag. From it, he withdrew a single, unlabeled prescription bottle. His suppressants. He held it for a long moment, the plastic cool against his palm. Taking them was a daily act of will, a chemical muzzle on the most primal part of his nature. He hated them. They made the world feel muffled, like a pane of thick glass between him and his own instincts. But they were also a peace offering, a tangible

promise. *See? I can be calm. I can be safe. You will not be overwhelmed.* He tucked the bottle into a zippered compartment, just in case Shane changed his mind at the last minute, their vacation wouldn't be ruined.

His phone buzzed on the nightstand. He didn't need to look to know it was Shane. The updates had been a constant, gentle stream throughout the day.

Shane- Parade is loud but crazy. I've never seen so many people at once. Was it like that for you?

IGR- Was better. I did my parade shirtless, remember. People loved it.

Shane- My mom would murder me. She's crying again.

Shane- This is the last event. Then it's just... us.

Us. The word shimmered between them, full of promise. The quiet of a lakeside cottage. The quiet of a space with no cameras, no teammates, no family. Just them, together.

IGR- I am packed.

Shane- Already? Your flight isn't until the end of the week.

IGR- I am prepared.

He was. And he was not. He was prepared for different scenarios for their time together. The good memories- the easy banter, the competitive drive, the shocking tenderness. And the bad- the chilling discovery of the trackers, the betrayed silence, the lingering phantom smell of gasoline and burning flesh that sometimes haunted Ilya's dreams.

Things were, as Shane's text had said, *seemingly going really good*. The daily contact was a lifeline. But Ilya, whose entire being was wired to analyze Shane's every micro-expression, heard the caution in that "*seemingly*." He felt it in the pauses between messages, the way Shane still sometimes ended calls abruptly when his family entered the room. The foundation was being rebuilt, but it was still new, feelings were still raw. One wrong step could sink into it and leave a permanent mark.

He folded a final sweater, his movements precise. On the TV, the camera zoomed in on Shane accepting a giant ceremonial key from the mayor. He looked so young. Trying so hard to appear like the perfect, confident man that everyone was looking up to. So beautiful. Ilya's chest ached with a love that was still, despite all his therapy, all his medication, a terrifyingly possessive thing. He wanted to devour that burden, to carry every ounce of it himself. The old, monstrous instinct whispered that Shane should be able to be an omega that Ilya controlled, curated, and owned.

He shut the suitcase with a definitive click, silencing the thought. That was the old path. The path that led to fire and ruin and would lose him Shane. The new path was letting Shane see that he was better, deserving of him. The faith he had for Ilya to be the man who had earned to be forgiven for unconscionable things might still have room for the man he was trying, desperately, to become.

He was packed. He was prepared. He was terrified. And for the first time in a while, the countdown in his head didn't feel like a sentence. It felt like a heartbeat.

The roar of the parade faded into the echoing silence of the car, which then he turned on the radio for some background noise, of some soothing instrumental music. Shane drove straight from the final press conference, a duffel bag of sweat-damp celebration clothes in the trunk and the heavy satisfying fact that he'd won the Stanley Cup so early in his career. He felt it in his chest. He'd done it- and Ilya had been so proud of him every time that they spoke over the last couple of days. The need for quiet was a physical thirst. More than that, the need to prepare was an itch in his hands, a compulsion in his orderly mind.

The cottage welcomed him with the faint, dusty scent of pine and closed-up stillness. He opened every window first, letting the early summer air, cool and carrying the scent of the lake, sweep through the rooms. Then, he began. The cleaning service had been by earlier that week to make sure things were free of the construction debris, but he didn't want a stranger's scent in here, this place was only for Ilya and himself.

The grocery list was a notepad on his phone, meticulously curated over the past week. It wasn't all guesswork. It was very intentional, he wanted to make sure they wouldn't need any time away from each other or to . He stood in the brightly-lit supermarket aisle, his baseball cap pulled low, and reconstructed Ilya's pantry from memory: the specific brand of salted

black licorice Ilya craved after games, the expensive jar of pickled garlic he'd eat straight with a fork, the dark, bitter rye bread. He added the obvious- coffee, the bitter Russian blend- and then the things he'd simply noticed Ilya reaching for over and over: yogurts with sweet mix-ins, almonds, a particular type of sparkling water. He bought the Cokes, of course. The staple of their hotel room minibars and Ilya's fridge. He filled a cart with all the favorites he read about, provisioning for the whole summer so they wouldn't need to be apart.

Back at the cottage, he put everything away in its precise place. He cleaned surfaces that were already clean. He washed the blankets on the sun-bleached sofa and made up the bed in the main bedroom with fresh sheets, his hands pausing on the cotton. This was the room. This was where it would happen. His heat was a predictable, ticking clock in his biology, due to arrive like a storm front precisely two days after he would stop taking his suppressants. The thought sent a jolt of pure, undiluted anxiety through him, sharp enough to override the lingering exhaustion from the playoffs.

He'd never spent a heat with anyone. His entire adult life had been so focused on his goals. To not let anyone find out his secret, to prove to himself and to his parents that their years of sacrifice weren't in vain. The idea of being that vulnerable, that *exposed*, with Ilya- with the alpha whose love had once been indistinguishable from obsession- was terrifying. It was also, a deeper, more shameful part of him whispered, the secret hope he'd barely allowed himself to name.

On the second day of waiting, the silence of the cottage began to press in on him. He took out his rarely used burner phone, his thumb hovering over his doctor's contact. Dr. B had answered on the second ring.

"Shane. I saw the games. Congratulations. And how is the head?"

They went through the concussion follow-up briefly, Shane assuring her the headaches were down to a rare twinge sometimes. Then, he took a breath that shuddered in his chest. "The, um. The other thing. My cycle. It's... due. Soon."

A pause on the line, clinical and assessing. "I see. And has that relationship has changed from our last discussion?"

“Yes.” The word was a whisper. “He’s... coming here. In two days. For at least my heat, maybe longer.”

Another pause. He could hear the rustle of papers, the click of a keyboard. “Shane, you know the statistics. The chance of conception during a partnered, un-suppressed heat is exceptionally high. If pregnancy is not a desired outcome at this time, I would strongly recommend the birth control injection. It suppresses ovulation for that cycle only. It’s effective, gets out of your system fairly quickly, and has fewer systemic side effects than your standard suppressants.”

Pregnancy. The word wasn’t abstract. It was a series of images and facts for Shane: a positive test, the media firestorm, the end of his career as he knew it, the terrifying transformation of his body, the loss of control. It was also, treacherously, an image of Ilya’s stunned, reverent face, his large hands, impossibly gentle, on a rounded stomach. His mother’s tears of a different kind. A tiny, impossibly beautiful tiny person with Ilya’s ocean blue eyes.

His career. *Their* careers. The relationship that was still so new, so fragile, built on therapy and promises and whatever the next few weeks would build. It was insane to want a baby right now.

“Get me the shot please,” he said, his voice firm, deciding. The part of him that was a strategist, a survivor, won out. “Overnight it if you can with instructions.”

“I’ll send it to the pharmacy in town that you can trust. No names and they have a drive through. You can pick it up tomorrow. Administer it in the thigh, 48 hours before the anticipated start of your symptoms.” She relayed the clinical details, and Shane committed them to memory.

The silence stretched again. He could hang up. He had what he needed. But the other question, the terrifying one, was a lump in his throat. His face grew hot. “Dr. B?”

“Yes, Shane?”

“When... when it happens. With an alpha there. What... what should I expect?” He forced the words out, each one a struggle. “I’ve only ever... been alone. And on some of the suppressants. It was just... painful.”

Her voice softened, just a degree. “It will be intense. It depends on the alpha, but the usual effects are the drive to nest, to be close, will be overwhelming. Your sensitivity to his scent will be magnified a thousandfold. It will likely guide everything- what feels safe, what feels necessary. Physically, it can be... profound. The presence of a trusted alpha can mitigate the fever and the muscle aches significantly. The experience can shift from one of illness to one of...” She searched for the clinical term. “...heightened reciprocal connection. Clear, ongoing consent is paramount, even when verbal communication may be difficult. Have you established non-verbal signals? A way to check in? Do you trust this Alpha to respect your boundaries?”

Shane’s mind raced. They hadn’t. They had a plan for summer, for talking, for driving from the airport. They didn’t have a plan for this. “No, I mean, yes I trust him but we haven’t spoken much about the details.” he admitted, his blush deepening.

“Establish them before the symptoms begin. A tap, a word, a gesture. It is your responsibility to yourself, and his to you, to have that framework.” She paused. “He is aware of the timing?”

“Yes. I told him.”

“And his response?”

“He’s...excited? He’s giving up part of his summer for me.”

A soft hum from Dr. B. “Then make a plan, Shane. That is what you are good at. Prepare the space, prepare your body, prepare your signals. Control what you can. It will help.”

He hung up, the phone warm in his hand. The cottage was perfectly ready. The groceries were stocked. The bed was made. The injection would be in his hands tomorrow. He had a

list of things to research: non-verbal safe words, nesting behaviors, alpha-omega dynamics during a partnered cycle. He had a plan to formulate.

He walked to the large window overlooking the lake, its surface like a sheet of hammered silver under the grey sky. In two days, Ilya would be here. The silence would be filled. And the deepest, most hidden part of himself- the omega he had spent a lifetime medicating into silence- was stirring, awake, terrified and yearning, counting down the hours.

The drive to the pharmacy in town felt like a test. Shane waited at the drive-thru and he checked his phone again, sending a quick text to Rose when she asked if he wanted to come to her movie shoot while he was free for a few days. The brim of his hat casting a shadow over his face, as he mumbled the pick up order number Dr. B had texted him over the speaker. A small box came down the delivery tube. He muttered his thanks and was back in the safety of the cottage within an hour.

Back at the cottage, he didn't open it immediately. He placed it on the kitchen counter and stared. It was a decision that had to be made. It was the only choice, even though it made him feel strange. *We are doing this, but we are not risking a pregnancy yet.* The logic was impeccable. The emotions were like a turbulent sea beneath the ice. Part of him, the part that had meticulously planned his career since he was fourteen, was screaming in approval. The other part, the newly-awakened, deeply uncertain omega, felt a pang of something like regret. It was insane. They were athletes at their peak. Their relationship was a carefully negotiated ceasefire. A child was a nuclear bomb for his life right now. And yet... the image wouldn't leave him: Ilya's fierce, focused intensity, the terrifying depth of his devotion, turned not on possession but on nurture. It was a fantasy so dangerous he had to physically shake his head to dispel it.

His laptop became his like his command center. He cleared his browsing history twice, his face perpetually flushed, as he dove into medical journals, obscure omega-focused forums, and dry anthropological texts. He learned about the "reciprocal calming effect" of a bonded alpha's presence, the potential for a partnered heat to reduce systemic stress markers even as it amplified sensory and emotional intensity. He read clinical descriptions of nesting behaviors- the drive to create a secure, scent-saturated environment. That, he understood. He'd already done it. The groceries weren't just supplies; they were offerings. The cleaned cottage wasn't just tidy; it was a den.

But the personal accounts were what truly unmoored him. Stories of overwhelming connection, of words becoming unnecessary, of a harmony that transcended the physical ache. Others spoke of claustrophobia, of feeling consumed, of the terrifying loss of self.

Which would it be? With Ilya, it could so easily be both. The man was a paradox- a predator who had learned to kneel, a storm contained by sheer will. Would his presence feel like a shelter or a cage?

The question of non-verbal signals was the most immediate problem. No one could script or fully plan out a heat, but he could script a safety protocol. He picked up his phone, his thumb slick with nervous sweat.

Shane- We need a safe word. Or a safe signal. For next week.

IGR- You have one in mind?

Shane- Not sure. I've been reading some blogs. I read that words might... not work. Some omega's use like this tap method. Three rapid taps would mean stop. Check in.

IGR- Three taps. I understand.

Shane- And you need one too. In case you... need to stop. Or step away.

There was a long pause. Shane could imagine Ilya's frown, the slight crease between his brows as he processed the idea that he, the alpha, might need an escape hatch.

IGR- I do not think I would need one. You already listen to what I say, when we are together.

Shane- Okay. if you're sure.

With that agreed on, Shane felt much more comfortable.

The next thirty-six hours were filled with heightened perception. The cottage, a place designed for Shane to be able to fully relax, felt like it was fully of electric anticipation, as if the very walls were trembling with the foresight that they'd be witness to a monumental shift in this relationship.. He found himself rearranging the living room furniture, pulling the largest, softest armchair closer to the fireplace. He took one of Ilya's forgotten practice

jerseys from his own duffel bag- a relic he'd never admitted to keeping- and folded it carefully, placing it on the foot of the bed. It might be a bit embarrassing to let Ilya know that he'd taken it but it was one of his most treasured possessions and he needed it close by..

His body began its subtle, familiar countdown. A low-grade thrum of energy in his veins, a sensitivity in his skin so that the brush of his cotton shirt felt like a whisper. His sense of smell sharpened exponentially. He could distinguish the damp earth by the shoreline from the dry pine needles on the path, the waxy scent of the cleaning products from the dusty sweetness of the old books on the shelf.

The silence was no longer empty. It was thick with anticipation, a held breath. He tried to read, but the words swam. He tried to watch a game tape, but the strategies seemed trivial, distant. All that was real was the space, the slowly gathering pressure in his own body, and the phantom sensation of a presence not yet arrived.

On the final evening, he stood on the dock as a slow drizzle began to fall, misting the lake and shrouding the opposite shore. The air smelled of petrichor and wet wood. Growing up, he loved the smell. Loved being outside during summer rains and now he'd get to share that with Ilya.

He went inside, locking the door behind him. The cottage was ready. The protocols were in place. The injection would be in his system. His research was a jumble of facts in his head. All that was left was the waiting, and the terrifying, thrilling surrender to an unknown experience. He was no longer just Shane Hollander, champion. He was an omega preparing for his alpha to spend a long stretch of time with him for the first time. He curled up on the sofa, the soft fabric smelling faintly of laundry detergent, and waited for the world to change.

The Range Rover felt like a spaceship. Too quiet, too smooth, the scent of its pristine leather interior still somehow sterile despite the pine-scented air freshener that they'd clipped to a vent. A gift from team ownership for winning the Cup. It was practical, reliable, and the windows were so darkly tinted they turned the bright afternoon into a perpetual, private twilight. Shane was grateful for that. It made the terminal's bustling curb much more manageable.

He'd parked in the exact spot they'd texted about. Column 3B, by the taxi stand. His hands were tight on the steering wheel, knuckles pale. The nervous energy wasn't the bad kind, not the tense energy that used to coil in his stomach before facing Ilya on the ice. This was a high-frequency buzz in his veins, a static of *what if* and *I missed you* and *please let this be okay*. He'd run through the script in his head a dozen times. *Park. See him. Smile. Hug? No, too much. A nod. Get the suitcase. Open the trunk. Say something normal.*

The script evaporated the moment Ilya emerged from the sliding glass doors.

He moved through the crowd with an unconscious, predatory grace that made everyone else seem like background extras. A single rolling suitcase, sleek and black. His outfit was simple- black sleeveless shirt, black shorts, a black baseball cap on backwards- but on Ilya, it looked like a uniform. The shirt showed the powerful cut of his shoulders and arms, the beautiful constellations of birthmarks that were splattered in the most fascinating patterns across his upperbody, familiar scars from old hockey wounds. He looked... incredible. Not just handsome, but present. Solid. Real after weeks of being a voice on the phone or a pixelated image.

Shane's heart did a complicated, painful squeeze against his ribs. The nerves were still there, a skittering flock of birds in his chest, but they were drowned out by a wave of pure, uncomplicated happiness so sharp it made his eyes sting. He unlocked the doors.

Ilya saw the car, a faint smile touching his lips. He loaded his suitcase into the back with efficient ease, then slid into the passenger seat. The car's interior seemed to shrink, the air pressure changing instantly, becoming richer, heavier. He brought with him the scent of airplane air and faint cologne, but underneath it, the essential, grounding scent of *Ilya*- clean, sharp, alpha, *home*. It hit Shane's senses like a physical touch, and he had to consciously stop himself from leaning into it.

"Hi," Shane said, the word too loud in the quiet cabin.

"Hello, solnyshko," Ilya said, his voice a low rumble. His blue eyes scanned Shane's face, taking in the probably-too-wide eyes, the flush on his cheeks. The scrutiny should have felt unbearable, but it felt like being *seen* for the first time in a while.

The control was gone. Shane's body moved on its own. He leaned across the center console, bracing one hand on Ilya's chest, and pressed a quick, closed-mouth kiss to his lips. It was over in a second. A peck. Chaste. But his lips tingled, and the thankfulness for the darkened windows was a prayer in his mind.

Ilya went perfectly still for a heartbeat, loving when Shane initiated physical touch like this.

Shane pulled back, fumbling with his seatbelt, putting the car in drive. "So, um. The drive's about an hour. Maybe a little more with traffic leaving the city. I stocked up on snacks. And drinks. The, uh, the licorice you like is in the bag behind your seat if you want it now. The traffic report said the 400 was clear but there was construction on the 11, so I mapped an alternate route that goes through some smaller towns. It's prettier, less trucks, but it adds about twelve minutes, do you mind? I should have asked. We can just take the highway if you're tired."

The words spilled out of him, a nervous, rambling stream. He could feel Ilya's smile beside him, a warm, silent presence. He didn't interrupt, just let Shane talk himself out, his gaze a gentle weight on Shane's profile.

When Shane finally paused for breath, his right hand fluttering restlessly on the gear shift, Ilya reached over. He didn't grab, didn't command. He simply slid his palm under Shane's twitching hand, turning it over. His thumb stroked once, slowly, over the racing pulse in Shane's wrist. Then he lifted Shane's hand and pressed a deliberate, soft kiss to the center of his palm.

The effect was instantaneous and catastrophic to Shane's composure. A jolt, white-hot and sweet, shot straight up his arm, pooling low in his belly. His breath hitched. The dim interior of the car suddenly seemed even darker at the edges as his vision tunneled on Ilya's face. His scent glands tingled, a faint, responsive warmth at the base of his neck. It was the most innocent touch, and it felt more intimate than anything they'd done in months.

Ilya watched the reaction play out over Shane's face with a fascinated, darkening gaze. He didn't let go of his hand. His thumb continued its slow, maddening stroke. "Hey now," he said, his voice a low, rough caress. "Stay focused for a little while longer, sweetheart."

The endearment, the gentle command, the sheer *possession* in the touch- it should have sent alarm bells clanging. It did. But they were muffled, drowned out by a deeper, older instinct that purred at the attention. This was different. This wasn't the obsessive control of the trackers. This was Ilya, seeing him come undone from a single kiss on the hand, and choosing to steady him instead of devour him. For now.

Shane swallowed, forcing his eyes back to the road, his fingers curling slightly around Ilya's. "I'm focused," he managed, his voice uneven.

"Good," Ilya said. He didn't release Shane's hand. He laced their fingers together and rested their joined hands on his own thigh, a point of burning, constant contact.

The rest of the drive passed in a blur of green and dappled sunlight. Shane talked, quieter now, about the cottage, about the lake, about the loons he'd seen that morning. Ilya listened, interjecting with a soft question or a low hum, his thumb tracing idle patterns on Shane's skin. The protocols, the injection, the safe signals, the terrifying, thrilling approach of his heat- all of it was still there, a structured list in the back of Shane's mind. But for this suspended hour, in the twilight cocoon of the car with Ilya's hand solid and warm in his, it all just felt like a future they were driving toward together. The destination was no longer a place of fear, but simply the next point on the map, the place where the quiet would truly begin.

The gravel of the driveway crunched under the Range Rover's tires as Shane pulled to a stop in front of the cedar-shingled cottage. The engine cut, leaving a sudden, profound silence broken only by the distant soft cry of some birds coming from the treeline. For a moment, neither of them moved. The journey's gentle hum was over; the destination was now, solid and real around them.

Shane unbuckled his seatbelt with a sharp click that sounded too loud. "I can get your bag," he said, already pushing his door open.

"Ne nado," Ilya said, his voice leaving no room for argument. "I can carry my own bags." He was out of the car before Shane could round the hood, hefting his suitcase from the back with ease. The simple, dismissive gesture was pure Ilya- a reflexive assertion of control, of

providing, even over something as trivial as a suitcase. Shane's hands fluttered at his sides for a second before he shoved them into the pockets of his shorts.

He led the way up the flagstone path, fumbling with the key in the lock. "It's, um, it's keypad too, but I never remember the code my dad set, so..." The door swung inward, releasing the scent of sun-warmed wood, clean linen, and the faint, lingering trace of Shane's own citrus-and-honeysuckle omega scent into the cooler, pine-scented air outside.

Ilya stepped across the threshold, his sharp blue eyes taking in the open-concept space: the vaulted ceiling with exposed beams, the wall of windows framing the glittering lake, the overstuffed, inviting furniture. He set his suitcase down quietly by the door.

"It's huge for one person, but the layout is really efficient," Shane started, the words beginning to tumble out again as the nervous energy sought an outlet. He pointed toward the kitchen. "The appliances are all new, they were just put in a few days before I got here. And see that door? That leads down to the outdoor shower from the dock, but we can go later if you want. The best thing is the water- we had a new well drilled a when the foundation went up, so now it's all filtered and super fresh, you can actually drink from the tap, which is kind of a big deal out here, most places you can't- "

He was gesturing toward the kitchen faucet as if demonstrating a marvel, his back momentarily to Ilya. He didn't see Ilya begin to move.

Ilya didn't walk toward him; he began a slow, silent circuit of the room's perimeter, a predator familiarizing itself with new territory. His boots were soundless on the wide-plank floor. He listened to the cadence of Shane's voice, the adorable, detailed ramble about water pH and pump warranties, a smile playing on his lips. He completed his arc, coming up behind Shane as he was explaining the filtration system.

With a gentle, inexorable pressure, Ilya guided him backwards, not with his hands, but with the sheer presence of his body until Shane's shoulders met the cool, unyielding surface of the floor-to-ceiling window. The vast panorama of the lake was at his back. Shane's ramble cut off with a soft, startled gasp. He was caged, not by arms, but by the solid wall and the alpha standing before him, close enough that their bodies almost touched.

"Shh," Ilya murmured, the sound a warm vibration in the space between them. "It's just me and you here. No need to be nervous."

He bent his head, one hand coming up to cradle the side of Shane's face, his thumb stroking the arch of his cheekbone. His other hand settled firmly at the base of Shane's spine, holding him in place. Then he kissed him.

This was nothing like the hurried peck in the car. This was slow, deep, and utterly controlled. Ilya set the pace, a languid exploration that was as much about possession as it was about greeting. He tilted Shane's head just so, kissing him with a focused intensity that demanded and received complete surrender. Shane melted into the kiss with a shuddering sigh, his hands coming up to clutch weakly at Ilya's sleeveless shirt, his earlier nervous tension dissolving like sugar in hot water. The structured thoughts about wells and filters evaporated and everything else flew out of his mind, replaced by the simple, overwhelming sensations of Ilya's mouth, Ilya's scent, Ilya's solid warmth against him.

When Ilya finally pulled back, it was only by a fraction. He kept his forehead resting against Shane's, his breath mingling with Shane's soft, panting exhales. A low, satisfied rumble sounded in his chest. He looked down at the omega in his arms- flushed, pliant, eyes dazed and heavy-lidded.

A slow, triumphant smile spread across Ilya's face. He brushed his thumb over Shane's kiss-swollen bottom lip. "There," he said, his voice a dark, tender caress. "All better."

Shane smiled up at Ilya, a soft, dazed expression that made his eyes crinkle at the corners. All the architectural commentary had been blissfully scoured from his mind, replaced by a single, warm fact: Ilya was here. He was real. And he had just kissed the nervous tension straight out of Shane's body.

With a quiet, confident tug, Shane grabbed Ilya's hand- the same hand that had been kissed into stillness in the car- and pulled. He didn't lead him on a tour. He led him the few short feet to the large, overstuffed sectional sofa that faced the wall of windows and the lake. Then, with a strength that seemed to surprise even himself, Shane pulled Ilya down on top of him as he let himself fall back into the deep, forgiving cushions.

There was a grunt, a shift of weight, and then Ilya was there, braced above him, a solid wall of muscle and heat. The world narrowed to the cradle of the couch, the frame of Ilya's shoulders blocking out the light, and the overwhelming, rightness of his weight.

Ilya's control, so evident at the window, fractured for a single, glorious second. His eyes darkened, the pupil swallowing the blue until only a thin ring remained. A low, involuntary growl vibrated through his chest and into Shane's. "You make me a little bit crazy," he breathed, He whispered against Shane's neck.

"Maybe," Shane whispered, his hands coming up to frame Ilya's face, his thumbs stroking the sharp planes of his cheekbones. He didn't give Ilya time to think, to retreat into restraint. He pulled him down and sealed their mouths together.

This kiss was not slow. It was an inferno.

It was all desperate, open-mouthed hunger and the slick, hot slide of tongue. Shane arched up into it, a soft, broken sound escaping his throat as Ilya met his hunger with a ferocity that was barely leashed. Ilya's hand fisted in Shane's hair, not to hurt, but to hold, to angle his head exactly where he wanted it, and Shane surrendered to the guidance with a shudder of pure relief. This was a language they had never forgotten.

The taste of him- coffee, and that essential, spicy-dark alpha flavor that was Ilya's alone-flooded Shane's senses. He could feel the hard lines of Ilya's body through their clothes: the bunch of his thighs where they pressed against Shane's hips, the formidable strength of his chest, the relentless ridge of his arousal. It should have been terrifying, this evidence of raw, alpha need. Instead, it sent a bolt of answering heat straight through Shane's core, liquid and demanding. His own body responded, a sweet, aching throb that made him rock up against the solid weight pinning him down.

Ilya's other hand slid from Shane's back, down over the curve of his hip, gripping with a possessiveness that made Shane gasp into the kiss. The fabric of their shorts was a maddening barrier. Ilya broke the kiss with a ragged breath, trailing his mouth down the line of Shane's jaw, his teeth scraping lightly over the pounding pulse in his throat, just above the scent gland he had never claimed. The sensation was electric, a promise and a threat that made Shane's vision blur.

“Ilya,” Shane gasped, his own hands scrambling, pulling at the hem of Ilya’s black shirt, seeking skin. He needed to feel the heat, the scars, the reality of him.

With a swift, efficient motion, Ilya pulled the shirt over his head and tossed it aside. The afternoon light from the window gilded the sweat-slicked planes of his chest, the dark neat trail of hair leading down, the stark black of his tattoo against his tanned skin. He was a masterpiece of brutal, focused power. Shane’s breath hitched. He mapped him with his hands, his fingers tracing the familiar ridges of abdominal muscle, the old, silvery slash of a skate blade over a rib, the pounding of his heart.

Ilya watched him, his chest heaving, his gaze molten. He captured Shane’s wandering hands, pinning them gently above his head on the couch cushion with one of his own. The dominance of the gesture was absolute, but his touch was careful, his thumb stroking Shane’s wrist in a silent question. Shane’s answer was to strain against the hold, not to break it, but to feel its strength. He was trembling, every nerve ending alight.

Leaning down, Ilya took his mouth again, this kiss slower, deeper, a drowning pull. He released Shane’s wrists, and Shane’s arms immediately wound around his neck, holding on as if he were the only solid thing in his tilting world. Ilya’s hand slid under Shane’s shirt, his palm searing against the smooth skin of his stomach, riding up over his ribs. Shane jerked, a sharp, sensitive gasp caught between their lips. Ilya stilled instantly, his hand softening, becoming a soothing, warm weight instead of a demand.

It was that- the terrifying, precise control over his own immense power, the way he could shift from devouring to comforting in a heartbeat- that undid Shane completely. A wave of emotion, too vast to name, crashed over him. He tore his mouth from Ilya’s, burying his face against the hot skin of Ilya’s neck, breathing him in, his body shaking.

Ilya froze above him, every muscle locked. “Shane?” His voice was gravel, strained with concern. “Solnyshko? Did I- ?”

“No,” Shane mumbled against his skin, his voice thick. He pressed a clumsy kiss to Ilya’s collarbone. “No. Don’t stop. Just... just hold on to me.”

A shudder ran through Ilya’s frame. He carefully lowered his full weight, blanketing Shane in heat and safety, his face buried in Shane’s hair. They lay like that for long minutes, tangled on

the couch, the only sounds their ragged breathing slowly syncing and the distant lap of water against the shore. The frantic edge of the makeout had burned away, leaving them in the glowing, vulnerable embers of something deeper, something that felt dangerously like a new beginning being forged in the quiet of the old cottage.

The silence was a living thing between them, thick with the echo of ragged breaths and the scent of arousal. Shane, his face still buried in the warm haven of Ilya's neck, felt the world slowly solidify back into shapes and consequences. The dizzying, safe weight of Ilya atop him was a siren song, begging him to forget everything else. But the part of his brain that ran on protocols and risk assessments- the part that had kept him alive and hidden for so long- finally sparked back to life.

With a soft, shuddering sigh that was equal parts regret and resolve, Shane pressed one last kiss to the damp skin beneath Ilya's jaw and began to gently extricate himself. Ilya, sensing the shift, immediately eased his weight, rolling to the side to give him space, though his arm remained a loose, possessive band across Shane's back.

Shane sat up, the blush returning with a vengeance, heating his face and neck. He couldn't meet Ilya's eyes, focusing instead on his own hands twisting in his lap. The couch cushions between them felt like a newly drawn border.

"We should... we should talk. Before... before things get..." He gestured vaguely between them, the words failing. *Before I lose the ability to think in straight lines. Before the heat takes the choice away.*

"Da," Ilya said, his voice low and gravelly with restrained desire. He shifted, mirroring Shane's position so they sat facing each other on the wide sofa, a careful foot of space separating their knees. He didn't try to bridge it. He understood the need for a demilitarized zone for this conversation. "Talk."

Shane took a deep, steadying breath, pulling the clean, pine-and-lake air into his lungs, trying to dilute the intoxicating concentration of alpha scent that clung to him. "While we're here. This summer. I need... I need us to be as honest as we can be. To communicate everything. Even the hard things. Even the stupid, nervous things." He finally looked up, meeting Ilya's intense blue gaze. "I can't do guesswork. Not with this. Not with you."

Ilya's expression was utterly serious, the remnants of predatory hunger banked into embers of focused attention. "No guesswork," he agreed, a solemn vow. "You say things. I say things. We listen."

"Okay." Shane's fingers plucked at a loose thread on the couch. "So. My heat. It's coming a day or two after I stop taking one of the pills." He forced the clinical words out. "I spoke to my doctor. I got a... birth control injection. It'll prevent pregnancy during this cycle. I'm going to take it tomorrow."

He chanced a glance at Ilya's face. There was no anger, no flash of offended alpha pride. Just a deep, thoughtful consideration. Ilya nodded slowly. "This is what you want? For now?"

"Yes. It's... it's too much. The idea of... of that, right now. With everything. With our careers, with this fragile thing between us. We have to at least spend this time together to figure things out."

"Then it is good," Ilya said, simple and firm. "Your body. Your choice." He leaned forward slightly, elbows on his knees, his gaze holding Shane's. "But, Shane... I want you to know. For me, the idea of making babies with you... it is not a fear. It is a hope. A hope for maybe... next year. Two years. When you are ready. If you ever are. I want it to be on the table. To be something we can... look at together. When the time is right."

The words landed not as pressure, but as a breathtaking declaration of a shared future. It wasn't a demand for immediate submission to their instincts, but an invitation to a profound, eventual partnership. It acknowledged Shane's autonomy completely, while offering the vision of a destiny Ilya desperately wanted. Shane's throat tightened. He could only manage a small, jerky nod.

Seeking safer, more concrete ground, Shane grasped for the other looming reality. "Our contracts. They're up soon."

"Yes."

"I... I want to stay in Montreal. I think. It's my home. My team. My... structure." It was the truth, plain and simple.

Ilya didn't hesitate. "Then you stay." He said it as if it were the easiest decision in the world. "I will look. Boston, for another year or two maybe. Or... another team closer. If you want me closer." The offer was staggering in its simplicity. He was willing to upend his own career, his own life, to orbit Shane's stability. It was the antithesis of his old obsession- not to pull Shane into his world by force, but to move his own world to align with Shane's.

The magnitude of it, the trust in that offer after everything, threatened to overwhelm Shane. "You'd do that?"

"For you?" Ilya's lips quirked in a faint, weary smile that held a universe of devotion. "Solnyshko, I warned you before. I gave you the chance to walk away and you didn't take it. After that, there is no devil in hell or God in heaven who could take you away from me. I will do whatever you need. I will be whoever you need me to be if at the end of our long lives, we are together, a gaggle of grandbabies around us. I bet we'll die the same day. There is no me without you anymore."

Shane, emboldened by the honesty, slowly reached out his hand, palm up, Ilya looked at it for a heartbeat, then placed his own hand over it, his long fingers lacing through Shane's. Not pulling, just holding.

"Okay," Shane whispered again, the word filled with more meaning than any other. It was an acceptance. A beginning.

The heavy talk left a new kind of quiet in its wake, one that felt clean instead of strained. Shane unfolded his legs, the pins and needles a welcome distraction. "C'mon," he said, standing up. "I'll show you the rest of the place. You know, so you can pick your room."

Ilya raised an eyebrow, "My room?"

"Yeah. There are two guest rooms. Well, three if you count the office with a pull out." Shane led him down a short hall, pointing to doors. "This one gets the morning sun, which is nice, but it's bright at like, 5 AM. This one faces the woods, so it's darker, quieter. The bed's a little firmer though, which you might like? Or hate. I don't know."

He was rambling again, but it felt different now. Lighter. The honesty had vented a pressure valve. Ilya followed, a silent, amused shadow.

"I think," Ilya said, his voice a low rumble behind him, "Too small. I'll used to big beds."

Shane snorted, pushing open the last door at the end of the hall. "Shut up. This is the only room with a King sized bed."

The master bedroom. It was dominated by a large, wrought-iron bedframe, the mattress piled with the soft, grey blankets Shane had washed. The same wall of windows looked out over the lake, the water now painted with the long, golden streaks of the late afternoon sun. It was serene, beautiful, and utterly, intimately *Shane's*. The scent of him- clean cotton, his specific shampoo, the underlying warmth of omega- was strongest here, woven into the very air.

Ilya stopped in the doorway, his playful demeanor evaporating. His gaze swept the room, not as a visitor assessing accommodations, but as a hunter in a sanctum. The intensity of his focus was a physical touch.

Shane felt a fresh flutter of nerves, but beneath it, a bold, teasing impulse rose. He turned, leaning against the doorjamb, aiming for nonchalance. "So? Which will it be? The dawn's early light special, the gloomy forest suite, or the- "

Shane landed with a soft 'oof' and a burst of laughter, the breath momentarily knocked from him. He was still giggling when Ilya climbed over him, caging him in with his arms, his torso hovering just above Shane's.

"Hey now," Shane gasped, still grinning, playing his role to the hilt. He put a hand on Ilya's chest in mock protest. "No funny business, sir. I'm just an innocent bellboy. You shouldn't treat the staff this way!."

Ilya leaned down, his nose brushing Shane's, his smile all wicked promise. He licked a line from Shane's scent gland all the way up to his ear, hearing him purr. Grinning, his voice dripping with faux innocence. "Do not worry. I am an excellent tipper. I know exactly how to treat bellboys." The double meaning hung in the air, rich and delicious. Shane's laughter softened into a breathless smile, his eyes shining with affection and a spark of desire.

"Oh yeah?" Shane challenged softly, his hands coming up to link behind Ilya's neck. "Prove it."

Ilya did, by closing the distance and kissing him

Shane landed amidst the blankets, a gasp caught in his throat. He looked up, his heart hammering against his ribs. Ilya stood at the foot of the bed, his chest rising and falling with a deep, controlled breath. The setting sun haloed him from behind, casting his face in shadow, but Shane could see the gleam of his eyes, the set of his jaw. All the careful restraint, the patient distance, had been stripped away, leaving only a stark, hungry truth.

"No other room," Ilya said, his voice thick and final.

He didn't pounce. He moved onto the bed with a predatory grace that made the frame creak softly, crawling over Shane until he was caged beneath him once more, but this time there was no glass wall at his back, only the yielding mattress and the unyielding reality of Ilya's intent. He braced himself on his forearms, his face inches from Shane's. The scent of him, sharp alpha and desire, flooded Shane's senses, a dizzying, welcome assault.

"Tell me now," Ilya breathed, the words a rough vibration against Shane's lips. "The word, solnyshko. Your little taps. Tell me to stop, and I stop. Tell me to go to another room, and I go. But if you do not..." He dipped his head, his nose tracing the line of Shane's jaw, inhaling deeply at the pulse point beneath his ear. A shiver, violent and sweet, racked Shane's frame. "If you do not, then there is no more distance. Not tonight, or any other night after."

Shane's mind, usually a whirlwind of analysis and contingency plans, went blissfully, utterly silent. There was only the weight, the heat, the scent, and the profound rightness of it. He

lifted a hand, his fingers trembling as they traced the severe line of Ilya's brow, then slid into the dark hair at the nape of his neck. He didn't say the safe word. He didn't tap.

Instead, he arched his neck, a silent, vulnerable offering, and whispered, "No more distance."

It was like breaking a dam.

Ilya's mouth crashed down on his, and this kiss was a forrest fire that made their earlier one seem like a matchstick light. It was all consuming, a desperate, hungry reclaiming. Shane met it with equal fervor, his hands dragging down Ilya's back, clawing at the fabric of his shirt until Ilya reared back just enough to rip it over his head and toss it aside. The sight of him- all tanned skin and defined muscle under the golden light- stole the air from Shane's lungs.

Then Ilya's hands were on him, everywhere, mapping him with a frantic, reverent urgency. He peeled Shane's shirt off, his calloused palms skating over his ribs, his stomach, his chest, pausing to thumb at his nipples until Shane cried out, back bowing off the bed. Every touch was electric, a direct line to the molten core of need pooling low in Shane's belly. His own shorts felt like a torturous constraint, the fabric rough against his aching erection.

"Ilya," he gasped, the word breaking on a moan as Ilya's mouth left his to blaze a trail down his throat, over his collarbone, laving attention on one peaked nipple. "Please..."

Ilya understood. He shifted, his hands hooking in the waistband of Shane's shorts and underwear, dragging them down in a long pull, ripping his own shorts off until they were both bare, skin to searing skin.

The feeling was earth shattering. The full, hot, heavy weight of Ilya's erection pressed against his own, the slick slide of pre-cum between them, the sheer, breathtaking intimacy of being completely exposed. Shane's vision hazed. He wrapped his legs around Ilya's hips, heels digging into the hard muscles of his ass, pulling him closer, needing more friction, more pressure, more *everything*.

Ilya groaned, a raw, animal sound, and buried his face in Shane's neck. "You feel... Bozhe... you feel like heaven." His hips began a slow, grinding roll, setting a rhythm that was pure,

undiluted pleasure. Shane clung to him, matching the pace, his own sounds- soft whimpers, choked gasps, Ilya's name- spilling into the quiet room.

But it wasn't enough. The friction was exquisite, but it was a promise, not the culmination. Shane's body, thrumming with the pre-heat sensitivity, screamed for more. For completion. He fumbled between them, his hand brushing Ilya's length, making him shudder violently.

"Wait," Ilya rasped, catching his wrist. He pressed a hard, desperate kiss to Shane's palm before reaching over to the nightstand. Shane heard the drawer open, the rustle of a box. He'd put lube and condoms there days ago, a hopeful, terrifying preparation. Now, the sound was the most beautiful he'd ever heard.

Ilya sheathed himself with quick, efficient motions, his eyes never leaving Shane's face. He slicked his fingers, and then those fingers were pressing, carefully, inexorably, at Shane's entrance. Shane sucked in a sharp breath, his body tensing for a split second- before he forced himself to relax, to breathe. This was Ilya, they've gone without before, and it was close, but he wasn't in heat yet.

"I know," Ilya murmured, kissing his temple, his cheek, his lips. "I know, lyubimyy moy. I am here. Just me." His finger slid inside, a slow, burning stretch that quickly melted into a deep, shocking fullness. Shane moaned, pushing down against it. A second finger joined, scissoring, stretching, preparing him with a meticulous care that was its own kind of worship. By the time a third finger curled, brushing that devastating spot deep inside, Shane was a writhing, pleading mess, tears of overwhelming sensation gathering in the corners of his eyes.

"Now," he begged, his voice shattered. "Ilya, now, please, I need- "

Ilya withdrew his fingers. He positioned himself, the broad head of his cock pressing where Shane was stretched and slick and desperate for him. He looked down, his face a mask of such fierce, tender agony it made Shane's heart crack open.

"Look at me," Ilya commanded, softly.

Shane opened his eyes, meeting that burning blue gaze.

Ilya pushed in.

It was a slow, inexorable invasion, a claiming that was also a surrender. Shane cried out, his nails biting into Ilya's shoulders, as he was filled, stretched, completed in a way that was profoundly more than physical. As if they were at the end of a long, lonely exile. Ilya held himself still, buried to the hilt, his entire body trembling with the effort of control, letting Shane adjust, letting him own the moment.

"Okay?" Ilya gritted out, a single bead of sweat tracing a path down his temple.

Shane could only nod, his throat too tight for words. He rolled his hips, a tiny, experimental movement, and the sensation was so intense it wrenched a sob from his chest. It was all the permission Ilya needed.

He began to move.

It was not a gentle rhythm. It was deep, powerful, relentless strokes that drove the breath from Shane's lungs and coherent thought from his mind. Each thrust was a punctuation mark in a sentence of raw need, hitting that perfect spot inside him again and again until pleasure coiled, tight and white-hot, at the base of his spine. The world narrowed to the slap of skin, the creak of the bed, the ragged symphony of their breathing, and Ilya's low, Russian curses muttered against his skin.

Shane was unraveling, hurtling toward the edge. He clawed at Ilya's back, his heels urging him deeper, faster. "Ilya, I'm- I can't- "

"Come for me," Ilya growled, his pace becoming punishing, his own control fraying. "Let me see you. мой ."

The possessive endearment, the sheer command in his voice, was the final trigger. Shane's orgasm ripped through him with silent, devastating force, his body seizing, his vision whiting out as he spilled between them, pulses of pleasure so intense they bordered on pain.

The clenching, fluttering heat of Shane's climax tore Ilya's restraint to shreds. With three more brutal, driving thrusts, he followed, his own release punching a raw, guttural shout from his throat as he buried himself deep and stilled, shuddering through the waves.

For a long time, there was only the sound of their ragged breathing slowing, and the distant cry of the loon on the lake. Ilya, his weight a welcome anchor, collapsed carefully onto his side, pulling Shane with him, keeping them joined. He nuzzled into the sweat-damp hair at Shane's temple, his arms a vise around him.

Slowly, sensation by sensation, Shane returned to himself. The ache of pleasant exertion. The cool air on his overheated skin. The solid, steady beat of Ilya's heart against his back. And beneath it all, a profound, trembling peace. The ghosts of the past- the fear, the betrayal, the fire- were still there in the shadows of the room. But here, in this bed, in this tangled, sated closeness, they held no power. There was only this- honesty earned, trust tested and not found wanting, and a love, once obsessive and sick, now purified in the sweat-slicked, quiet dark, becoming something that felt, for the first time, like it could truly be their own.

The peace of the afterglow was a living thing in the room, thick and honeyed. Shane lay boneless against Ilya's chest, listening to the steady, slowing drum of his heart. The sweat on their skin was cooling, a slight chill beginning to seep into their limbs. Ilya's arms were locked around him, not as a cage, but as a mooring line in a calm sea.

"You're getting cold," Ilya murmured into his hair, his voice a drowsy rumble. His hand stroked down Shane's spine, a possessive, soothing gesture.

"A little," Shane admitted, nuzzling closer into the heat Ilya still radiated. The idea of moving, of breaking this perfect, tangled stillness, felt impossible.

Ilya shifted, and for a heart-stopping second Shane thought he was pulling away. Instead, Ilya simply tightened his hold and rolled, gathering Shane against him as he sat up on the edge of the bed. Shane made a soft, protesting noise, limbs feeling like lead.

"Come," Ilya said, the word not a command but an invitation. He stood, Shane held securely against his chest, and carried him the short distance to the en-suite bathroom. He flicked the

light on- a soft, dimmable glow- and set Shane down gently on the closed toilet lid before turning to the large, deep soaking tub.

Shane watched, his mind still floating in a pleasurable haze, as Ilya bent to start the water. He tested the temperature with his wrist, adjusting the taps with careful precision. The sound of rushing water filled the small room, steam beginning to curl into the air. Ilya found bath salts under the sink- something piney and clean that Shane's mother must have left- and poured a generous amount under the stream.

This was new. This meticulous, domestic care. Ilya had taken care of him like this before, but this felt different, this felt like so much more. Ilya was focused on the water's heat, on creating comfort. It made Shane's throat feel tight.

When the tub was full, Ilya turned off the taps and came back to him. He didn't speak. He simply reached for Shane, his hands firm on his hips, guiding him to stand and then helping him step over the high rim and into the steaming, fragrant water. The heat was a shock, then an instant, total relief, seeping into his sore muscles and the pleasant ache between his legs. He sank down with a sigh that trembled at the end, the water rising to his chest.

Ilya followed, his larger body displacing water that sloshed gently against the porcelain. He settled behind Shane, his legs bracketing him, and pulled him back to rest against his solid chest. The position was one of utter vulnerability, surrounded and supported. Shane's breath hitched, a faint echo of old panic- trapped- before it melted under the sheer, undeniable safety of the embrace. This was chosen. This was given.

For long minutes, they just existed. Shane let his head loll back against Ilya's shoulder, watching the steam rise. Ilya's arms were loosely around his waist, his chin resting on Shane's damp hair. The world was this water, this warmth, this silent, breathing presence at his back.

Then Ilya's hands began to move. They slid up his chest, over his shoulders, then back down his arms in long, slow strokes. He wasn't arousing. He was mapping. Re-learning the territory of Shane's body without the frantic hunger of before, with something closer to reverence. His fingers traced the line of a collarbone, the ridge of a bicep, the delicate bones of his wrist.

“You are so beautiful,” Ilya whispered, the words breathed into the shell of his ear. “Every part.”

Shane shivered, a different kind of heat gathering low in his belly. The exhaustion was still there, but beneath it, a slow-burning ember was being coaxed back to life by the hypnotic motion of those hands. He felt Ilya’s own body responding, a firm, thickening pressure against the small of his back.

Ilya’s hands drifted lower, skimming over his stomach, dipping beneath. One broad palm spread over Shane’s lower abdomen, a warm, heavy weight. The other hand drifted lower still, fingers combing through the coarse hair, then lower, until they just brushed against his softening length.

A jolt, sharp and sweet, went through Shane. He gasped, his hips giving an involuntary twitch.

Ilya stilled instantly. His hand retreated to Shane’s hip, holding him steady. “Still want?” he asked softly, the soft words a gentle check-in in the steam-filled air.

Shane nodded his head, turning it to press his forehead against Ilya’s stubbled jaw. “Yes, please,” he whispered. He reached back, his hand finding Ilya’s thigh under the water, and gave it a reassuring squeeze. Then, gathering his courage, he guided Ilya’s hand back to where it had been.

A low, approving hum vibrated against his back. This time, Ilya’s touch was not a question, but a promise. He took Shane in hand, his grip firm and knowing, stroking him with a lazy, devastating rhythm that had nothing to do with urgency and everything to do with pleasure drawn out and savored. The water lapped around them, amplifying every sensation, the slosh of their movements a quiet, intimate soundtrack.

Shane was content to be worked back to the heady floating feeling, to let the pleasure build in slow, cresting waves. But a deeper need stirred. He wanted to turn the tables, to offer the same worship. With effort, he shifted in the cradle of Ilya’s legs, turning in the water to face him. Water slopped over the side of the tub.

Ilya watched him, his eyes dark pools in the steam, his expression one of raw, open want. Shane didn't hesitate. He leaned in and kissed him, a deep, wet, searching kiss that tasted of salt and pine. As he kissed him, his own hand found Ilya under the water, wrapping around his hard, silken length. Ilya groaned into his mouth, his hips jerking up into the touch.

They found a rhythm, a slow, synchronous dance of hand and tongue and shared breath. It was messy and inefficient and perfect. The water made everything slippery, a sensual slide of skin on skin. Shane broke the kiss, panting, to trail his mouth down Ilya's throat, over the prominent Adam's apple, to the powerful juncture of his shoulder. His teeth scraped lightly over the unmarked skin where a claiming bite would go. Ilya shuddered violently, a broken, Russian curse spilling from his lips.

"Shane," he gasped, his own hand moving faster on Shane, his control fraying. "I am close... I cannot..."

"Then don't," Shane breathed against his skin. "Don't wait."

It was all the permission needed. Ilya's orgasm hit him like a silent storm, his body bowing, his face pressed into Shane's wet hair as he spilled over Shane's fist with a series of ragged, choked gasps. The sight, the feel of it, the raw sound of his release, tipped Shane over the edge mere seconds later, his own climax a bright, shattering burst that left him trembling and sightless, held upright only by Ilya's arms.

They slumped together in the cooling water, a tangled, sated heap of limbs. Ilya reached blindly for the plug with his toe, and they listened to the water begin to drain, a slow, gurgling echo of their own spent energy.

Ilya held Shane as he turned the showerhead on to rinse everything off, then reached for a towel, wrapping it around Shane first with a tenderness that felt monumental, before slinging one around his own hips. He led Shane, who was now swaying on his feet with pure exhaustion, back to the bed. They didn't dress. They simply collapsed between the sheets, skin to skin, Ilya pulling the blankets over them and tucking Shane securely against his side.

Outside, an owl cried out, a lonely, wild sound across the dark water. Shane listened to it, then to the steady, strong beat of Ilya's heart under his ear. The ghosts of their past difficulties were still there. The memory of the trackers, the terror of the kidnapping, the

smell of gasoline- they lingered in the corners of Shane's mind sometimes. But here, in this bed, with this man who would burn the world for him and was now learning, painstakingly, how to build a quieter, safer one, the ghosts had no power. They had faced the precipice of their old, toxic love and had, for this night at least, stepped back from the edge and found something softer on the other side. It was a fragile peace, hard-won and easily shattered. But for now, in the deep cottage dark, it was enough. It was everything.

The deep, black quiet of the cottage was split by a shift in the atmosphere, not a sound. Shane woke not from a dream, but into a new, pressing awareness. The pleasant aches from earlier were a distant memory, replaced by a low, insistent thrum that seemed to originate in his marrow. The pre-heat sensitivity had graduated into its first true wave- a feverish warmth under his skin, a deep, hollow ache in his core that was less about pain and more about a profound, physical *wanting*. The blankets were too heavy, the air too still.

And beside him, a furnace. Ilya was asleep, one arm thrown possessively over Shane's waist, his breathing a deep, even tide. But his scent in the dark was amplified, a complex, intoxicating tapestry of clean sweat, alpha musk, and the faint, reassuring aroma of his skin. It called to the ache in Shane, a magnetic pull that overrode the last vestiges of sleepy logic.

Shane turned carefully in the circle of Ilya's arm. He studied the shadowed planes of his face in the moonglow slipping through the windows- the severe brow relaxed in sleep, the fan of dark lashes, the stern mouth gone soft. This was the man who had burned a monster to ashes for him. This was the man who had tracked his every move. This was the man who, for ninety-five days, had kept a promise that must have felt like carving out his own heart.

The words formed, simple and terrifying in their vulnerability. He leaned in, his lips brushing the shell of Ilya's ear, his voice a sleep-roughened whisper in the absolute quiet. He moved closer, kissing softly wherever he could reach until he felt Ilya start to stir.

"Ilya... make love to me."

The effect was slow. Ilya's breathing hitched, stopped. His eyes flew open, pupils wide and black in the dim light, fixing on Shane's face with a shock so profound it looked like pain. For a long, suspended moment, he just stared, as if deciphering a code in a lost language. *Make love*. Not fuck me, not I need you, not any of the desperate, hungry phrases they'd traded before. This was something else. A request for connection, not just culmination.

A ragged breath tore from Ilya's throat. Emotion- too vast, too raw- flooded his features, threatening to crack the careful control he wore like armor. He couldn't hold Shane's gaze. With a broken, stifled sound, he turned his face and buried it in the curve of Shane's neck, his nose pressing against the unmarked, vulnerable scent gland there. His shoulders trembled, once, with the force of feeling he had no words for. He'd never heard it like that. From anyone. Especially not from Shane, whose honesty was a blade that could either cut or surgically remove a tumor.

Shane felt the damp heat of Ilya's breath, the slight tremble in the large body pressed against his. He understood. He brought his hands up, one sliding into the dark silk of Ilya's hair, the other spreading wide over the powerful, tense muscles of his back. "It's okay," he murmured into the quiet. "Just you. Just me. Like this."

It was permission, and it was a guide. Ilya drew in a shuddering, deep breath, filling himself with Shane's scent- citrus, clean sweat, and the rising, sweet-tart fragrance of his approaching heat. When he lifted his head, his eyes were wet, but his gaze was fiercely tender. He didn't speak. Words had failed him. Instead, he began to speak with his hands.

He touched Shane as if he were something precious and newly discovered. His palms smoothed over Shane's feverish skin, learning the texture all over again in the intimate dark. He kissed him, but not with the consuming hunger of before. This was a slow, deep, searching kiss, a conversation of lips and tongue and shared breath that said *I am here, I am with you, this is real*. Shane melted into it, a soft sigh escaping into Ilya's mouth, his body arching into the touch, the hollow ache within him pulsing in time with his heartbeat.

His preparation was even more meticulous than before, his fingers working Shane open with a patient, reverent focus that made Shane clutch at the sheets, his toes curling. The fullness was exquisite, a slow stretch that promised everything. Ilya wished he had more patience to explore, to taste the slick, to sit up and watch every expression crossing Shane's face, but he was only human.

When Ilya finally guided himself to Shane's entrance, he paused, his forehead resting against Shane's, their breath mingling. He looked into Shane's eyes, his own blazing with a blue-fire intensity that held a question, a plea, and a vow all at once. Male omega's usually only liked vaginal sex during their heat, and for Shane to offer this to him humbled Ilya once again.

Shane answered by wrapping his legs around Ilya's hips, pulling him down. "Yes," he breathed. "Like this."

Ilya slid inside with a single, slow, inexorable push that stole the air from both their lungs. It was a joining that felt less like possession and more like homecoming. There was no frantic pace, no driven hunger to lose themselves. Ilya set a rhythm that was deep, rolling, and devastatingly slow, each measured stroke a deliberate act of worship. He braced himself on his forearms, cradling Shane's face, never breaking eye contact. The physical sensation was overwhelming- the perfect, filling stretch, the friction on that breathtaking spot inside him with every unhurried thrust- but it was the emotional nakedness that undid Shane completely.

Tears welled in his eyes, blurring the intense, beloved face above him. In this slow, quiet darkness, with Ilya moving inside him with such deliberate tenderness, the ghosts felt finally, truly banished. The trackers, the fear, the fire... they were part of the past. This, the sweat-slick slide of their bodies, the unbroken gaze, the shared, shuddering breaths- this was the present.

"Ilya," Shane gasped, his voice breaking on a sob that was pure feeling. "Is this... is what we're feeling real? Tell me it's real."

Ilya's rhythm faltered. He stopped, buried deep, his entire body going rigid. A storm of emotion crossed his face- anguish, hope, a love so profound it seemed to terrify him. He opened his mouth, but no sound came out.

Instead of words, he did what he had always done best- he answered with his entire being. He leaned down and captured Shane's mouth in a kiss that was a confession. It tasted of salt- his tears or Shane's, neither knew- and of promise. A determined hope of a man learning a new way to love. It was *I love you* and *I am sorry for what happened before* and *you are my everything* all fused into the desperate, tender meeting of lips and tongue.

He began to move again, his thrusts gaining a new, purposeful intensity, as if he could physically impress the truth of his answer into Shane's very soul. Shane cried out, the pleasure cresting into something boundless, a wave of pure, white-light certainty that shattered through him. His climax was a silent, full-body convulsion, a release that felt as emotional as it was physical, tears streaming freely down his temples into his hair.

The feel of Shane pulsing around him, the broken, trusting sound of his release, broke the last of Ilya's control. With a final, deep drive and a raw, choked groan against Shane's shoulder, he followed, spilling inside him, his own release feeling like a surrender and a claiming all at once.

He collapsed, careful of his weight, turning them so Shane lay half on top of him, their bodies still joined, hearts hammering a frantic, slowing rhythm against each other. The room was silent save for their ragged breathing. Ilya's arms were locked around Shane, his face once more buried in his neck, his breaths coming in hot, damp gusts against Shane's scent gland.

Finally, his voice emerged, rough and shredded, the words muffled against Shane's skin. "It is real," he whispered, the sound barely audible. "It is the only real thing I have ever known."

Shane listened to the fierce, pounding heart under his ear. He felt the solid warmth wrapped around him, the lingering, full ache inside him. He smelled their scents mingled in the air- alpha and omega, no longer at war, but intertwined. The question had been answered, not with a speech, but with a silence that spoke volumes, and a tenderness that felt stronger than any obsession.

For the first time, the devotion didn't feel like a cage. It felt like the walls of the cottage around them- solid, familiar, built to keep the wilderness out, and the warmth in. He closed his eyes, and for the first time in memory, drifted back towards sleep in the arms of his alpha, not with trepidation, but with a peace so deep it felt like forgiveness.

The first thing Ilya was aware of was the silence. Not the empty, echoing silence of his penthouse or hotel rooms, but a deep, living quiet, broken only by the soft lap of water against the shore and the distant, sleepy call of a bird. The second thing was the weight, the warm, solid weight of Shane Hollander asleep in his arms, his back pressed against Ilya's chest, their legs tangled together under the soft, rumpled sheets.

Dawn was just beginning to bleed into the room, painting everything in shades of cool blue and soft grey. Ilya didn't move. He barely breathed. He simply existed in the moment, his body a haven of unaccustomed calm.

After a moment, he slowly maneuvered Shane to turn and curl against him again. He let his gaze trace the landscape of Shane, memorizing it anew in this fragile peace. The fan of dark lashes against his cheek, so much longer and darker than anyone would guess from his game-face scowl. The smattering of faint, golden freckles across the bridge of his perfect nose and over his cheekbones- a secret map Ilya had spent years cataloguing every time they were together. In the subdued light, they were like dusted cinnamon. Shane's lips were slightly parted, his breathing deep and even, the faintest hint of a snore catching on each exhale. It was the most endearing sound Ilya had ever heard.

He was made for me.

The thought came, not as the old, jagged possession that had driven him to practically insane, but as a quiet, awe-filled certainty. Every detail- the arch of his brow, the slope of his shoulder, the way his body fit so perfectly against Ilya's own as if carved from a complementary stone- felt like a miracle, as if the stars aligned to make sure they would get this exact moment. This was the prize his monstrous father had told him he had to seize and control. But here, in the quiet, Ilya understood the old man had been wrong. You didn't seize a miracle. You were granted it. And you spent your life being grateful, being careful, being worthy.

His hand, which had been splayed possessively over Shane's stomach, shifted slightly. His thumb stroked the soft skin just below his navel. A deep, complex ache bloomed in his own chest. The injection. The 'not now'. He understood the logic. He championed the logic. Their careers, the media, the terrifying fragility of what they were rebuilding- it was all a house of cards. A pregnancy would be a hurricane.

But the alpha in him, the part shaped by a culture that measured an alpha's worth in legacy and lineage, felt a sharp pang of disappointment. Their first shared heat. The biological imperative was a drumbeat in his blood. To create something that was part of Shane, part of him, a living testament to this all consuming love... the want was a physical hunger.

He closed his eyes, breathing in the scent of Shane's sleep-warm skin. *He didn't say 'never'.* *He said 'not now'.* And Ilya had promised to follow any plan. He thought of Kip, Old Scott's omega, round with a child that was welcomed, planned for, celebrated in a healthy home. That was the model. Not a secret, not a scandal, not a chain. A choice, made together, in sunlight. He could wait for that. For when Shane's ready. The disappointment softened, tempered by a patience that felt new and strangely strong.

For the first time in memory- perhaps in his entire life- the constant, low-grade hum of anxiety was gone. The loneliness that had been his most faithful companion since his mother's death was absent. The intrusive thoughts- the images of Shane hurt, of Chris's leering face, of his own father's raised fist- were silent. They weren't defeated; he knew they lurked in the shadows of his mind, waiting for a moment of weakness. But for now, in this bed, with this omega breathing softly against him, they held no power.

This was what healing was supposed to feel like. Not the absence of pain, but the presence of something so good it made the pain irrelevant. This was the peace he had burned a man alive to try and purchase, only to realize it couldn't be taken. It could only be given. And Shane, in his infinite, careful grace, was giving it to him.

He pressed the lightest, most reverent of kisses to the juncture of Shane's neck and shoulder, where his scent was strongest. He didn't wake him. Let him sleep. Let him have this uncomplicated rest. They had the whole day ahead of them. The heat was coming, they would both need as much rest as they could get. Ilya closed his eyes again, matching his breathing to Shane's, and let the quiet certainty settle into his bones. He was exactly where he was meant to be.

The gentle grey light of dawn had warmed into a soft, buttery gold when Shane finally stirred. He didn't open his eyes at first, simply stretched, a long, languid arc of his body that pressed every deliciously sore muscle back against the solid warmth of Ilya's chest. A low, contented hum vibrated in his throat.

Ilya, who had not moved, tightened his arm in response. "доброе утро," he murmured into Shane's hair.

"Mmf." Shane turned in his arms, blinking sleepily up at him. The freckles Ilya had been worshipping in the dawn were now highlighted by the sun, his brown eyes soft and

unguarded. This was a Shane few had ever seen- ruffled, peaceful, and utterly at home. He smiled, a small, private thing, and leaned up to brush a kiss against Ilya's chin. "Shower?"

The shower was all steamed glass and the echo of water on tile. They moved around each other with a new, unspoken synchronicity. Ilya adjusted the temperature; Shane reached for the shampoo. The simple act of washing, performed for each other, felt as intimate as anything they'd done in the night. Ilya's hands, so capable of violence and perfect stickhandling, were infinitely gentle as he worked lavender-scented lather through Shane's hair, his fingertips massaging his scalp until Shane's eyes drifted shut with a sigh.

Rinsed clean, Shane turned, the water sluicing down his back. His gaze, clear and deliberate now, traveled down Ilya's body. Without a word, his hands settled on Ilya's hips, steering him back until his shoulders met the cool, wet tile. Shane looked up, holding his gaze for a heartbeat- a silent question, a reaffirmation of control- before he slowly sank to his knees on the textured shower floor.

The sight stole the air from Ilya's lungs. Shane Hollander, on his knees for him. Not in submission, but in offering. His hands, steady and sure, guided Ilya to fullness, and then his mouth, hot and wet and perfect, took him in. Ilya's head thudded back against the tile, a guttural curse lost in the spray. His hands fisted, wanting to tangle in that damp hair, to guide the pace, to *take*. But he forced them to stay flat against the tile, his knuckles white. This was Shane's to give. He watched through slitted eyes, mesmerized by the slide of Shane's lips, the focused devotion on his face, the way his own body responded with helpless, escalating pulses of pleasure. It was over too quickly, a sharp, breathtaking climax torn from him that left his legs trembling. Shane stayed with him through it, nuzzling the scent gland by his crotch, before rising gracefully and accepting the kiss Ilya pulled him into, deep and tasting of shared intimacy and clean water.

Breakfast was a quiet. Shane, wrapped in a soft hoodie, scrambled eggs while Ilya made bacon with Shane's direction. They moved in the kitchen like partners in a well-rehearsed dance. But when Shane served himself, scraping a modest portion of eggs onto his plate with a single piece of toast, Ilya's brows drew together.

"This is all?" he asked, his voice carefully neutral.

Shane shrugged, a faint pink tingeing his ears. "Not that hungry yet."

Ilya said nothing, but two minutes later, he silently forked a piece of bacon and a second scoop of eggs onto Shane's plate. His expression dared Shane to argue. Shane looked at the added food, then at Ilya's stubborn jaw, and a small, real smile touched his lips. He picked up his fork. It wasn't control. It was care. The difference was everything.

Over coffee, Shane thought about what was next. "There's a nature trail that starts at the back of the property. Goes about three miles in a loop to a lookout. Or we could take the canoe out. The water's still pretty cold, but we could swim if you're interested." He glanced out at the lake, then back at Ilya, his eyes softening. "Or... we could just be. Here."

Ilya reached across the table, covering Shane's hand with his own. "We just be," he said.

They ended up on the large sofa, controllers in hand, a hockey video game flashing on the screen. The competitive fire ignited instantly. "You are using the same move over and over again. Is predictable," Ilya taunted, his fingers a blur.

"My predictable move is about to score on your predictable goalie," Shane shot back, his tongue caught between his teeth in concentration.

Ilya, trailing by a goal, resorted to sabotage. He leaned over and blew a soft, distracting stream of air against Shane's neck, right over his scent gland. Shane jolted, his player on screen stumbling, and Ilya stole the puck, racing down the virtual ice to score. "Cheater!" Shane laughed, shoving at his shoulder.

"Is strategy," Ilya insisted, grinning unrepentantly.

They played for hours, the rivalry as fierce and fun as it had been on the ice a lifetime ago, but now without the sharp edge of real enmity. They were evenly matched, trading wins and insults, their laughter echoing in the sunlit room. The structured, intense man and the obsessive, driven one found a perfect, playful equilibrium in pixelated competition.

As the afternoon light began to lengthen, the controllers were abandoned. Shane, pleasantly tired, slumped against Ilya's side, his head finding its familiar place on his shoulder. Ilya's arm came around him, his hand idly stroking Shane's arm.

The ghosts were silent. The future, with its contracts and decisions and potential injections, was for another day. For now, there was only the shared quiet, the residual thrill of competition, the solid warmth of the other's body, and the profound, simple peace of a day spent doing nothing, together. It was a healing all its own.

The golden afternoon bled into a soft, violet-tinged evening. The competitive buzz of the games had faded into a comfortable, shared lethargy. It was Shane who eventually stirred, his stomach giving a soft, audible grumble that made Ilya smirk.

"We should eat," Shane said, untangling himself from Ilya's side with a reluctant sigh.

The kitchen became a new arena, their styles a stark, amusing contrast. Shane approached cooking as he did everything: with intense, focused precision. He diced an onion into even dices, his knife skills frighteningly efficient. He measured spices into his palm with a critical eye, tasting the air as they hit the hot oil.

Ilya, meanwhile, operated with the chaotic energy that he did most things with. He didn't measure; he poured, sprinkled, and adjusted by some internal instinct Shane found fascinating.

"You are making a mess," Shane observed, not critically, but with a sort of awe, as Shane splashed a bit of wine into the pan.

"It's called flavor," Ilya retorted, grinning. "Your way looks like a chemistry experiment. I cook off vibes"

"My way is correct."

“My way is edible and faster.”

They bumped hips by the stove, vying for space, and Shane caught Ilya’s wrist before he could oversalt the sauce. “Trust me,” Ilya murmured, taking the shaker. Their eyes held, the playful argument dissolving into something warmer. Shane’s breath hitched, and he nodded, relinquishing control.

They ate at the small table by the windows, the lake now a sheet of black glass reflecting the first stars. The food was a bizarre, delicious fusion of Shane’s perfectly balanced herbed chicken and Ilya’s robust, garlicky pasta. Shane served himself again, and again, Ilya’s eyes tracked the portion- still smaller than what Ilya knew he needed, especially with the metabolic demands of his the upcoming heat. The old, controlling impulse rose, a sharp desire to command him to eat more, to physically ensure his strength. But he saw the easy smile on Shane’s face, the relaxed slope of his shoulders, and he bit the words back. *Maybe*, he reasoned, forcing his own jaw to unclench, *it takes time for the athlete’s mindset to switch off. Maybe he needs days to remember what hunger feels like without a training schedule.* He would not poison this perfect, quiet mood. He would watch, and wait.

After cleaning up- Shane meticulously washing, drying and Ilya putting away- Shane padded over to the large, upholstered ottoman. He popped the lid, revealing a hidden trove of comfort: thick wool blankets, soft fleece throws, and a pile of down pillows. The omega in him, feeling safe and sated, purred to life.

With quick, efficient movements, Shane began building a nest right there in the center of the living room floor. He arranged the pillows into a soft wall, layered the blankets for texture and warmth. It wasn’t the frantic, desperate construction of a heat-driven need, but the contented creation of a den. A safe place.

Ilya watched, leaning against the kitchen doorway, his heart doing a slow, painful squeeze in his chest. He saw the focused calm on Shane’s face, the innate need for order and security being met. Without a word, Ilya pulled the soft, worn t-shirt he’d thrown on over his head and held it out.

Shane looked up, saw the offering, and rolled his eyes, but a faint, pleased blush colored his cheeks. He took the shirt and without hesitation, tucked it into the very center of the nest, against the largest pillow. Ilya’s scent would be the heart of it. The trust in that simple act was a physical warmth in Ilya’s veins.

They chose a movie, something action-packed and undemanding, but from the first explosion on screen, their attention was elsewhere. Wrapped in the nest, surrounded by shared scent and softness, the film became background noise. Shane leaned back against Ilya's chest, and Ilya's arms came around him, his chin resting on Shane's head.

It started with Ilya pressing a kiss to his temple. Then Shane tilted his head back, seeking his mouth. The first kiss was soft, a continuation of the evening's peace. But the nest, the darkness, the feel of Shane pliant and warm in his arms, stoked a low-burning ember. The kisses deepened, turning slow and languid, then hungry and searching. Shane turned fully in his embrace, his hands coming up to cup Ilya's face, and the movie was forgotten.

There was no rush, no driven urgency like the night before. This was exploration, rediscovery. They kissed until their lips were swollen and their breaths came in soft, shared pants, until the only light was from the forgotten television flickering blue across their skin. They kissed until Shane, with a final, sweet sigh, went boneless against him, his head finding its home in the hollow of Ilya's shoulder. Ilya held him, rearranging the blankets around them, his own eyes heavy.

The last thing he was aware of before sleep took him was the perfect, weightless silence in his mind, and the scent of their nest- wool, clean cotton, pine, and the two of them, blended into one.

The second day unfolded in a seamless, sun-drenched echo of the first. Time lost its rigid structure, measured not by clocks but by the arc of the sun across the lake and the quiet rhythms of their bodies. They made love in the late morning light, slow and deep on the rumpled sheets, a gentle reclamation. They made love again in the early afternoon, drowsy and sated on the sofa, a lazy exploration. It was always slow, always gentle, a conscious preservation of the fragile peace. There was an unspoken agreement in every tender touch: they were storing calm. They both knew the storm of Shane's heat was gathering on the horizon, a pressure change in the air between them, and these quiet unions felt like fortifying the walls before a gale.

Shane's parents called twice. Yuna's voice, sharp with concern even through the speakerphone, asked about headaches, about rest, about food. David's calmer tone inquired about the lake level, the boat motor. Shane answered with a patience Ilya had never witnessed, his voice soft, reassuring. "I'm good, Mom. Really. I'm just... relaxing." Ilya, chopping vegetables for lunch within earshot, felt a complicated warmth at the inclusion when Shane had set the phone on speaker.

Then, just a few minutes later, Shane's phone rang again. He glanced at the screen and a different, easier smile touched his lips. "Hey, Rose."

Ilya's knife stilled on the cutting board. Rose Landry. The name was a spark to tinder. She was a friend, she represented a part of Shane's life- the normal, uncomplicated, Canadian part- that was forever closed to him. He heard Shane's light laugh, a sound that was still too rare. "Yeah, the cottage is great... Just laying low... No, you're not interrupting..."

The casual intimacy of it, the sound of another person effortlessly accessing a smile Ilya felt he had to mine for with painstaking care, was intolerable. A cold, familiar jealousy, the old possessive ghost he thought he'd buried, slid through his veins. He set the knife down silently.

He crossed the room as Shane was saying, "I'll probably be back in the city next month maybe, we can- " and took the phone from his hand. He ended the call without a word and tossed it onto the cushions behind them.

Shane's eyes widened, not with fear, but with startled understanding. "Ilya- "

He was cut off as Ilya spun him and pressed him back against the cool, solid log wall of the cottage. This was not the gentle taking from the bed or the sofa. This was not a request. It was a declaration, driven by a dark, churning emotion Ilya couldn't name. He kissed him, hard, a claiming that was all teeth and desperate tongue. His hands pushed at the waistband of Shane's shorts, his own already shoved down.

"Okay," Shane breathed, the word a shaky exhale against Ilya's mouth. Not a protest. A surrender.

It was fast, and it was rough against the unyielding wall. Ilya drove into him with a single-minded intensity that bordered on punishment- for Rose, for the world, for the part of Shane he could never fully own. He braced Shane with his body, his hands gripping his hips hard enough to leave bruises.

And Shane... Shane changed.

During their gentle lovemaking, Shane was present. His hands mapped Ilya's back, his mouth answered every kiss, his whispers were a shared secret. He was a participant, an equal in the dance.

Now, pressed against the wall, he went quiet. His grasping hands stilled, falling to brace against the logs. His head tipped forward, his breathing shifting into deep, even patterns. His eyes, when Ilya caught a glimpse, were hazy and distant. He surrendered completely, yielding not just his body but his will, floating away on the current of Ilya's control. He slipped into that silent, submissive space where nothing existed but sensation and the alpha who commanded it.

The realization hit Ilya like a bucket of ice water a moment before his own climax tore through him. He finished with a guttural groan, his forehead thudding against the wall beside Shane's head, shame and a terrible, thrilling possessiveness warring in his chest.

He softened, but didn't pull away, holding Shane up as his own legs trembled. He pressed an apologetic kiss to Shane's sweat-damp shoulder. "Come back to me, sweetheart," he whispered. *I'm sorry.*

Shane just hummed, a low, contented sound, still floating somewhere far away. It took a full minute for him to blink back into himself. When he did, he leaned back into Ilya's hold, his body pliant. "S'okay," he mumbled, his voice thick.

They cleaned up in silence. The easy rhythm of the day was fractured a bit. As they made a simple dinner, Ilya watched Shane move, his mind churning. The duality was stark, and it terrified him. Gentle Ilya brought forth Shane's partnership, his laughter, his trust. The jealous, possessive Ilya- the ghost of the man who'd hired trackers- evoked a total, deep surrender. It was a power more absolute than any he'd ever wielded, and the part of him shaped by his father's brutal lessons thrilled to it. The part of him that loved Shane, the part in therapy, recoiled.

Shane seemed unbothered, curling into the nest on the couch afterward as if nothing had happened. But Ilya lay awake long after Shane's breathing evened out in sleep, staring at the ceiling. The peace of the cottage was still real. But within it, he had discovered a new, dark

thread in the tapestry of their intimacy. He had seen the ghost of his old obsession, and he had seen how willingly Shane's traumatized body and mind could appease it. It was a dynamic that could so easily curdle, slipping back into the sickness of before. He couldn't ignore it. It would need to be examined, spoken of, before the summer ended. But not tonight. Tonight, he pulled Shane closer, breathing in the scent of his hair, and clung to the fragile peace, guarding it even from the shadows in his own heart.

The moon cast a cold glow, leaving the cottage in the deep, velvety muted colors that only exists far from city lights. They were in their nest, the blankets a soft chaos around them, the movie credits long since finished rolling in silence on the screen. Shane was a warm, boneless weight against Ilya's side, his breathing slow. The ghost of the earlier encounter against the wall, however, lingered between them like a scent Ilya couldn't ignore.

His hand, which had been stroking Shane's arm, stilled. The words felt too loud for the quiet, but they had promised honesty.

"Shane," he began, his voice a low rumble in the dark. "Earlier... when I was... not gentle. You went away. Into your head."

Shane didn't tense, but Ilya felt the minute shift in his breathing, a quiet alertness.

"I worry," Ilya continued, forcing the admission out. "You can slip into it so... easily. Is it... are you okay when that happens?"

There was a long silence. Shane's fingers traced idle patterns on Ilya's chest, over his heartbeat. When he spoke, his voice was thoughtful, distant in a different way.

"It's not like being hurt," he said finally. "It doesn't feel like a bad kind of quiet. Not like after... him." They never said Chris's name. "That was cold. And empty. This is... warm. And full."

He paused, gathering his thoughts with the careful precision Ilya knew so well. "My brain, it's always... on. Analyzing. Planning. Running scenarios. What I said, what I didn't say, what play to make, what the media will think, what my parents need, what my body is

doing... it's a constant... noise." He let out a soft breath. "When you take over like that, when it's clear you're in control and I can't... mess it up... the noise just stops. It all goes quiet. There's just... feeling. And trust. It's not that I'm not there. I'm just... not in charge. And for a little while, that's... a relief."

He tilted his head back to look at Ilya, his eyes reflecting the faint starlight from the window. "I like it. I like knowing you can take me apart like that and I'll be safe. That you *want* to, but you'll also put me back together." A faint, self-deprecating smile touched his lips. "It probably sounds messed up."

Ilya listened, his heart a complicated, aching knot in his chest. He understood the relentless noise of a mind that couldn't stop. His was filled with darker symphonies- fear, possession, violence. Shane's was a cacophony of responsibility and hyper-vigilance. The idea that his own dominating instinct could provide Shane a respite was intoxicating and terrifying in equal measure. It was a power he craved and feared abusing.

"It does not sound messed up," Ilya murmured, his hand coming up to cradle the side of Shane's face. "It sounds like a gift you give me. A very big trust." He searched Shane's eyes. "But you must tell me. If it ever feels... cold. Or empty. You must tell me."

Shane held his gaze, then nodded slowly. "I will. I promise." He nuzzled into Ilya's palm. "But... it hasn't. Not with you. Not since... everything. It feels different now. It feels like a choice."

The words settled in Ilya's soul, quieting his own rising noise of fear. This wasn't the traumatized surrender of the kidnapping. This was Shane, with his brilliant, analytical mind, consciously choosing to hand the reins to Ilya within the safe parameters they were building. It was an intimacy as profound as any physical act.

He leaned down and kissed him, a slow, sealing promise. When he pulled back, he rested his hand on Shane's stomach, over the faint, firm muscles. "Then it is our secret," he whispered. "Our quiet place."

Shane's answering smile was soft and real. He turned, settling back against Ilya, pulling his arm around him like a living blanket. The last tension from the day bled away, leaving only the deep, trusting quiet of the nest. Ilya closed his eyes, breathing in the scent of their peace.

He would examine this dynamic, yes. They would have to talk about its edges, its dangers. But for now, he would simply accept the gift of it- the profound trust that allowed Shane to find quiet in his arms, and the immense responsibility that came with holding that silence sacred. It was another thread in the new thing they were weaving, strong and complex, nothing like the brittle chain of his old obsession.

Chapter End Notes

Just a cottage, a lake, and two men who have spent thirty-one chapters trying to convince themselves they don't desperately want this.

I know this chapter is slower than the previous few, but I really wanted them to have room to breathe. They've been living in survival mode for so long that learning how to simply exist together feels just as important as all the dramatic moments.

And yes... Shane getting the birth control injection was intentional. I know some of you have been side-eyeing every mention of heats and babies for the last couple of chapters. 😂 I'm not saying anything else because I enjoy watching the theories roll in.

I also really wanted to show how different Ilya is becoming. The old Ilya would have walked into that cottage and taken everything he wanted. This Ilya waits. He checks in. He listens. He still wants Shane with every fiber of his being, but now that desire is guided by respect instead of obsession. Growth doesn't erase who he is, it changes how he loves.

As always...

❤️ What was your favorite moment?

❤️ Anyone miss unhinged Ilya? He might be making an appearance in two chapters lol

❤️ Did Ilya kissing his palm completely ruin anyone else?

Thank you all for reading, commenting, screaming, and theorizing with me every single chapter. This story has become so much bigger than I ever imagined because of all of you.

See you next chapter... where these two finally get to discover what a partnered heat actually looks like.

Good luck to all of us. ❤️

Chapter 32: Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

I don't even know how to introduce this chapter without screaming into the void. 😊

This one has been living in my head for months. So many conversations, promises, fears, and little moments from earlier chapters finally come together here. If you've been patiently waiting for these two emotionally constipated hockey players to actually talk to each other... well... here is your reward. 😊

Before you dive in, a few thank-yous:

💙 To my amazing beta reader for catching all of my "oopses," because apparently words are hard after staring at the same chapter for days.

🌈 To my gay besties for helping me create the spicy scenes... and for collectively traumatizing my husband every time I asked, "baby come here and help Tony help me visualize something." 😊

💜 And finally, to my dear sister, who clutched her invisible pearls throughout this chapter and repeatedly told me to take certain scenes out. Naturally, every time she did... I made those scenes longer. 🙄

As always, thank you all for reading, commenting, screaming, theorizing, and coming along for this ride with me. I hope you love this chapter as much as I loved writing it.



Chapter Notes

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

The deep, calming quiet of the cottage that night was broken by a whisper of fabric moving. but by a decision. Shane slipped from the warmth of the bed and Ilya's arms, the wood floor cool under his bare feet. He slipped on the first pair of boxers he saw, Ilya's from the size. In the bathroom, the small, clinical package waited on the counter. He stared at it, his mind clear. It was the right choice, the responsible choice. The only choice that made sense for the athletes they were, for the fragile new thing they were building. In an hour, the window would close. He could feel the ache in his body already, the warmth blooming around his scent glands, it was cutting it close for this to be effective.

He jumped when the bathroom door nudged open. Ilya stood there, silhouetted by the faint moonlight from the bedroom, gloriously, unconcernedly naked. His sleep-rough voice was a low scrape in the dark. “Solnyshko? What is wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, I have to take the shot.” Shane said, his voice tighter than he intended. He held up the syringe. “It’s time.”

Ilya’s eyes tracked to the instrument, and for a heartbeat, the air changed. Shane saw the knowledge flash in his gaze, the alpha understanding that with a few well-placed, stern commands, he could override this. He could appeal to the part of Shane that craved submission and obedience, the part that had just confessed to finding quiet in surrender. The power imbalance hung between them, taut and real.

But Ilya simply stepped into the room. He didn’t grab, didn’t command. He came behind Shane and ran his large, warm hands up and down the tense line of his spine, a soothing, grounding pressure. “Do you need help?” he asked, his voice now carefully neutral.

The offer of aid, not control, untied the knot in Shane’s chest. He nodded, a quick, jerky motion. “Please.”

Without a word, Ilya took the syringe and the alcohol swab from his trembling fingers. He sank to his knees on the bath mat, a posture of service that felt more intimate than any dominance. He swabbed a patch on Shane’s inner thigh close to the scent gland there, his touch clinical and gentle. “Look at me,” he murmured.

Shane dragged his eyes from the needle to Ilya’s face. In the dim light, Ilya’s expression was solemn, etched with a painful respect. He held Shane’s gaze as he pressed the needle in and depressed the plunger. A quick, sharp sting. A decision was made final.

Ilya disposed of the syringe and pressed the cotton ball to the spot, his other hand coming up to rest on Shane’s hip. He stayed there, kneeling, for a long moment, just breathing with him. The choice was made. He had helped cement it.

“Thank you,” Shane whispered, the words thick.

Ilya stood, pulling Shane into a tight, wordless hug. His skin was warm, his scent a shelter. He didn't say he agreed or that he was disappointed. He simply held him, accepting the weight of the choice as shared.

Back in the bed, sleep was impossible for Shane. The injection felt cold, like threads seeping in and around the warm tapestry of their night, and his mind snagged on it. Ilya, sensing his wakefulness, shifted to face him, his hand coming to rest on Shane's cheek.

"You are thinking too much," Ilya murmured.

A shaky breath escaped Shane. "Yeah."

Ilya was silent for a while, his thumb stroking Shane's freckles. Then, his voice even softer, he asked the question that had clearly been weighing on him. "Shane... when we are together... when I am inside you here," he slowly trailed his hand down, bypassing his flaccid cock and circling his vaginal entrance. "... you always tense at first. Every time. Does it... not feel good? We do not have to do that. There are other ways." The offer was genuine, laced with a worry that he was causing pain.

The offer, so utterly sincere, cracked something open in Shane's chest. He'd thought he'd hidden it, that the flinch was internal and invisible. But Ilya saw everything. He always had.

Shane's eyes burned. He shook his head against the pillow. "No. It's not that. It feels... it feels perfect after a second. It's just..." He struggled for the words, the honesty they'd promised feeling like scaling a cliff. "The first moment of... when you're first inside me, the pain kinda feels good." He blushes fiercely. "It's a loss of control. My body likes it, but growing up I heard... things. My teammates used to joke about male omega's versus beta's. That omega's became clingy and desperate. I never wanted to be that. We had to all have a lecture one day because a soccer captain had raped an omega. My teammates didn't even blink. It was like whatever happens, happens. I swore to myself that wouldn't happen to me. Ever. It was so hard hiding- making excuses not to be in the showers. I had to be better than everyone else so they didn't have room to think about how strange I was. I was the odd ball. The only Asian kid, I wasn't too social. I didn't like going out. Everything about *me* was wrong, but I was good on the ice. My parents were so proud, the school and my coaches were always saying how amazing I was. That would have all gone away if I slipped and someone

saw me in the showers.” Shane stopped for a few minutes. He pulled away from Ilya so that he could look up at the other man.

“But with you, I don’t feel that way. I don’t feel embarrassed or like there’s something wrong with me, but sometimes, I just think my body needs to get used to being not on the defensive” he rushed to add, feeling Ilya go rigid. “Never by you. But by...everything. It’s been so hard to hide things from my friends, pretending that I’m fine to my parents... then I meet you. You invaded my life even before we met. It’s a stupid, automatic flinch. But then I feel it’s you, and it... it all melts away. It becomes good. It becomes everything.”

He felt Ilya’s entire body go rigid beside him, he sat up, needing to make sure he was getting his point across. A low, wounded sound escaped Ilya, and Shane went to grab his hands in his.

“It passes,” Shane whispered urgently, turning to face him, his hand finding Ilya’s cheek. “It passes so fast because it’s you. Because I know you’ll stop if I ask you to. Because I did choose this. But that first split second... my body remembers before my brain can catch up.”

Ilya was silent for a long time, his breath shuddering. When he spoke, his voice was thick. “I hate that I cannot fix that for you. That I... contributed to it.”

“It’s not your fault,” Shane said firmly. He shifted closer, pressing his forehead to Ilya’s shoulder. “And you just... waiting through that second. Letting me feel it and come back to you... that helps. It makes the memories weaker. You always bring me back to you.”

Ilya’s arms tightened around him, almost desperately. “We will go as slow as you need. Forever. Or we will not go there at all. Your choice. Always.”

The confession hung in the dark, raw and ugly. Ilya’s breath caught. Shane could feel the fury and the grief radiating from him, a silent storm directed at a dead man.

“Moy bednyy mal’chik,” Ilya breathed, his voice aching. He pulled Shane closer, tucking his head under his chin, wrapping him up so completely Shane felt surrounded by Ilya’s scent,

his warmth.

Ilya held him for a long time, his lips pressed to Shane's hair. When he finally spoke, his voice was a vow shaped in the dark. "I understand. I will fight anything for you, every time, until is nothing but dust." He paused. "And if you ever want to stop anything we are doing... you tell me. No shame. Ever."

The tension finally bled out of Shane, replaced by a weary, profound relief. They had shone a light on another dark corner of the past. Ilya hadn't gotten angry. He hadn't taken it as a rejection. He had offered a change in tactics, a respect for the battlefield of Shane's own body.

"Okay," Shane whispered. He nestled deeper into Ilya's hold, their bed feeling safer than ever. The injection was working in his bloodstream, the cold threads slowly moving through his veins. And Ilya, his once-terrifying alpha, was with him, and promised to fight his battles with infinite patience. It was a different kind of devotion, quieter than possession, stronger than obsession.

A few hours later, Ilya surfaced from a thin, anxious sleep. The first thing he registered was the change in temperature. The body curled against his own was no longer just warm; it was radiating a dry, febrile heat that seeped through Shane's out of his naked torso and into Ilya's skin. Not the drenching sweat of full heat yet, but like the kindling before the blaze. Shane's breathing had deepened, each exhale a soft, almost inaudible sigh.

Carefully, moving inch by inch, Ilya extricated himself from the limbs and blankets. Shane made a small, distressed sound in his sleep, his hand flexing where it had been pressing against Ilya's chest. The instinct to crawl back in, to wrap himself around that heat and stoke it, was a physical ache. *Mine. Needing me.*

He stood in the dark bedroom, forcing a breath. The ghost of his father's voice whispered one solution: claim, take, dominate. The newer, painfully learned voice of his therapist and his own hard-won love suggested another: *care, provide, support.*

He padded silently into the kitchen. The research he'd done in the lonely weeks before coming here scrolled through his mind like a checklist. *Hydration is paramount. Easy calories, something that can be eaten without too much effort. Electrolytes. Omega metabolism spikes; they burn through energy reserves.* He thought of the painfully small portions on Shane's plate all day, the athlete's discipline warring with a body about to undertake a massive biological task. It wasn't enough. He filled a large glass with water and ice, the cubes cracking loudly in the silent cottage. Then he took the container of leftover roasted chicken from the refrigerator. He shredded a generous portion into a bowl, warming it just enough to take the chill off, to make it easy. He added a pinch of salt. He smiled at the fridge. It was well stocked with prepared meals to last them for the rest of the week.

When he returned to the bedroom, Shane was awake. He'd pushed the blankets down to his waist, his eyes glazed and heavy-lidded in the moonlight. He watched Ilya approach, tracking his movement with a slow, drugged focus.

"You're hot," Ilya stated, his voice low. He set the water and bowl on the nightstand.

"Starting," Shane confirmed, his voice rough. He looked at the offerings, then back at Ilya, a complex expression crossing his face- gratitude, vulnerability, a hint of shame at being seen in this needful state.

Ilya sat on the edge of the bed. He didn't command. He presented. He held the glass to Shane's lips first. "Small sips."

Shane obeyed, drinking until Ilya pulled the glass away. "Too fast will make you sick," Ilya murmured, an echo of the clinical articles he'd memorized. He then picked up the bowl and fork. He speared a few pieces of chicken. "Now this. Slowly."

"I can do it," Shane said, but his hand, when he raised it, trembled slightly.

Ilya captured that hand, lacing their fingers together and lowering it back to the sheet. He held the fork steady. "Let me," he said, and it wasn't an alpha's order. It was a request, a plea to be allowed to provide this specific care. "Please."

Shane studied him for a moment, then gave a tiny nod. He parted his lips.

Ilya fed him, piece by careful piece, watching his throat work. He said nothing, his entire world narrowed to this simple, sacred task: ensuring the omega he loved consumed what he needed to weather the storm Ilya's own presence would intensify. The possessive joy he felt was not in the control, but in the capability- in being the one trusted to meet this need, not with demands, but with quietly offered chicken and ice water. It was a new kind of devotion, built not on tracking devices, but on watching for tremors in a hand and remembering the importance of taking care of his mate. In the quiet dark of the night, it felt more profound than any declaration.

Ilya held the cool glass to Shane's lips, his other hand cupping the back of his head to steady him. Shane drank obediently, small, measured swallows, his throat working. The water was what his body craved. When the glass was half-empty, Ilya set it aside and picked up the bowl of warm, shredded chicken.

"Now some more of this," he said softly, bringing a forkful to Shane's lips.

Shane's head turned slightly, his nose wrinkling. The glazed look in his eyes was deepening, the lucid awareness of earlier being slowly submerged by the rising tide of his biology. "Not hungry," he mumbled, the words slightly slurred.

"You need to eat," Ilya said, keeping his voice low and even, the same tone he'd use to coax a nervous animal. "Your body will burn everything. You will need the strength."

Shane shook his head, a weak, stubborn motion. He brought a hand up, not to push the fork away, but to press vaguely against his own stomach. "Don't... don't need it. Getting... getting fat. Slow."

The words, mumbled into the dim room, landed like a physical blow on Ilya's chest. They weren't the petulant refusal of a child, nor the disciplined denial of an athlete. This was something sadder, more ingrained- the ghost of a young omega who'd spent a lifetime trying to make his body conform, less *omega*, to survive in a world built for alphas and betas. It was the echo of the boy who'd hidden in empty showers, who'd calculated every aspect of his life to retain control over anything he could.

A fierce, protective ache tightened Ilya's throat. The old Ilya would have seen this as a failing to be corrected, a weakness in his possession. The man kneeling by the bed now saw only a wound that needed tending.

He didn't argue. He didn't try to reason with the pre-heat fogged mind. He leaned in closer, his voice dropping into a register that was not a request, but a firm, unwavering directive. It was the voice of an alpha providing care, a command meant to bypass fear and soothe instinct.

"Shane. Look at me."

Shane's heavy-lidded eyes drifted up to meet his. The submission there was deeper now, a willing surrender to the authority in Ilya's tone.

"You will eat this for me," Ilya said, each word clear and deliberate. He held the fork steady. "It is not about weight. It is about fuel. You are not getting fat. A sick, weak body will not please me, and you do want to please me, right? You need your strength for this week. Now, open."

For a heartbeat, Shane hesitated, the lifetime of conditioning warring with the newer, deeper trust. Then, with a soft sigh that seemed to come from his very bones, he parted his lips.

Ilya fed him. Piece by slow piece. He watched the tension ease from Shane's jaw as he chewed, the automatic obedience allowing his body to accept what it truly needed. There was no pleasure in this control, only a solemn responsibility. Each bite was a confirmation for Ilya that Shane needed him to take care of him, to protect him from everything, even if it was just from himself.

When the bowl was empty, Ilya set it aside. He wiped Shane's mouth gently with his thumb, then helped him sip more water. The feverish heat was more pronounced now, a dry fire radiating from Shane's skin, but some of the restless anxiety had bled away, replaced by a pliant exhaustion.

“Good,” Ilya murmured, the command leaving his voice, replaced by pure warmth. “So good for me, solnyshko.”

He rearranged the blankets, making sure that Shane was comfortable. Shane’s eyes were already closing, the simple act of eating having taken the last of his conscious energy. He turned onto his side, instinctively seeking Ilya’s warmth, and Ilya slid in behind him, molding his body to Shane’s back, a living shield against the coming storm.

The heat was beginning in earnest. But Shane was nourished. He was safe, and he was loved. And it really was love, not just because they were mates. Ilya loved him for everything he was- the man who he became enraptured with upon meeting and he needed to know that. As Shane’s breathing evened out into a deeper sleep, Ilya pressed his lips to his damp hair and made another promise into the dark- he needed Shane to know how he felt before the heat took his consciousness fully.

The feverish heat radiating from Shane’s skin had intensified, a dry, restless energy that made him shift against the sheets with soft, pained sounds. The rational part of him was slipping away, submerged under the biological tide. Ilya watched, every instinct screaming to soothe, to fix. He remembered the research, the simple advice: *cool wet cloths, hydration, comfort*.

Without a word, he slid his arms under Shane’s limp body. Shane murmured a protest, but it was weak, his head lolling against Ilya’s shoulder. Ilya carried him to the bathroom, the world narrowed to the weight in his arms and the frantic beat of his own heart.

He set Shane down on the closed toilet lid, supporting him against the cool tile of the wall as he started the shower. He adjusted the taps carefully, running the water cooler than usual, testing it on his own wrist until it was a refreshing, gentle chill. He helped Shane step under the spray.

The effect was immediate. Shane gasped, his eyes fluttering open, a flicker of clarity returning as the cool water ran over his overheated skin. He leaned his forehead against the tile, his breathing deepening from panicked pants to something more even. Ilya stayed with him, a solid presence, his hands gently guiding the water over Shane’s back and shoulders, washing away the anxious sweat. It was a silent, methodical care. No demands, no claims. Just the steady, cool rain and the safety of not being alone.

When the heat seemed leached from his skin, replaced by a more manageable warmth and a slight shiver, Ilya turned off the water. He wrapped Shane in a large, soft towel, drying him with the same focused tenderness, before lifting him again and carrying him back to the bed.

This time, he didn't lay him down. He sat against the headboard and arranged Shane in his lap, cradling him against his chest, enveloping him in warmth and the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. The nest of blankets was around them, like a private little bubble.

Shane was quiet for a long moment, listening to that heartbeat. Then, his voice small and raw, he confessed into the dark. "I'm scared. For the next few days. Of... losing myself. Of what it'll be like."

Ilya's arms tightened. He pressed his lips to Shane's damp hair. "Do not be scared," he murmured, the words a vow. "This is natural. This is our new start. Right here." He took a deep breath, giving shape to the future he'd been building in the quiet of his own mind for months. "We will figure it out. How to keep you in the league, as you are. How to be together. We will get married. We will have babies, when you are ready." The words felt both terrifying and right. "We will have everything. But we start here. Now. With this. However it comes. I am not afraid."

He felt Shane tremble against him. Then, Ilya said the words he had felt since the moment he saw Shane Hollander shyly walk up to him almost four years ago, words that had been poison in his obsession and were now, finally, a healing truth. "I love you, Shane."

The silence that followed was profound, filled only with the echo of the declaration. Then Shane shifted, turning his head to look up at Ilya. In the dim light, his eyes were clear, free of heat-fog for this single, suspended moment. All his walls were down. All his fears were laid bare, and in the center of them was this absolute truth.

"I love you, too, so much." Shane whispered, the words a release, a homecoming.

A peace, deeper than any Ilya had ever known, settled in his bones. He traced the line of Shane's jaw, his thumb brushing over his lips. The old, poetic Russian slipped out, a final, vulnerable offering of his soul.

“Schastye moyo,” he breathed, his voice thick. “If I loved you like no other, would you love me the same?”

Shane didn’t hesitate. He reached up, his hand curling around the back of Ilya’s neck, pulling him down until their foreheads touched. He nodded, their breath mingling, Shane couldn’t stop the tears from escaping. His answer was simple, devastating, and complete.

“My life is only life with you in it.”

It was the final lock clicking open. Ilya kissed him then, trying to pour all everything he was feeling all at once. When they parted, Shane’s eyes were drifting shut again, but the frantic edge of the heat had been softened, surrounded by something stronger. He nuzzled into Ilya’s chest, his movements becoming deliberate as he tugged and rearranged the blankets around them both, building a smaller, perfect nest within the circle of Ilya’s arms. An omega, safe in the heart of his alpha’s devotion.

Ilya held him, watching as sleep finally claimed him. The fever was still there, his heat was almost upon them. But the foundation beneath them was now unshakeable, they had named it. They had chosen it. Love, not as a chain, but as the ground upon which they would finally stand together.

Ilya held him through the creeping hours of the night, a vigilant sentinel, guarding over his mate. The dry heat coming off Shane’s skin was a tangible force. Every so often, Ilya would reach for the water glass, murmuring, “Solnyshko, drink,” and Shane would obey, his throat working on autopilot.

A deep, complex part of Ilya loved this. Loved the utter trust, the seamless obedience, the way Shane’s brilliant, analytical mind quieted into simple reliance. It soothed the raw, possessive edges of his alpha nature, the part that had once mistaken control for care. But even as he cherished it, he knew he would not want this version of Shane forever. He missed the sharp, questioning gaze, the million rapid-fire questions when presented with a new play or a strange rock on the lakeshore. He missed his capable, stubborn, fiercely independent omega. This surrender was a gift for the crisis, not the blueprint for their life.

When Shane finally dozed again, his breathing a shallow, hot flutter against Ilya’s neck, Ilya remained awake. His own blood was beginning to sing in response, a familiar, rising pressure

at the base of his spine. His rut, a shadow to Shane's heat, was stirring. He could feel the aggressive pulse of it, the urge to pin and claim and lose himself. He closed his eyes, focusing on the weight in his arms. *Easy. For him. You must go easy.* His goal was to have Shane willing to go into another heat in a few months, and he wouldn't want to if when he came out of this he would find himself bruised and sore. The last of his own rut suppressant was leaving his system, but his will had to be the stronger cage. He would not be his father. He would not be the monster from the hotel room. He would be the man Shane had just said he loved.

Just before dawn, Shane woke with a sudden, frantic energy. He pushed out of Ilya's arms with a strength that belied his feverish state, his eyes wide and unseeing, fixed on some internal, urgent blueprint.

"Shane?" Ilya asked, shifting to follow.

But Shane was already moving, a creature of pure instinct. He stripped the bed with clumsy, desperate hands, whining when a sheet tangled. He dragged blankets from the ottoman, from the linen closet, piling them in the center of the mattress. He arranged pillows, then immediately rearranged them, a soft, distressed whimper escaping when the symmetry didn't satisfy his heat-addled brain. He pulled Ilya's discarded shirt from the earlier nest and pressed it to his face, inhaling deeply before tucking it with reverent care beneath a pillow. He was building a fortress, a sanctuary, and Ilya was, for the moment, just another resource-accepted, needed, but not consciously seen.

Ilya watched, his heart aching. This was his omega stripped bare, not just of clothes, but of every learned restraint, acting on a biological instinct older than language. He stayed quiet, still, letting the compulsion run its course. Only when Shane began to slow, his movements becoming sluggish and confused, his whimpers more frequent as exhaustion battled the drive, did Ilya move.

He rose and went to him. "Enough, Milyy moy," he said softly, his voice cutting through the fog. "It is perfect. It is ready."

Shane blinked up at him, dazed, a sheen of sweat on his brow. Ilya didn't ask. He simply bent, hooked an arm under his knees and behind his back, and lifted him. Shane went limp, his head falling against Ilya's shoulder with a final, exhausted sigh.

Ilya carried him a few steps to the newly constructed nest and carefully lowered them both into its center. He arranged Shane against him, pulling the rearranged blankets and pillows around them until they were swaddled in a cloud of fabric and shared scent. Shane trembled, the fever peaking, the first true slickness heating the skin between them.

“So good,” Ilya murmured into his hair, one hand stroking firmly down the tense line of his spine. “You built a perfect place for us. So clever. So strong.”

A shudder ran through Shane, and then, from deep in his chest, a sound emerged- a low, thrumming purr of pure, unconscious contentment. Ilya could very quickly become addicted to the sound. A wave of pure, possessive tenderness crashed over Ilya, so potent it momentarily stilled the rising drumbeat of his own rut. Shane melted into him with a shuddering exhale, his head falling back against Ilya’s shoulder.

For long moments, there was only the sound of their breathing and the crackle of the fire in the hearth Shane had insisted on lighting. Then, Shane’s voice, small and muffled against Ilya’s skin, broke the quiet.

“Ilya?” A pause, filled with the hammering of two hearts. “When... when this is over. Would you... would you want us to be bonded?”

The question, asked with such vulnerable hesitation, stole the air from Ilya’s lungs. A claiming bite. The ultimate, irreversible seal. The act his father had taught him was about ownership, a brand to prove conquest. The act he had fantasized about in his darkest, most obsessive moments, imagining his teeth breaking Shane’s skin, making him irrevocably *his*. He heard the offer of a lifetime of trust from the omega who had every reason to fear permanent marks. He felt the weight of it, sacred and terrifying.

Ilya’s arms tightened. He pressed his lips to the very spot on Shane’s neck where his teeth would go, feeling the frantic pulse beneath his mouth. “Da,” he breathed, the word a vow. “More than anything in this world.” He felt Shane relax infinitesimally. But Ilya wasn’t finished. He had a condition, born not of control, but of a desperate need to build something that could withstand everything- the media, the league, their pasts.

“But on one condition,” Ilya said, his voice gaining a firm, solemn edge. He shifted Shane in his arms just enough to look into his eyes. “We also get married.”

Shane blinked, surprise cutting through the heat-haze. “Married?”

“Yes. A bond is for us. In here.” He tapped his own chest, then Shane’s. “It is private. Sacred. But marriage...” Ilya searched for the words, wanting to be crystal clear, to avoid any shadow of his old, coercive patterns. “Marriage is a promise to the world. It is a contract, a family, a foundation everyone can see. It is for your parents, for the lawyers, for the league. It is... armor.” He cupped Shane’s face, his thumb stroking his cheekbone. “I am not proposing now. This is not the right time. I will do it properly. With a ring, on my knees, when you are clear-headed and can tell me to go to hell if you want.”

He took a shaky breath, laying his heart completely bare. “I just need you to understand what this, what *you*- mean to me. It is not just my omega in my nest. It is my husband in our home. My partner for every contract, every championship, every quiet morning. That is what I am working for. That is the future I see.”

Shane stared at him, his eyes wide and glistening. The heat was there, a flush on his skin, but his mind was present, absorbing every word. He saw the earnest, almost fearful intensity in Ilya’s blue eyes, the absolute absence of manipulation. This wasn’t a trap. It was a blueprint.

A slow, real smile broke through Shane’s fevered expression. He turned fully in Ilya’s arms, straddling his lap in the heart of the nest, and framed Ilya’s face with his hot hands. “Okay,” he whispered, his voice thick. “Okay. Bonded and married. But you’re right. Do it properly. Later.” He leaned in, their foreheads touching. “But the answer will be yes.”

Relief, profound and dizzying, washed through Ilya. He captured Shane’s mouth in a searing kiss that was all promise and no possession. When they parted, Shane’s purr returned, louder this time, a contented engine thrumming through them both. He nuzzled into Ilya’s neck, scenting him deliberately, and Ilya felt the sharp, sweet pang of his rut align with Shane’s heat, not as a taking, but as an answer.

“Yours,” Shane murmured against his skin, the word both a surrender and a claim.

“Mine,” Ilya agreed, holding him in the perfect nest. “And I am yours. Now, and when I marry you.” The future, once a haunted, lonely plain, now had a shape. It had a ring, a bite, and a foundation stronger than any obsession. For now, in the warm, scented dark, that was enough.

The air in the nest was thick with the scent of pine, fever, and desperate want. Shane’s request hung between them, not just a question, but a seismic shift. Bonding. Now. Before the heat stripped him of all coherent thought.

Ilya’s entire body went rigid. The fantasy of it had haunted him for years, but now, faced with the reality, every protective instinct roared to life. “Net,” he breathed, his voice strained. “The bite... it will hurt. The pain, with the heat, it will be too much. After, when you are clear-”

“I don’t want to be clear,” Shane interrupted, his eyes blazing. The structured, conflict-avoidant omega was gone, burned away by a need for something absolute. “I want it now. I want to go into it knowing I’m yours. That you’re mine.”

With a fluid, determined movement, he climbed into Ilya’s lap, straddling him in the center of their sanctuary. He didn’t kiss him. Instead, he leaned forward, his lips brushing the corded muscle of Ilya’s neck, right over the pounding, prominent scent gland. Then he nipped. Not hard, but a deliberate, teasing scrape of teeth over the most sensitive alpha skin.

It was like a spark to a powder keg.

A raw, guttural growl tore from Ilya’s throat, the sound vibrating through both of them. Every thread of his hard-won control, every promise to go slow, shattered. His hands locked onto Shane’s hips, fingers digging in.

He surged up, and Shane met him, a perfect, desperate alignment. In one brutal, fluid motion, Ilya sheathed himself fully inside Shane’s slick, welcoming heat at the exact moment he drove his teeth deep into the offered curve of Shane’s neck.

Shane’s cry was sharp, a sound of piercing pain that melted instantly into a keening wail of ecstasy. His body arched violently, forcing Ilya even deeper. The twin sensations- the

blinding stretch within, the sharp, claiming puncture of the sharp bite, short-circuited every nerve ending. He was being unmade and remade in the same second.

Ilya pulled his head back for a fraction of a second, his mouth wet and copper-tinged. His voice was a dark, ragged command against Shane's ear. "Now you. Bite me. *Now*. As hard as you can."

He guided Shane's head to his own throat, to the gland Shane's teeth had just teased. It was an order, an invitation, a demand for mutual ruin. Shane, lost in a haze of pain and devotion, obeyed. He sank his teeth into Ilya's flesh with all the strength he possessed.

The world dissolved.

A blinding, white-hot circuit completed. Pleasure, pain, possession, surrender - it all fused into a single, indivisible current that locked their souls together. Ilya's growl turned into a continuous, possessive snarl as his hips began to piston, his thrusts turning rough, deep, and relentless. The careful lover was gone, incinerated by the primal alpha finally claiming his mate.

His hand slid from Shane's hip, splaying wide and firm against the small of his back, pressing him down, holding him in place for every driving impact. The other hand fisted in the sheets beside Shane's head. This was not lovemaking. This was a conquering, a branding. An instinct older than language, older than themselves, older than fear.

Shane clung to him, his own bite unwavering, his body convulsing around Ilya's in waves of overwhelming sensation. He was pinned, claimed, and utterly consumed. The structured mind that feared loss of control had voluntarily leapt into the volcano, and was now being forged into something new in the fire.

When the final, cataclysmic release tore through them, it was simultaneous. Ilya's roar was muffled against Shane's ravaged neck, Shane's scream was swallowed by Ilya's skin. They spilled into each other, the bond sealing not just with blood and seed, but with a shared shockwave of absolute, terrifying completion.

Slowly, the world swam back. Ilya, trembling with the aftershocks, gently loosened his jaw and eased Shane's teeth from his throat. He rolled them, gathering Shane's limp, trembling body against him, tucking him into the curve of his own body. The nest was in disarray, the sheets stained with sweat and blood.

He nuzzled the fresh, glistening bite on Shane's neck, lapping gently at the wound with a soft, apologetic rumble. Shane shivered, a broken, satiated sound escaping him. He turned his head, his dazed eyes finding Ilya's. The fear was gone. The anxiety was gone. In its place was a profound, weary peace, and a new, almost invisible blue thread in the brown of his irises- the reflection of a bond accepted.

"Mine," Ilya whispered, the word no longer a threat, but a fact, heavy and sacred.

"Yours," Shane sighed back, his purr restarting, weaker but deep, a vibration of pure belonging. He traced the matching wound on Ilya's throat with a reverent fingertip.

The bond was a live wire between them, a searing, golden circuit that pulsed with every shared heartbeat. The initial, shocking pain of the bites had subsided into a deep, throbbing ache- a brand, a seal, a truth etched into their skin. Shane lay trembling beneath Ilya, his body humming with a new, terrifying awareness. He could *feel* Ilya's hunger, his awe, his fiercely protective joy, not as an emotion to be interpreted, but as a tangible presence in his own chest, a second storm system colliding with the hurricane of his heat.

Every nerve ending was exposed, singing with the need for more- more contact, more friction, more of the alpha whose scent was now woven into his very cells. The careful, gentle lovemaking of the past days felt like a distant memory, a prelude to this consuming inferno.

Shane's hands scrabbled against Ilya's sweat-slicked back, his blunt nails digging into the hard muscle. He was burning up from the inside, the slick between his thighs a hot, desperate flood. He could feel Ilya's erection, thick and heavy against his thigh, but Ilya was holding himself still, his face a mask of agonized restraint, his blue eyes black with a rut that was now perfectly, dangerously synchronized with Shane's heat. The new bond screamed at the distance.

“Alpha,” Shane gasped, the word ripped from a raw throat. He arched his back, pressing his aching core against Ilya. “Please... don’t be careful. Not now.”

Ilya shuddered, a drop of sweat falling from his brow onto Shane’s collarbone. “The bite... you’re hurt...”

“I don’t care!” Shane’s voice broke on a sob of frustration. He bucked beneath him, a frantic, omega motion. “The bond... it needs... I need you to fuck me. Hard as you can. Please, Ilya. I need it. I need to feel you everywhere.”

He saw the last vestige of Ilya’s control snap. A low, continuous growl rumbled from Ilya’s chest, vibrating through Shane’s own. Ilya’s hands, which had been braced gently, now gripped Shane’s hips with a force that would leave bruises, yanking him into position.

“You are sure?” Ilya’s voice was a guttural, alpha command, stripped of all softness.

“Yes!”

Ilya didn’t let him finish. He drove into him in one brutal, shearing thrust that punched the air from Shane’s lungs. It was nothing like before. There was no slow stretch, no gentle accommodation. It was a claiming, a conquering, a brutal reaffirmation of the bond written in blood. Shane cried out, a sharp, shattered sound that morphed into a wail of pure, unadulterated ecstasy. The pain was there, a bright, sharp edge, but it was instantly swallowed by a pleasure so profound it felt like annihilation.

Ilya set a punishing pace, each thrust a deep, grinding impact that shook the bed and stole coherent thought. The world narrowed to the slap of skin, the ragged symphony of their breaths, and the blinding, white-hot focus of where their bodies joined. Shane clung to him, his legs locked around Ilya’s waist, meeting every drive with a desperate lift of his hips. He was sobbing, babbling, words fracturing into nonsense.

“More... harder, alpha, please...”

Ilya's growls were punctuated by rough, Russian curses. He shifted his angle, and on the next thrust, he hit a spot so deep and perfect that Shane's vision whited out. A scream tore from his throat, his body bowing off the mattress.

"That's it," Ilya snarled, his voice thick with feral pride. "You take it. You take everything I give you. My mate."

The word, spoken in the midst of the violent taking, unlocked a deeper, more primal need in Shane. The pleasure was building to an impossible peak, but it wasn't enough. The bond, the heat, the brutal fucking- it all screamed for completion, for the final, physical lock.

"Knot me," Shane begged, the words a broken whisper against Ilya's shoulder. Then, louder, a desperate chant. "Ilya, please, knot me, need your knot, need you to fill me, please, alpha, *please...*"

The plea acted on Ilya like a trigger. His rhythm became erratic, frantic. The pressure at the base of his cock, the knot, began to swell, a thick, insistent promise. Shane felt it, the stretch becoming immense, overwhelming, *perfect*. He was so open, so ready, his body demanding this final claim.

"Now," Ilya commanded, his voice ragged with his own impending release. He drove in one final, deep time, and the swollen knot pushed past the tight ring of muscle, seating itself fully inside Shane with a feeling of devastating, absolute fullness.

Shane's climax detonated. It was not a wave, but a supernova, a silent, seizing explosion that ripped through every cell. His scream was soundless, his body convulsing around the thick knot locking Ilya inside him. The bond between them flared white-hot, and through it, Shane felt the shattering cascade of Ilya's own orgasm- a roar of pure, alpha triumph and a bottomless, reverent love that was its foundation.

Ilya collapsed over him, his teeth finding Shane's bonding bite again, not to break skin, but to hold, to soothe, as he pumped his release deep into Shane's clutching heat. The knot held them fast, a physical anchor as the storms within them slowly, slowly subsided.

For long minutes, there was only the sound of their gasping breaths and the faint, wet sounds of their joined bodies. Ilya, with immense care, rolled them to their sides, never letting the knot pull. He gathered Shane against him, his arms a vise around him. He nuzzled the bleeding bite, licking gently at the wound.

Shane was boneless, floating in a haze of endorphins and profound, soul-deep satisfaction. The heat was still present, a banked fire, but the desperate edge was gone. He was full, claimed, and bound. He could feel Ilya's satiated exhaustion, his protective possessiveness, his awe, all through the golden thread now permanently tying their souls together.

"Moy prevoskhodnyy," Ilya whispered, his voice wrecked.

Shane couldn't speak. He made a soft, purring noise and pressed back against the knot, against Ilya's chest, into the safety of the bond. The nest was destroyed around them, the sheets soaked and tangled. But they were, for the first time, truly and irrevocably one. The obsession had burned itself out in this final, mutual conflagration, leaving only the quiet, unshakeable certainty of the bond. There was no more hiding. He was found, claimed, and loved, not just in spite of the storm, but within the very eye of it.

The world had shrunk to the humid, scent-saturated confines of the nest. The violent peak of the bonding and the heat had ebbed and flowed, leaving in its wake a trembling, bone-deep exhaustion. Shane lay sprawled on the ruined sheets, every muscle liquid, his mind floating in a hazy calm. The fresh bonding bite on his neck pulsed with a low, steady ache, a sweet, claiming pain that anchored him to the man whose large hand was splayed possessively over his stomach.

Ilya, however, was already shifting from mate back to caretaker. The primal fog of the rut was receding, burned away by the new, golden awareness of the bond. Through it, he could feel the echo of Shane's utter depletion- a hollowed-out tiredness that went beyond the physical.

“Sleep,” Ilya murmured, his voice a gravelly rasp against Shane’s temple. It wasn’t a suggestion.

Shane made a weak noise of protest, his eyelids fluttering. “M’not...”

“You are,” Ilya stated, the alpha timbre leaving no room for argument. He pressed a kiss to Shane’s damp hair. “A short nap. For me.”

It was the “for me” that did it. Shane’s resistance, already feeble, dissolved. He nodded, a tiny movement, and let his eyes close. His breathing evened out almost instantly, slipping into the shallow, vulnerable sleep of complete surrender.

Ilya moved with a quiet efficiency. He fetched a bowl of cool water and a soft cloth from the bathroom. Kneeling beside the bed, he began to wipe the sweat and spend from Shane’s skin. His touch was reverent, each pass of the cloth a silent apology and a reaffirmation. He blotted the tender skin around the bonding bite with extra gentleness, a possessive thrill coursing through him at the sight of his teeth permanently etched into Shane’s skin. *Mine*. In almost every way that counted.

Next came the water. He lifted Shane’s head gently, coaxing his lips apart. “Drink, solnyshko,” he whispered. Shane obeyed even in sleep, swallowing the cool liquid Ilya trickled into his mouth.

When Shane was as clean and comfortable as he could be made, Ilya turned his attention to his legs. They were trembling slightly, the powerful muscles strained and locked from hours of tension. Ilya warmed a dollop of lotion between his palms and began to knead.

He started at the ankles, his thumbs working in firm, circular motions up the tight cords of Shane’s calves. He could feel every knot, every tremor. He worked in silence, his focus absolute. This was his love language. In that moment, his only purpose was to take care of his mate. As his hands slid higher, massaging the dense quads, he sent a gentle, questioning pulse down the bond. Not words, but an impression: Soreness? Pain?

A soft, sleepy sensation floated back- discomfort, yes, a deep muscular fatigue, but no sharp pain. Just the good, used ache of a body that had been thoroughly loved and claimed. Ilya's chest tightened. He continued his ministrations, worshiping the very limbs that carried his omega through the world.

When the last of the tension seemed to ease from Shane's body, Ilya finished by pressing a kiss to the inside of each knee. He looked up. Shane was watching him through heavy-lidded eyes, not fully awake, his gaze soft and his unfocused gaze let Ilya know how he was even without the bond connecting them.

A new, quiet hunger stirred in Ilya- not the ravenous need of the rut, but a deep, yearning tenderness. He wanted to give, to worship, to erase any lingering shadow of fatigue with a different kind of pleasure.

Without a word, he shifted down the bed. He hooked his hands under Shane's knees, gently urging them apart. He pressed a kiss to the inside of one thigh, then the other, breathing in the intimate, musky scent of them together. Then he lowered his mouth.

He took his time. This was not about driving them toward another climax; Shane's system was too spent for that. This was about sensation alone. About the soft, wet heat of his mouth, the lazy swirl of his tongue, the devoted attention to every sensitive inch. He licked and suckled with a focused patience that was its own kind of claiming, mapping Shane's body with a reverence usually reserved for sacred things.

Shane gasped, a weak, shattered sound. His hands fisted in the sheets, not pushing him away, but anchoring himself as a different, more delicate fire was stoked from the embers. "Alpha..." he breathed, his voice thin with overwhelmed sensation.

Ilya hummed against him, the vibration drawing a broken whimper. He felt the faint, trembling tension build in Shane's body- not the powerful crest of an orgasm, but a slow, sweet unraveling. He gentled his mouth, softening his touch until it was just the ghost of pressure, the barest hint of suction.

It was enough. Shane's release was a quiet sigh, a gentle shudder that rolled through him, leaving him even more pliant and boneless against the mattress. A single tear traced a path

from the corner of his eye into his hairline, not of pain or sadness, but of sheer, overwhelming tenderness.

Ilya moved back up the bed, gathering Shane's utterly spent form against his chest. He licked his own lips, tasting the proof of his devotion. Shane nuzzled into his neck, his purr restarting, a weak but steady rumble of pure, uncomplicated contentment.

"Zayka," Ilya whispered into the quiet. He held the entirety of his world in his arms, cleansed, watered, soothed, and loved into a state of perfect peace. The obsession that had once been a cage had burned itself to ash, and from the ashes, this was what grew: a devotion that knew how to claim, and knew, with even greater certainty, how to cherish.

The night had deepened around the cottage, a velvet black punctuated by the chorus of peepers from the lake's edge. Inside, the feverish peak of the heat had broken, leaving Shane languid and pliant, curled against Ilya on the sofa. But a different, deeper burn had taken its place, the constant, low-grade hum of the new bond, a live wire connecting their nervous systems, making the very air between them feel charged. He pressed a kiss to the tender, bruised skin of the bonding bite on Shane's neck, feeling him shiver. "Come."

He carried him out through the sliding glass doors to the back deck. The night air was cool, raising goosebumps on their skin. The hot tub sat like a sunken jewel, steam curling lazily from its surface into the star-dusted sky. Ilya carried Shane down the steps, the hot water a shock that quickly became an embrace. Shane sank into it with a groan, his head tipping back against the rim, his eyes closing. The water buoyed his exhausted body, the jets soothing the muscles, a muted thrum against his skin.

Ilya followed, his larger body displacing water as he settled opposite. For a moment, they just watched each other through the steam. Shane's cheeks were flushed, his lips parted, his brown eyes dark and heavy-lidded. The bonding bite stood out starkly on his throat, a purple-and-crimson brand Ilya had put there. The sight of it, of *his mark* on Shane's skin in this private, watery world, sent a possessive thrill so sharp it was almost a pain through Ilya's core.

"Look at me, sweetheart." Ilya said, his voice a low rumble that competed with the bubbling water, "You with me? Are you ok?"

“I am,” Shane breathed, his gaze not quite focusing on Ilya’s face.

He moved through the water, not with his usual predatory grace, but with a deliberate, inevitable slowness, like a tide coming in. The water swirled around him. He didn’t stop until he was caging Shane against the rim of the tub, their legs tangling under the surface. “This is real. The bite is real. The bond...” He placed a hand over Shane’s heart, then over his own. “...is real. You feel it. That hollow space in your chest is now filled with me.”

Shane’s breath hitched. He could feel it- a foreign, comforting weight behind his sternum, a second rhythm syncing with his own. “I feel it,” he whispered.

“Good.” Ilya’s hands found Shane’s hips under the water, his grip firm. “Now you will feel everything else.”

He kissed him, deep and claiming, a slow mimicry of the bite. When he pulled back, his mouth traveled down Shane’s jaw, to his ear. “You are so open for me now,” he murmured, the words a dark, rough caress. “So soft, so ready. Just for me.” One hand slid between them, beneath the water, his fingers finding Shane’s vagina with unerring accuracy. He was right. Shane was slick and yielding, his body already pulsing gently around Ilya’s teasing fingertips. “Your body knows its alpha. It remembers this fat cock filling it up. Begging for it again.” A violent tremor wracked Shane. The clinical, structured part of his mind was offline, incinerated by the bond and the heat. All that was left was raw nerve endings and the devastating sound of Ilya’s voice weaving filth and possession together. He whimpered, his head falling back against the tile.

“You want it?” Ilya growled, nipping at his earlobe. “You want this thick cock splitting you open in this hot water? Making you scream where only the stars can hear?”

“Alpha,” Shane gasped, the word torn from him.

“How?” Ilya demanded, his fingers still circling, dipping inside but not giving him what he needed. “How do you want it? Tell me. Use your pretty mouth.”

Shane’s mind blanked. Coherent speech was beyond him. “I... I can’t...”

“You can,” Ilya insisted, his voice dropping to a sinful whisper. “Tell me how your greedy little hole wants to be fucked. Or I will get out of this tub and leave you here, aching and empty.”

It was a bluff, the bond screamed at the very thought of separation- but the threat worked. Shane’s eyes flew open, wild and desperate. “Hard!” he blurted out, the confession ripped from a place of pure id. “Fuck me hard, Alpha, please, I need it- ah!”

Ilya drove into him with a single, powerful thrust that shoved Shane up the wall of the tub, water sloshing over the sides. The stretch was immense, breathtaking, the warm water doing nothing to lessen the sensation of being utterly filled. Shane cried out, a ragged sound swallowed by the night.

“Like that?” Ilya snarled, his composure fracturing, his own need laid bare. He pulled out almost all the way and slammed back in, setting a brutal, pounding rhythm that made the water churn around them. “This what you need? My cock fucking the sanity out of you? Making you forget your own name?”

“Yes!” Shane chanted, his nails scraping against Ilya’s shoulders under the water, his legs locking around Ilya’s waist to take him deeper. Each filthy word was a spark on tinder, each deep stroke a promise of oblivion. He was unspooling, coming apart, the structured world he’d built his life upon dissolving in the steam and the sweat and the searing stretch.

“You are mine,” Ilya grunted, his hips a relentless piston, his own control fraying at the edges. The dirty talk was a rope he was using to pull them both into the abyss. “This tight, perfect body is mine. This clever mouth is mine. This sweet cunt,” he punctuated the crude word with a particularly vicious thrust that made Shane see stars, “dripping for me, taking me so deep... it belongs to me. Say it.”

“Yours!” Shane sobbed, the admission a release as potent as the physical one coiling in his gut. “All yours, alpha, please, I’m gonna-!”

Ilya’s hand snaked between them, his fingers finding Shane’s clit under the water, rubbing tight, frantic circles. “Come for me,” he commanded, his voice breaking. “Come on my cock

like the good, bonded omega you are. Show me what I own.”

The command, the friction, the overwhelming fullness, the blinding truth of the bond- it was too much. Shane shattered. His orgasm ripped through him with a silent, seismic intensity, his body seizing, clamping down on Ilya in rhythmic, pulsing waves. His cry was a choked gasp against Ilya’s slick shoulder.

The feel of Shane milking him, the blinding feedback loop of pleasure through the bond, tore Ilya’s own release from him. He buried himself to the hilt with a guttural roar, his teeth finding the bonding bite once more as he spilled into Shane, the hot water swirling around them as they shook together through the aftershocks.

For a long time, they stayed like that, pinned together by pleasure, the only sounds their ragged breaths and the gentle lap of water. Slowly, Ilya softened, slipping from Shane’s body. He gathered Shane- boneless, trembling, utterly spent- into his arms, holding him above the water, cradling him like something precious salvaged from the deep.

He nuzzled the fresh bite, then kissed it gently. No dirty talk now. Just a breath against damp skin. “Mine.”

Shane, beyond words, could only manage a weak, satiated hum. He turned his head and pressed his own lips to the matching mark on Ilya’s throat. The bond between them thrummed, not with frenzy, but with a deep, quiet completion.

The next forty-eight hours existed outside of time. The fever, having crested in the violent, bonding storm, settled into a deep, relentless tide that pulled Shane under completely. He surfaced only in brief, hazy moments, and when he did, he was... in that headspace where only physical feelings existed.

The fiercely intelligent, analytical mind that could deconstruct a power play in seconds was offline. In its place was a quiet, pliant creature of instinct. He could move- shifting in the nest, reaching blindly for Ilya, but he couldn't speak. Words were too complex. When he was awake, his dark eyes would simply fix on Ilya, wide and unblinking, a universe of trust and need contained in that silent stare. He was floating in that warm, submissive space he'd described, but now there was no shore in sight.

Ilya's world narrowed to a single purpose: the preservation of his mate.

He became a study in efficient, silent care. He blended protein shakes with bananas and honey, holding the cup to Shane's lips, stroking his throat to encourage swallows. He fed him bites of soft fruit, plain rice, whatever chicken or fish that had been prepared, anything easily digestible. He tracked water intake with the same focus he once gave to game tape, coaxing sips between waves of fever.

When Shane's temperature would spike, his skin burning dry to the touch, Ilya would carry him to the bathroom. He'd fill the tub with lukewarm water, a shock to the system that made Shane gasp and cling to him. They'd sink into it, and for a while, it was just holding. Ilya would cradle Shane against his chest, letting the cooler water leach the fever from his limbs, whispering nonsense in Russian against his damp hair. "Moy khoroshiy mal'chik. Ya zdes'. Vse v poryadke."

But the water, the closeness, the scent of his bonded omega in need, was a potent trigger. The care would seamlessly bleed into claiming. Shane, pliant and wordless, would turn in his arms, his body seeking even in its stupor. Ilya would take him there, against the sloped porcelain, movements slow and deep, a relentless rhythm meant more to reaffirm the bond than to chase a peak. Shane would arch silently, his mouth open on a soundless cry, his hands fluttering against Ilya's back. It was sex as a biological function, a grounding ritual for both of them. Ilya would watch his face, ensuring the pleasure was outweighing the discomfort, using the bond as his guide as much as sight.

Afterward, he'd drain the tub and refill it with fresh, cool water, and they would simply lie together again, Shane's head heavy on his shoulder, until the heat built once more and the cycle repeated.

In the nest, during the brief periods of exhausted sleep, Ilya didn't really rest. He watched. He memorized the flutter of Shane's eyelids, the pattern of his breathing. He traced the vivid

bonding bite, a stark, beautiful violent mark against the tanned skin, it was still red, but had already started to heal. This was what his obsession had wrought. Not the controlled possession he'd once imagined, but this total, terrifyingly awe-inspiring responsibility. He had wanted to own every part of Shane, and now, through the bond, he did. He felt the echo of Shane's fever in his own bones, the deep ache of overworked muscles, the hollow, hungry thirst. It was no longer a fantasy of control, but a shared life.

Once, deep in the second night, Shane stirred. His eyes opened, clearer than they had been in hours. He looked at Ilya, and his brow furrowed slightly, a ghost of his old, questioning self. He lifted a trembling hand and touched Ilya's cheek, where stubble had grown and exhaustion had carved deep shadows.

A single, coherent word rasped from his raw throat. "Tired."

It wasn't about himself. Ilya felt the meaning through the bond- a thick, aching concern that cut through the fever haze. *You are tired.*

The selflessness of it, in the midst of his own instinctual ordeal, shattered Ilya. He caught Shane's hand and pressed a fervent kiss to his palm. "I am not tired," he lied, his voice thick. "I am exactly where I need to be."

Shane's eyes searched his for a moment longer, then the clarity faded, smoothed away by the returning inner tide. He made a soft sound and nuzzled back into Ilya's neck, his purr restarting, a ragged, comforting vibration.

Ilya held him, listening to that sound. This was the reality of the bond. Not just the frenzy and the claiming, but this: the silent vigil, the shared breath, the carrying of the load when the other could not fend for themselves. The obsession that had almost destroyed them both was not there. He was no longer just protecting Shane from the world. He was sustaining him through the storm within his own body. It was the most honest thing he had ever done.

Day five dawned with soft gray skies of the summer rain, soft light seeping into the cottage. The fever had almost faded, coming and going during the afternoon, leaving behind a profound, trembling fatigue that made Shane's limbs feel like lead. The silent, pliant subspace of the peak heat had softened into a wordless clinginess. He followed Ilya from room to room with slow, unsteady steps, his fingers twisted in the waistband of Ilya's sweatpants, his forehead often pressed between Ilya's shoulder blades, breathing him in.

Ilya guided him to the bathroom and sat him on the closed toilet lid. Shane swayed, his eyes half-closed. "Bath?" Ilya asked softly.

A faint, almost imperceptible nod.

Ilya started the water, running it cool. When he went to help Shane in, Shane balked, a weak sound of protest in his throat as the water touched his overheated skin. "Shh, I know," Ilya murmured, his hands firm. "It will help. Just for a minute."

He settled Shane in the water and sat on the broad rim of the tub, using a hand-held sprayer to gently run the cool stream over Shane's back and shoulders. Shane shivered, but gradually the tension seeped out of him, his head lolling forward. It was then, in the clear morning light filtering through the window, that Ilya saw the full map of their passion.

Dark, vivid bruises bloomed over the crests of Shane's hips, the imprints of Ilya's fingers from days of relentless holding. More bruises mottled the insides of his thighs. A constellation of hickeys- some purple, some fading to yellow-green were scattered across his chest, stomach, and the tender skin over his ribs. The bonding bite on his neck was a fading, scabbed masterpiece, but these other marks... they were the evidence of a less sacred hunger. Of an alpha lost in rut and possession, of an omega pushed to and past his limits.

A cold knot of shame tightened in Ilya's stomach, cutting through the constant, low hum of the bond. He had planned to join Shane in the bath, to soothe him with slow, gentle lovemaking now that the height of the heat was passing, to reaffirm their connection in the water as they had countless times throughout this week. But the sight of the bruises changed everything.

You are not your father, he reminded himself, the therapist's voice blending with Svetlana's in his head. *You're a large Alpha, of course some bumps and bruises should be expected.*

He turned off the water. He still didn't get in. Instead, he reached for a soft cloth and the gentle, unscented soap Shane used. "Just cleaning," he said, his voice quieter than before.

He washed Shane with a tender thoroughness, avoiding the darkest bruises. He shampooed his hair, massaging his scalp until Shane's purr kicked in, a ragged, exhausted sound. He rinsed him, all without a single touch that could be construed as a demand. When he was done, he drained the tub and wrapped Shane in a large, fluffy towel, drying him with the same focused care.

Back in the bedroom, Ilya laid him on the fresh sheets he'd put on the bed. He retrieved the arnica cream he kept in his kit for hockey bruises and warmed a dollop between his fingers.

Shane watched him, his eyes clearer now. The thin blue thread of color that matched Ilya's eyes was fading, but still clouded with fatigue. He flinched slightly when Ilya's hands first touched the bruise on his hip.

"I am sorry," Ilya said, the words automatic and inadequate. He spread the cream with infinite gentleness, his touch apologetic on every discolored patch of skin. "I was not careful."

Shane's hand lifted slowly, coming to rest over Ilya's where it pressed against his hip. He didn't speak. He didn't need to. The bond carried the feeling- not accusation, but a simple, weary acceptance. *It happened. I wanted you. It was a lot.*

Ilya finished, then stretched out beside him, on top of the covers, while Shane lay beneath them. He propped himself up on an elbow, his free hand drawing idle patterns on Shane's unmarked arm.

"No more today," Ilya stated, his voice leaving no room for argument, though it was soft. "Only rest. Your body needs to come down soon, I don't want you to drop too fast."

Shane looked at him for a long moment. Then he shifted, painstakingly turning onto his side to face Ilya. He pushed at the covers between them with a clumsy hand until they were out of the way, then scooted forward, tucking himself against Ilya's body, his head finding its home on Ilya's chest. It was an answer. An agreement.

Ilya's arms came around him, holding him without constriction. He pressed his lips to Shane's damp hair. The frantic, consuming drive of the heat was gone. The obsessive need to constantly claim and reaffirm was quiet. What remained was the quiet certainty of the bond, a golden, humming thread between their hearts, and the solemn responsibility to tend to the vessel that contained his other half. He was fascinated that he could feel Shane's emotions through their bond. He'd read about that some mates could develop that connection and he was ecstatic that they had that. It wouldn't last past the heat cycle, but he loved that he got to feel Shane's emotions for however long it lasted.

Shane's breathing deepened into sleep almost instantly, his purr stuttering back to life. Ilya stayed awake, watching the slow rise and fall of his chest, feeling the faint, sore ache in his own body echoed back through the bond. He closed his eyes, listening to the purr, and for the first time in five days, allowed himself to truly rest.

Ilya surfaced from a light, dreamless sleep not to sound, but to sensation. A warm, wet, perfect heat enveloped him, drawing him from the depths of his first sleep in a week into a state of instant, throbbing awareness. The room was still dark, the cottage silent save for the sound of the water in the lake. He didn't need to open his eyes. The bond told him everything. It sang with a focused, hungry intent that was entirely Shane's.

He lay perfectly still, letting the pleasure build- a slow, torturous pull, a slick slide of tongue that knew exactly how to wring a choked gasp from his throat. Shane's hands were braced on his thighs, his head a dark silhouette in the dim room. Ilya could feel the faint tremble in those skilled fingers, the residual fatigue, but the purpose was unwavering.

When Ilya's hips gave an involuntary jerk, Shane knew he was awake. He released him with a soft, wet sound and sat up, straddling Ilya's hips. In the faint ember-glow, Ilya could see his

face- eyes dark and determined, lips swollen. The bruises on his hips were shadows in the low light, the bonding bite a stark, sacred ruin on his throat.

“Shane,” Ilya rasped, his voice thick with desire. His hands came up to frame Shane’s waist, his thumbs stroking the bruised skin. “You should be resting. You’re sore.”

Shane shook his head, a quick, negating motion. He didn’t speak. Words were still sometimes difficult, a clumsy tool compared to the direct line of the bond. Instead, he leaned forward, placing his hands on Ilya’s chest, his gaze locked on Ilya’s. He communicated in the way Ilya had once used to dominate- with sheer, unbreakable will.

He lifted himself up, positioned himself, and sank down in one slow, inexorable motion.

Ilya’s breath left him in a rush. The feeling was staggering- the tight, clinging heat, the profound intimacy of being sheathed completely inside his bonded mate. That feeling will never get old. Shane was slick and ready, his body accepting him effortlessly, but Ilya could feel the echo of soreness through the bond, a background hum of overstimulation. He tried to guide the movements, to let Shane set a gentle pace.

But Shane had no interest in gentle. He braced his hands harder on Ilya’s chest, his fingers digging in, and began to move. He set a ruthless, rolling rhythm, riding Ilya with a desperation that spoke of a need deeper than physical release. This wasn’t the pliant surrender of the heat’s peak. This was Shane, *his* Shane- the brilliant, stubborn, resilient omega, taking what he needed. Claiming his alpha in return. Each downward stroke was a punctuation, a silent declaration- *I’m back. This is my choice. You are mine, too.*

Ilya’s control, already frayed by sleep and the perfect sensation, shattered. His hands flew to Shane’s hips, not to guide or slow, but to hold on as he was thoroughly, beautifully wrecked. He met each rise and fall with a thrust of his own, driving deeper, chasing the connection that was already absolute but still felt new enough to steal his reason.

“Look at you,” Ilya groaned, his voice a wrecked thing. “Moy lyubimyy. Riding me so perfectly. Taking everything. Using me just how you need.” Words flowed out of him and Shane must still feel the bond because even the russian parts seemed to have an effect on him, a darkly tender mirror of their earlier frenzy, but now it was filled with awe.

A broken, gasping sound escaped Shane. He threw his head back, the line of his throat exquisite, the bonding bite offered like a trophy. His rhythm became frantic, losing its precision, driven by a cresting wave of pure sensation. Ilya could feel it coiling at the base of his own spine, the pressure building in tandem through the golden thread between them.

He sat up abruptly in a surge of strength, wrapping his arms around Shane's torso, crushing him close as he rolled them over without breaking their connection. He pressed Shane into the mattress, blanketing him, and drove into him with three final, deep, claiming thrusts.

"Now," Ilya snarled against the bonding bite, his teeth grazing the scarred flesh. "Come with me. Now."

It was not a command the bond needed,; it was a plea their bodies answered as one. Shane's climax tore through him with a loud, seismic shudder, his inner muscles clamping down in rhythmic pulses. The feel of it, the blinding feedback of pleasure through the bond, hurled Ilya over the edge immediately after. He spilled into Shane with a guttural cry, his own release feeling less like a taking and more like a gift given and received in the same instant.

He collapsed, careful of his weight, turning them to their sides. They lay tangled, breathless, sweat-slicked skin cooling in the night air. Shane's hand came up, his fingers tracing the matching bite on Ilya's neck, then drifting to rest over the frantic beat of his heart.

The silence was total, but the bond hummed between them, satiated and peaceful. No obsession, no fear, no past ghosts in the shadows. Just the two of them, bound in the dark, having found a new way to speak without words, a language of equal hunger, equal trust, and a love that was finally, unmistakably, consummated.

One day eight, the fever was gone, the debilitating fatigue had receded, but the bond between them seemed to have its own gravitational pull, demanding constant, physical reaffirmation. They had already made love four times that day- slowly against the kitchen counter at dawn, desperately in the shower after, languidly in the nest before lunch, and with rough, hungry

urgency against the wall of the bedroom just an hour ago. Each time was a conversation the bond translated perfectly- *I am here. You are mine. We are real.*

Now, after the fifth time, Shane lay on his back amidst the wreckage of sheets, his chest heaving. Sweat gleamed on his skin, highlighting the fading bruises and the dark, scabbed bonding bite. His eyes were unfocused, staring at the ceiling, his pupils so dilated the warm brown of his irises was nearly swallowed. He was floating somewhere far away, in that deep, submissive space where only sensation and instinct lived.

Ilya lay beside him, one arm thrown over his eyes, catching his own breath. The constant cycle of sex and care had left him physically spent but mentally wired, the bond humming with a satiated, golden warmth. He felt Shane's hand fumble for his, their fingers tangling. Then Shane guided Ilya's palm and pressed it flat against his own lower abdomen, over the soft, firm plane below his navel.

A single, slurred word escaped Shane's kiss-swollen lips. "Baby?"

The word landed in the quiet room like a physical blow. Ilya's breath hitched. He turned his head, removing his arm from his eyes to look at Shane. His omega's face was still hazy, but there was a desperate, hopeful longing in his unfocused gaze that carved straight through Ilya's heart. The heat, the bond, the sheer biological imperative of their joining, it was all screaming at Shane's hindbrain, overriding the careful, rational decision they'd made together.

"No, sweetheart," Ilya said softly, his thumb stroking Shane's stomach. "Not this time. Remember?" He kept his voice gentle, but firm. "The injection? We agreed."

The clarity of the reminder seemed to pierce Shane's fog for just a second, long enough for the disconnect to register. His lower lip trembled. A soft, wounded whimper escaped him, and then tears, silent and profound, welled in his eyes and spilled over, tracing paths through the sweat on his temples. It was the pure, uncomplicated grief of an instinct denied.

"No, none of that," Ilya murmured, his own chest tightening. He wiped the tears away with his fingers. "Do not cry. Next time. We will make a baby, okay? When you are ready. When we are both ready. We agreed." He was repeating it like a mantra, for both of them.

But Shane wasn't hearing the agreement. He was feeling the hollow, aching *want* that the heat and the bond had amplified to a deafening roar. With a sudden, clumsy surge of strength, he pushed himself up and climbed over Ilya, straddling his hips. His movements were uncoordinated, driven purely by need. He took Ilya in hand, stroking him firmly, expertly, until he was hard again against his palm. Then, without preamble, he sank down onto him, sheathing him completely in a slow, breathtaking slide.

He braced his hands on Ilya's chest, his tear-streaked face set with a heartbreaking mix of determination and despair. He began to move, riding him with a slow, deep, rolling rhythm that was less about pleasure and more about a profound, intrinsic plea. He looked down, his blown-out pupils fixed on Ilya's.

"Give me a baby, Alpha," Shane whispered, the words raw and ragged. "Please. I want a baby."

The plea, spoken in that broken, instinct-driven voice, was a knife twisted in the gut of every alpha fiber Ilya possessed. His hips wanted to snap up, to drive into that sweet, welcoming heat and answer the call. The bond thrummed with the shared, desperate yearning. With as much sex as they'd had, a treacherous, hopeful part of him had wondered if the shot had failed. But Shane's scent, while rich with omega and sex and *him*, hadn't shifted into the particular, subtle sweetness that signaled conception he'd read about. The chances were marginal at best. This agony was for nothing.

He didn't argue. He didn't try to reason with the final burst of heat-haze. Instead, he reached up, his hands framing Shane's face, and pulled him down into a deep, consuming kiss. It was a kiss meant to swallow the plea, to communicate what words couldn't. *I hear you. I want it too. But not like this. Not when you are not yourself.*

He took over the rhythm, rolling them carefully until Shane was beneath him, never breaking the kiss. He moved inside him then, not with the frantic pace of before, but with slow, deep, reverent strokes. This wasn't about answering the desperate call for conception. This was about connection. About love. About reminding Shane, and himself, that they were more than their biology.

“I love you,” Ilya breathed against his lips between kisses. “My Shane. My heart. My mate. Right now, this is enough. You are enough.”

He poured every ounce of that devotion into each movement, each touch, until the desperate tension in Shane’s body gradually melted, the grief in his eyes clouding over with a dazed, overwhelmed pleasure. When Shane finally climaxed, it was with a soft, shuddering cry that sounded more like relief than triumph, his body clinging to Ilya’s. Ilya followed him over, spilling into him with a groan, the act feeling both like a surrender and a promise.

Afterward, he held Shane close, their legs tangled, his lips pressed to the bonding bite. Shane’s tears had stopped. He was pliant again, exhausted, his earlier desperate plea seeming to have been wept and loved out of him for now. The bond hummed, still longing, but soothed.

Ilya stared at the ceiling, one hand splayed once more over Shane’s flat stomach. The want was a physical ache in his own soul. *Next time*, he promised silently, to Shane, to the universe, to the ghost of his own father who would have seen this as a failing. *Next time, we will do it right*. For now, he held his crying, wanting, perfect mate, and learned the hardest lesson of love yet: how to cherish a dream while patiently waiting for the right time to make it real.

Shane woke to a silence that felt different. It wasn’t the heavy headed feeling he’d had all week, , but the clear, crisp silence of a cottage in the early morning. His mind, which had been a swirling fog of instinct and sensation for eight days, snapped back into focus with an almost audible click. The first thing he registered was the ache. A deep, pleasant soreness in his muscles, a tender throbbing between his legs and behind, and a sharp, specific pulse on the left side of his neck.

He sat up slowly, the sheets pooling around his waist. A full-body blush crept over his skin as the memories, not as a coherent narrative, but as vivid, sensory flashes, assaulted him. The desperate cling of the nest, the cool water of the tub, the searing pain-pleasure of the bite, the relentless, sweating rhythm of their bodies, and his own voice, broken and begging for *more*. He covered his face with his hands, a low groan escaping him.

A warm, calloused palm settled on the small of his back, rubbing in a slow circle. Shane peeked through his fingers. Ilya was propped on an elbow, watching him. He didn't look exhausted or frenzied. He looked... peaceful. A gentle, unguarded grin played on his lips, softening the usual severe lines of his face.

"There you are," Ilya murmured, his voice rough with sleep but brimming with warmth.

Shane lowered his hands, his blush deepening. "I'm... here. I think. Everything hurts."

Ilya's grin widened. He sat up fully and leaned in, capturing Shane's lips in a kiss that was unbearably soft and sweet. It was a hello, a welcome back. When he pulled away, he kept his forehead pressed to Shane's. "You have killed me, love," he whispered, the words a tender confession. "Completely unmanned me. I am dead. I've died a very happy man."

The humor, so light and genuine, disarmed Shane's embarrassment. A shaky laugh bubbled out of him. He leaned into Ilya, curling against his side, tucking his head under his chin. Ilya's arms came around him, holding him without an ounce of demanding pressure, just a steady, sure warmth. They stayed like that for long minutes, Shane listening to the strong, steady beat of Ilya's heart, feeling the new, golden thread of the bond humming contentedly between them. It wasn't a noise. It was a presence, like a second heartbeat nestled beside his own.

"I don't remember... all of it," Shane admitted quietly into Ilya's skin. "It's like... bright pictures. Feelings. The bath. The... the bite." His fingers rose to trace the scabbed mark on his own neck, then mirrored the motion on Ilya's. A shiver that was pure awe went through him. It was real. They were bonded.

"You were very brave," Ilya said, his lips against Shane's hair. "And very... determined."

A flash of memory- himself, climbing onto Ilya, taking control with a clumsy, desperate strength. "Oh, god," Shane mumbled, hiding his face again.

Ilya chuckled, the sound vibrating through both of them. “It was perfect. Even when you were... You were perfect.” His hand stroked down Shane’s spine, soothing. “And you are safe. You are here.”

Another, more troubling flash. Tears. A hollow, aching want that had felt like it would crack his ribs open. “I asked for... I said...”

Ilya’s hand stilled. He understood. “You asked for what your body needed at that moment. What the bond wanted. There is no shame in it.” He paused, choosing his words with the care Shane now recognized as his new, hard-won love. “We have an agreement. A plan. That has not changed. The want... the want is just a promise for later. It is okay to feel it.”

The structured, analytical part of Shane’s mind, now fully online, latched onto the logic. The injection. The timing. Their careers. The fragile, miraculous thing they had just rebuilt. It *was* the plan. The rational agreement stood firm. But beneath it, in a deeper, newly awakened chamber of his heart, the echo of that instinctual plea still resonated. *Next time.*

“Okay,” Shane whispered, not trusting his voice with more.

Ilya seemed to understand that, too. He didn’t press. He just held him closer. “We should get up. Eat something that is not a protein shake. You need real food.”

The mention of food made Shane’s stomach growl loudly. The all-consuming hunger of the heat was gone, replaced by a normal, profound emptiness. He nodded.

As they shifted to get up, Shane’s body protested with a chorus of aches. He winced, and Ilya was instantly there, a solid support for him to lean on. Shane looked at the man beside him, the obsessed rival who had burned the world for him, and was now, patiently and with immense gentleness, helping him out of bed, his blue eyes full of a devotion that asked for nothing in return.

The hot water drained away the last remnants of sweat and sleep, and with it, the final clinging haze of the heat. Shane moved stiffly under the spray, a full-body wince accompanying his reach for the shampoo. Ilya watched, his sharp eyes missing nothing.

Before Shane could protest, Ilya was out of the shower, returning a moment later with two pills and a glass of water from the sink.

“For the soreness,” he said, his voice leaving no room for debate.

Shane took them, his eyes fixed on the drain, a blush warming his cheeks that had nothing to do with the water’s heat. The vulnerability of it, needing care, being so thoroughly *used*, still clashed with the lifetime of rigid self-sufficiency.

A calloused finger hooked under his chin, applying gentle, inexorable pressure until Shane’s gaze was forced upward. Ilya’s blue eyes were close, intense, but the old, frantic obsession was banked, replaced by a quiet, unwavering focus. “Eyes on me,” he said, the words a soft command. “Always.”

It wasn’t a demand for submission, it was a request for connection. A refusal to let Shane hide in his own shyness. Shane held the look, and the embarrassment slowly seeped away, replaced by a grounding warmth. He nodded, a tiny movement against Ilya’s finger.

The shower was for cleansing, not for reigniting. They washed each other with a practical tenderness, Ilya’s hands carefully massaging shampoo into Shane’s scalp, Shane returning the favor with slow strokes down Ilya’s back. They kissed under the spray, slow and deep, a quiet rediscovery of lips that had spent days communicating in growls and whimpers. It was a recalibration.

Stepping out, they toweled off in the steam-filled room. As Ilya turned to hang his towel, the mirror caught his reflection, and Shane’s gaze snagged on it.

The landscape of Shane’s back, hips and shoulders was a canvas of Ilya’s own making. Dark, mottled bruises bloomed across his hips, the unmistakable imprints of desperate fingers. A few lower down, on his thighs, spoke of a fierce, clinging grip. There were scratches on Ilya too, thin and red, tracing paths over his ribs and across his shoulders.

A familiar, cold knot of guilt tightened in Ilya’s stomach. He saw Shane’s eyes widen, his lips part. He braced himself for the apology, the regret, the shadow of the past where his touch

was something to be feared and regretted.

But Shane didn't need it. He stepped closer, his damp fingers hovering just above a particularly vivid red line on Ilya's bear tattoo. A slow, incredulous smile spread across his face.

"Wow," Shane said, his voice laced with a hint of awed laughter. "We really... went for it, huh?" He met Ilya's wary eyes in the mirror, his own shining with a mix of mischief and possessiveness. "Guess the 'conflict-avoidant Hollander' takes a vacation during heat. Look at the state of us."

He gave a soft, genuine laugh then, shaking his head as he turned to grab his toothbrush, as if marveling at a strange and fascinating discovery about himself.

A slow smile spread across his own face. "Looks like I gave as good as I got," he said, his voice deliberately casual. He reached out and poked a particularly vivid bruise on Ilya's hip. "You're gonna need a note for the trainer. 'Excused from practice, got manhandled by his omega.'"

Ilya's smirk deepened into a real, warm grin. He caught Shane's poking finger and brought it to his mouth, kissing the tip. "A small price to pay," he murmured, the words vibrating against Shane's skin. He released his hand and gave him a gentle swat on the backside. "Now brush your teeth. Your breath is terrifying."

Shane laughed, a real, unguarded sound that echoed in the steamy room. He turned to the sink, squeezing toothpaste onto his brush. The normalcy of it was a balm. As he brushed, he watched Ilya in the mirror. The alpha stood behind him, applying a salve to the fresh bonding bite on his own neck with clinical precision. Their eyes met in the glass. No words passed, but the bond hummed between them, a contented, golden thread.

The tension bled from Ilya's shoulders so completely he felt lightheaded. The apology died on his tongue, unnecessary. This wasn't shame. This wasn't fear. This was Shane, seeing the evidence of their own passions, his own surrender, and his own strength, and claiming it with a joke. It was acceptance, pure and simple.

Ilya watched him squeeze toothpaste, his own reflection softening in the foggy glass. The bruises ached, a pleasant, grounding soreness. They were not marks of a battle, but souvenirs of a mutual surrender. Shane's laughter in the face of them was a greater gift than any careful touch could ever be. It was the sound of a ghost being laid to rest, the ghost of the omega who flinched, and the alpha who saw his own love as something destructive. He leaned against the counter, a slow smile answering Shane's in the mirror, and let the simple, ordinary sound of brushing teeth fill the room. It was the most peaceful sound in the world.

Finished, Shane rinsed and spat. Ilya immediately reached for his own toothbrush, but Shane was faster. He snatched the tube of toothpaste and held it behind his back, raising his chin in a playful dare.

Ilya stared at him, toothbrush poised. "Give."

"Make me."

For a second, the old Ilya flickered in his eyes, the one who would have pinned him against the counter and taken what he wanted. This Ilya just sighed, a long-suffering sound, and leaned in. He braced his hands on the sink on either side of Shane, caging him without touching, and simply took the toothpaste from Shane's loose grip behind his back. It was so easy Shane hadn't even felt it.

"Cheater," Shane mumbled around a fresh smile.

"Strategy," Ilya corrected, squeezing a stripe onto his brush. He nudged Shane aside with his hip to get to the water. "Go put clothes on. You are distracting."

Shane wandered back into the bedroom, the towel around his waist. The aches were still there, a persistent, deep-down soreness, but the medicine and the shower had taken the sharp edge off. He found the soft sweatpants and Ilya's shirt that he had laid out for him on the freshly made bed. As he dressed, he looked at the nest, now dismantled, the sheets stripped. It was just a bed again.

He heard Ilya spit and rinse in the bathroom. When he emerged, his hair damp and dark, his own sweatpants slung low on his hips, he found Shane sitting on the edge of the bed, pulling on socks.

“Ready?” Ilya asked.

Shane nodded, standing up. A twinge in his thigh made him wince, just slightly.

Ilya saw it. Of course he did. He didn’t comment, didn’t fuss. He just walked over, took Shane’s face in his hands, and kissed him, slow and sweet. “Come on,” he said against his lips. “I will make eggs. You will eat all of them.”

It wasn’t a question. And for the first time in a long time, maybe ever, Shane Hollander didn’t feel the need to negotiate the terms. He just leaned into the kiss, and then followed his alpha toward the smell of coffee and the promise of a new, ordinary day.

The morning sun danced on the lake’s surface, a field of shattered diamonds. They had settled into two weathered Adirondack chairs at the end of the dock, the wood warm beneath them. A soft, clean breeze carried the scent of water and pine, a world apart from the intense, scent-saturated air of the cottage bedroom. Shane sipped his coffee, watching a bird dive in the distance, his body a symphony of pleasant aches anchored by the steady, golden hum of the bond in his chest.

“What would you like to do today?” Ilya asked, his voice a low rumble that blended with the lap of water against the pilings. He wasn’t looking at the lake; he was looking at Shane, his blue eyes calm, his presence a solid, quiet fact beside him.

Shane let out a long, contented breath. “Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Just... this. For a few days.” A small, approving smile touched Ilya’s lips. He nodded. Then, after a comfortable silence, Shane voiced the question that had been hovering in the back of his mind since clarity returned. “When... when do you have to go back?”

Ilya didn’t hesitate. “I am here for however long you want me to be.”

The simplicity of the statement, the utter lack of negotiation or condition, sent a jolt of pure, undiluted joy through Shane. It wasn't the overwhelming, suffocating possession of before.

A wide, effortless grin spread across Shane's face. He abandoned his chair in a flash, his soreness forgotten in the rush of happiness. He climbed into Ilya's lap, the older chair groaning in protest, and settled himself, tucking his head under Ilya's chin. Ilya's arms came around him instantly, holding him close, a soft chuckle vibrating against Shane's temple.

"Happy?" Ilya murmured.

"Very," Shane confirmed, nuzzling into his throat, right beside the bonding bite. He could feel Ilya's contentment through the bond, a deep, steady river matching his own.

They sat like that for a long while, wrapped in sunlight and silence. Finally, Ilya's hand stroked slowly up and down Shane's back. His voice, when he spoke, was thoughtful, careful.

"There is something I wish to speak about."

"Hmm?"

"Your parents." Ilya felt Shane go very still in his arms, but he didn't tense with fear. It was the stillness of attention. "I want to meet them. Formally."

Shane leaned back just enough to look at him. "You've met them. At games, after..."

"That is not meeting," Ilya said, his expression solemn. "That is... being in the same space during chaos. I mean to meet them. To sit with them. To tell them my intentions." He paused, his thumb brushing over the bonding bite on Shane's neck, a silent acknowledgment of the permanent step they had already taken. "We are mates now. It is only right. In a proper

courtship, I would have asked your father for permission to court you long before this. I did everything... backwards. And wrong. I want to do this part correctly.”

The words settled over Shane, heavy with meaning. This wasn't the Ilya who operated in shadows, who hired investigators and bypassed every normal social protocol. This was a man trying to build something above board, to integrate his life with Shane's in the daylight, where his family could see. It was an apology for the past and a plan for the future, all in one.

Shane thought of his mother's sharp, knowing eyes, his father's calm assessment. He thought of the terror they'd endured, the secrets he'd kept. Letting Ilya in, formally, would be forcing that final door open. It was terrifying.

But the bond hummed, warm and sure. He looked at Ilya's face, saw the earnest hope there, carefully restrained but undeniable.

“Okay,” Shane said softly. He traced the line of Ilya's jaw. “But we do it here. At the cottage. Neutral ground. And... we tell them everything. About the bond. About... everything.” It was a condition, but also a sharing of the burden.

Ilya's eyes closed for a second, as if in profound relief. When they opened, they were clear and sure. “Da. Everything. They deserve to know who their son has tied his life to.” He pulled Shane closer again, pressing a kiss to his hair. “Thank you.”

They lapsed back into silence, but it was a different quiet now, charged with a new, shared purpose. The obsession that had once been a locked room was now an open door, and Ilya was asking to walk through it, hand in hand with Shane, to face the world and his family, on the other side. It was, Shane realized, the most romantic thing Ilya had ever done.

The laughter on the dock softened into a comfortable quiet, broken only by the gentle lap of water and the distant cry of the loon. Shane's fingers traced the edge of a faint bruise on Ilya's forearm, his touch idle. “You know, for a guy who's supposed to be ‘completely unmanned,’ you're still pretty insufferable.”

Ilya didn't open his eyes, a smirk playing on his lips. "You prefer me insufferable. It gives you something to fix. A project."

"My last project almost got me kidnapped and set on fire," Shane shot back, but there was no heat in it, only a weary, accepted truth. He leaned his head against Ilya's shoulder. "This one just eats all my food and hogs the blankets."

"I am a growing alpha," Ilya said solemnly, finally opening his eyes to look down at him. "I need my strength. My mate is very demanding during his heat." Ilya joked, squeezing Shane's hip.

Shane snorted. "Terribly demanding." He grew quiet again, the humor settling. The sun was climbing higher, warming their skin. The bond between them was a quiet, steady pulse, a fact of his new existence as fundamental as his own heartbeat. Ilya's earlier request lingered in the air, a necessary, daunting step. Shane took a deep breath. "Okay. Let's do it."

He pulled his phone from his pocket. Ilya's arm around him tightened briefly, a silent squeeze of solidarity, then relaxed, giving him space.

His mother answered on the second ring. "Shane? Honey, is everything alright?" Her voice was sharp with immediate concern. In the background, Shane could hear the familiar sounds of his parents' kitchen- a spoon clinking against a mug, the low murmur of a news channel.

"Yeah, Mom. Everything's fine. I'm good." He used his calmest, most even tone, the one he reserved for reassuring her after a hard hit on the ice.

"You've been quiet. We've been worried." The subtext was clear: *You disappeared after winning the Cup, and you're at the cottage alone, you usually check in at least once during your heat to let us know you're ok.*

"I know. I just... needed some quiet time. To decompress." He caught Ilya's gaze. Ilya was watching him intently, his expression neutral but his eyes soft. "Actually, that's why I'm calling. I was wondering if you and Dad wanted to come up for dinner. Maybe tonight?"

A pause. He could picture her face, the calculating concern. “Dinner? At the cottage? Just... us?”

Shane swallowed. “Well. Me, and... a guest.”

The silence on the line stretched. He heard her put a hand over the receiver, the muffled sound of her saying, “David, he’s got a guest.” When she came back, her voice was carefully, painfully neutral. “A guest. I see. That’s... lovely, honey. Of course we’ll come. Should I bring anything?”

“Just yourselves,” Shane said, relief making him slightly lightheaded. “It’s nothing fancy. I’ll cook.”

“You’ll cook,” she repeated, and he could hear the thousand questions in those two words.

“I’ll see you later tonight, Mom. Let’s do 6? Love you.”

“Love you too, Shane. See you later honey.”

He ended the call and let the phone drop into his lap. He stared out at the lake, the vast, glittering blue suddenly seeming to hold the weight of all the words he hadn’t said.

Ilya’s hand came up, his fingers gently tilting Shane’s chin until their eyes met. “You did well,” he said, his voice low.

“She knows it’s you,” Shane said, the certainty sitting like a stone in his gut. “She has to.”

“Probably,” Ilya agreed, not denying it. “But now, she will have a table between us. She will be able to look at me. To ask her questions.” He brushed his thumb over Shane’s cheek. “It is

better this way. No more shadows.”

Shane leaned into the touch, drawing strength from its steadiness. The terrified, secretive omega who had hidden his entire nature was gone, burned away in the fires of the past year. In his place was a man who was tired of hiding, who had a mate, and who was, for the first time, preparing to introduce the two most important parts of his life to each other. It was terrifying. But with Ilya’s solid presence beside him and the golden thread of the bond thrumming with unwavering support, it also felt, impossibly, like the next right step.

“Come on,” Ilya said, standing and pulling Shane up with him. “If we are having company, we need more prepare the food. And you,” he added, a glint of the old, challenging smirk returning to his eyes, “need to decide what to wear to make you look like you haven’t been naked for the past week.”

The tension broke. Shane shoved him, laughing as Ilya pretended to stagger on the dock. “You’re such an asshole!”

“I am yours,” Ilya corrected, catching his hand and lacing their fingers together. “And you are stuck with me. Now, and at dinner later. I’ve never met parents before. Should be fun.”

Hand in hand, they walked back up the dock toward the cottage, leaving the sunlight dancing on the water behind them. The peace of the morning was now layered with a new, anticipatory gravity. The cottage was no longer just a retreat. It was about to become a proving ground.

The afternoon sun slanted through the cottage windows, painting the dust motes gold. A nervous energy had replaced the morning’s peace, thrumming in the air as tangible as the hum of the bond. The scent of marinade and chopped herbs mingled with the underlying, permanent trace of *them*, bonded mates. Would his parents be able to feel it even though they were only betas?

Shane stood paralyzed before his open closet, a pile of discarded clothes on the bed behind him. His mind, usually so adept at systems and plays, was stuck in a loop of social calculations. The variables were too many: his mother’s hawk-like perception, his father’s quiet scrutiny, the fresh, undeniable evidence on his skin.

A dark henley was rejected- too hot, too suspicious for a lakeside dinner. A high-collared polo was next, but the stiff fabric chafed the bonding bite. He tried a team hoodie, then immediately threw it off, muttering about looking like he was hiding. The structured, conflict-avoidant part of his brain was screaming to control the narrative, to present a version of this that wouldn't alarm. To show them that he was still 'their Shane' but with Ilya added with him.

Ilya leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed, watching the silent crisis. He had set the table on the deck according to Shane's instructions. He'd offered to help with the food, but Shane had shooed him away, needing the familiar, mechanical ritual of prepping vegetables. Now, Ilya just observed, a quiet, steady presence amid the sartorial chaos.

Finally, with a frustrated sigh, Shane pulled on a soft, blue linen shirt his mother had bought him last summer. It was open at the collar, the fabric too light to hide the dark, scabbed claim on his neck or the faint bruises peeking above the neckline. He paired it with plain shorts. It was a normal outfit. Something to remind them that everything would be fine. *This is me. Take it or leave it.*

He turned and saw Ilya's chosen outfit. The breath caught in his throat.

Ilya wore his black Boston shirt, the sleeves torn off at the seams, revealing the powerful curves of his shoulders and biceps. It was faded, well-worn. The shirt of a rival. The shirt of the man who had burned for him. Below, he wore a pair of Shane's own shorts, which fit him loosely across the hips. The statement was blatant, defiant, and utterly Ilya. *I am who I am. I am here, in your clothes, in your space. . Your mate.*

"You can't wear that," Shane said, his voice thin.

Ilya raised an eyebrow. "Why not? Is clean. It is my team."

"It's... going to rile my mom up."

A slow, dangerous smile touched Ilya's lips. "Good."

There was no time to argue. The crunch of tires on gravel echoed from the driveway. Shane's heart leapt into his throat. The bond flared with a burst of shared anxiety, instantly soothed by a wave of deliberate calm from Ilya's end. He took a deep breath and went to the door, Ilya following slightly behind him.

They walked out onto the deck together. Shane carried a platter of vegetables for the grill. Ilya carried everything else.

Yuna and David Hollander emerged from their car. Yuna's eyes went immediately to Shane, scanning him head-to-toe in a millisecond. He saw the moment her gaze stuck on his neck, the slight hitch in her step. Her expression didn't change, but it became... set. David's assessment was slower, taking in Shane, then Ilya, then the way Ilya's hand came to rest, almost imperceptibly, at the small of Shane's back as they approached the steps.

"Momma. Dad," Shane said, forcing a smile. "You remember Ilya Rozanov."

"Mr. and Mrs. Hollander. ," Ilya said, nodding. His voice was respectful, but there was no deference in his posture. He met David's gaze directly, then Yuna's. "Thank you for coming. It's good to see you in better circumstances."

"Hi, honey," Yuna said to her son, her voice tight as she pulled him into a hug. Her nose flared subtly against his hair- checking his scent. The change would be profound to another omega: the clear, bright notes of his natural scent now irrevocably intertwined with the dark, spicy signature of an alpha. A bonded alpha. She pulled back, her hands on his arms. "You look... well."

"I am," Shane said, and for the first time, he meant it completely.

David shook Ilya's hand, his grip firm, his eyes kind but unreadable. "Rozanov. Good to see you."

The understatement hung in the air. The last ‘circumstance’ had been a hospital waiting room after a kidnapping.

“I will grill,” Ilya stated, taking the platter from Shane’s hands. It was a tactical retreat, giving the family a moment. He turned his back to them, focusing on the grill.

Shane was left with his parents in the evening light. The silence was brittle.

“So,” Yuna began, her eyes following Ilya’s broad, shirtless back. “This is... a visit?”

Shane took a deep breath. The analytical part of him wanted to script this, to follow facts. But there was no chart for this. There was only the truth, and the bond humming like a plucked string in his chest. He looked at his father’s calm face, his mother’s guarded one.

“He’s staying for a while,” Shane said. Then, the words coming simpler than he’d feared: “We have things to talk about. A lot of things. But first... dinner?”

David nodded, a world of understanding in his eyes. He placed a hand on Yuna’s shoulder, a gentle pressure. “Dinner sounds perfect. Can I help with anything?” He didn’t wait for an answer, deciding to go stand with Rozanov.

His wife and Shane had always had a close relationship. Not excluding him, but they just understood each other without words. It was something beautiful to see, so he knew they needed time to speak.

“So,” Yuna started.

“Mama, Ilya and I are together. We’re mated.” Shane said with a blush.

Yuna stayed silent, a shocked expression on her face for a moment. “Wow. I did not expect that. I thought you two hated each other. I mean-“

“No, mama. I mean I get where anyone would think that. But we love each other. So much mama, we tried to stop it. We had so many things go wrong, but we love each other.”

“Oh baby! All I ever wanted was for you to be happy! I don’t care with who as long as they treated you right-as long as they saw you for you-“

Shane grabbed her into a tight hug, holding in his tears, trying to get her to understand why they hid for so long, why he hid from *her* for so long.

After a few minutes, Yuna pulled back, kissing his cheeks and wiping both of their faces. “Enough. We have to sit and talk.”

As they moved, setting out drinks, the normalcy of the actions a stark contrast to the seismic shift in the spaces atmosphere, Shane watched Ilya at the grill. The Boston logo seemed to blaze in the sunset. This was it. No more shadows. No more hiding. The proof was on his skin, in the air, and sitting at his table. The conversation was yet to come, but for now, the scent of grilling vegetables and the quiet, defiant presence of his bonded mate by the lake had to be enough. Yuna’s eyes, sharp and worried, kept drifting back to the mark on Shane’s neck, and Shane knew the real test was just beginning.

David and Ilya had set the table while they talked. Grilled chicken and vegetables where piled on everyones plates and the buttered pasta was mostly for Ilya and David. The air on the deck was thick with the scent of food, lake water, and a rising tension that had little to do with the fading sunset. Yuna Hollander placed her fork down with a precise click.

“So,” she said, her gaze fixed on Ilya, who met it unflinchingly from across the table. “You are mates. That is... permanent. What is the plan, Ilya? Shane’s career is in Montreal. Yours is in Boston. The media, the league... his safety.” The last word was heavy, loaded with the memory of headlines and hospital waiting rooms.

Ilya had prepared for this. The old him would have laid out a dictated future. The man he was now, the one who had survived almost losing his mate several times, chose his words with care. “I am working on several plans. But any plan,” he said, his eyes shifting to Shane, who

was staring fixedly at his own hands, “will be discussed with Shane first. He will choose. My career is flexible. His does not have to be.”

David nodded slowly, a pragmatist assessing a proposal. Yuna’s expression remained carved from ice. “And your intentions beyond this summer? Your history is... well-documented. The press paints a picture of a man with little regard for commitment.”

A flush of anger, hot and defensive, rose in Ilya’s chest, but he banked it. She was protecting her child. He had given her every reason to. “The press made an example of me,” he said, his voice low but clear. “It was easier to let them. But there has been no one else since the first time we got serious. There will be no one else. I love him. I am loyal to him. This,” he gestured between himself and Shane, the bond a palpable truth in the space, “is the only thing that is real to me.”

It was a good answer. An honest one. But for Shane, the pressure in the room was becoming a physical weight. The questions, the scrutiny, the unspoken history of trackers and fire and fear, it was too much input. The structured part of his mind, his refuge, was short-circuiting. He could feel his mother’s disapproval, a sharp, sense of worry and protectiveness that grated against his own raw nerves. The sounds of the night insects amplified into a screech. The wood grain of the table blurred and swam.

His breathing hitched, then shallowed. A high, thin whine started in his ears. He couldn’t do this. He folded forward, arms coming up to shield his head, his forehead pressing into the cool, solid wood of the table. He was trying to disappear, to make the sensory world small and manageable again.

“Shane- ” Yuna began, her chair scraping back, her instinct to comfort her child in the way she always had.

But Ilya was already moving closer.

He was out of his seat and kneeling beside Shane’s chair in one fluid motion. He didn’t grab him. He didn’t try to pull him upright. He simply leaned in, his body a shield between Shane and the overwhelming world, and put his lips close to Shane’s ear. His voice was a private rumble, for Shane alone, in the quiet Russian he used for their most intimate moments.

“Solnyshko moyo, you are safe. I am here. Breathe with me. We are fine. Your parents will understand and everything will be ok.”

Yuna froze, half-risen from her chair. The protective anger in her posture drained away, replaced by a stunned, silent watchfulness. She saw the way Ilya’s large body curved around Shane’s folded form, not to restrain, but to enclose. She heard the low, unfamiliar cadence of his voice, not a command, but a steady, rhythmic anchor. She saw Shane’s knotted shoulders slowly begin to loosen, his frantic breathing deepening to match the pace of Ilya’s murmured words.

Most of all, she saw the kiss. Not dramatic or possessive, but a soft, deliberate press of lips to Shane’s temple, a seal on the whispered comfort. And Shane, her son who flinched from unexpected touch, who had spent a lifetime building walls, leaned into it. He turned his head, just slightly, his forehead coming to rest against Ilya’s cheekbone. A silent, complete trust.

Yuna sank slowly back into her seat. David reached over and covered her hand with his, giving it a gentle squeeze. The fight went out of the air, leaving behind a raw, fragile quiet.

It was Shane who broke it. He sat up, scrubbing a hand over his face, his cheeks flushed with embarrassment but his eyes clearer. “Sorry,” he mumbled, not looking at anyone.

“Don’t be,” David said, his voice kind. “It’s a lot.”

Ilya returned to his seat, but his attention remained tethered to Shane, a visible line of care. Yuna studied them both, the vivid proof of the bond on her son’s neck, and the new, quiet proof of devotion in the alpha’s watchful eyes.

“Well, we need to make a plan,” Yuna began again, her voice softer now, stripped of its interrogating edge. “They will be complicated. His contract is up for renewal this season, the league’s image policies, his brand deals with the...”

“I will take care of it,” Ilya said, interrupting her gently but firmly.

Yuna's eyes flashed. "*You* will take care of *his* contracts?"

"No," Ilya corrected, understanding the flare of protective instinct. "I will take care of the situation. The lawyers, the negotiations, the... the problems. I will handle what comes at us, so Shane can focus on hockey." He looked at Shane. "The decisions will be ours. Together. But the weight of making it happen? That is mine to carry. It is the least I can do."

It was not the arrogant claim of a man taking over. It was the vow of a man determined to build a buffer between his mate and the world he had once dragged him into. A penance, and a promise.

The rest of the dinner passed in a tentative, newfound calm. The conversation turned to safer topics, the cottage, the upcoming season, a neutral recounting of the Cup win. Ilya answered questions politely, his hand finding Shane's under the table, their fingers linking.

When Yuna and David left hours later, the night was full and dark, the lake a black mirror. On the driveway, Yuna hugged Shane tightly, her face buried in his neck for a long moment, right beside the bonding bite. She didn't mention it. She just held him.

When she pulled back, she looked at Ilya, who stood a respectful step behind Shane. "You will keep him safe," she said. It was no longer a question.

"With my life," Ilya replied. It was the simplest, truest thing he knew.

They watched the car's taillights disappear into the pines. The cottage, their sanctuary, awaited them, but it felt different now. It was no longer a hiding place. It was a home that had just been acknowledged by the outside world. The first, hardest audience had borne witness.

Shane let out a long, shaky breath, leaning back against Ilya's chest. Ilya's arms came around him, his chin resting on Shane's head.

“It is done,” Ilya murmured into his hair.

“For now,” Shane said, but the tension was gone from his voice. It was replaced by a weary relief. The secret was out. The bond was seen. The path ahead was terrifying and fraught, but they were on it. Together. And for the first time, with a fragile, hard-won blessing resting on the night air behind them.

The fire had burned down to a deep bed of glowing coals, painting their faces in warm, shifting light. They were curled together on the wide outdoor lounger, a blanket thrown over their legs, in a comfortable silence broken only by the crackle of embers and the distant lap of water.

The loon’s cry sliced through the night -it was a long, trembling wail that echoed across the lake, rising and falling like a ghostly siren. Ilya jerked upright so violently he nearly upended them both. “Blyad! What the fuck was that?”

Shane, who had been drifting into a doze against his shoulder, blinked slowly. “A loon?”

“A *what*?” Ilya’s head swiveled, his eyes trying to pierce the blackness of the lake.

“A loon. It’s a bird.”

“Sounds like a fucking wolf,” Ilya muttered, his body still tense, one arm automatically curling tighter around Shane as if to shield him from the unseen menace.

“It’s a bird, trust me.” A slow, sleepy smile spread across Shane’s face. He tilted his head up to look at Ilya’s alert, suspicious profile. “You’re so scared!”

“I am not scared,” Ilya hissed, his pride wounded. “I am assessing an unknown threat. What kind of a bird makes a noise like that? It is unnatural.”

“A loon!” Shane’s smile turned into a grin. Another cry sounded out in the distance. “See? Not a wolf. A bird.”

The loon called again, its cry even closer, a series of manic, yodeling notes.

Ilya flinched. “Is a fucking wolf-bird. Stupid Canadian wolf bird. Does it have teeth? It sounds like it has teeth.”

Shane couldn’t help it. He laughed, a soft, warm sound that vibrated against Ilya’s side. “It has a beak. For fish.” Shane raised his hands off of Ilya and cupped them around his mouth, a bird cry mimicking the loons came out.

“Oh, so now you speak bird, too?” Ilya grumbled, finally settling back down but keeping a wary eye on the lake. “Of course. Fluent in hockey, French, and now... stupid flying wolf.”

“Yes, I’m amazing,” Shane confirmed, nuzzling back into his spot. He could feel the steady, strong beat of Ilya’s heart, still slightly elevated from the surprise.

Ilya let out a long-suffering sigh, the tension finally leaving his shoulders. He dropped a dramatic kiss onto Shane’s hair. “I hate you.”

Shane’s hand found Ilya’s under the blanket, lacing their fingers together. He brought their joined hands up and pressed a kiss to Ilya’s knuckles, right over a faded scar. “No,” he said, his voice full of quiet certainty. “You don’t.”

Ilya had no retort for that. He just hummed, a low, contented sound, and rested his cheek on top of Shane’s head, his gaze softening as he stared out at the dark, wolf-bird-infested water. Ilya didn’t answer. He just turned his face into the curve of Shane’s neck, his nose brushing the bonding bite. A long, slow breath left him, the last of the tension dissolving. They sat like that as the fire crumbled into a bed of pulsating coals, painting them in a faint, rosy light.

Shane held him, savoring the solid weight, the steady breath against his skin. He realized, with a quiet thrill, that he loved every version of this man- the brilliant rival, the terrifying protector, the broken penitent, the devoted mate, and now, the one who jumped at bird calls and grumbled in Russian about anything that made him learn about something new. It was all Ilya. And it was all his.

The fire had grown low, casting long, dancing shadows. The easy laughter from their earlier teasing had settled into a comfortable quiet, but a new tension hummed beneath it, born of the serious turn their conversation had taken. The loon, their “wolf-bird,” was silent now, leaving only the crackle of the flames.

Ilya stared into the embers, his jaw working slightly. “Your friends,” he began, his voice measured. “Pike and JJ. They should know. That we are together.” He glanced at Shane, his blue eyes intent. “It would be easier. No more hiding in pieces.”

Shane felt a familiar knot of anxiety tighten in his stomach. The thought of widening the circle, of making this real to the people who had held him together after everything... it was terrifying. “I know,” he said quietly, tracing the seam of the blanket over their legs. “And they will. I just... I need a little more time. To get used to it myself first.”

“The two people I care about,” Ilya continued, as if Shane hadn’t spoken, “Marly and Svetlana. They both know everything. About you. About what I did. Is only fair.”

The words were logical, but they felt like a pressure. Fairness. Ilya was trying to find balance. Shane understood it, this was Ilya’s way of trying to build something transparent, to atone for the secrets and surveillance of the past. But understanding didn’t make the fear any less acute.

“Ilya, please. Just a little time,” Shane repeated, his voice barely above a whisper.

Ilya fell silent. He didn’t argue, but the quiet that descended wasn’t the peaceful one from before. It was heavy, charged with his restrained displeasure. He gave a single, short nod, his gaze fixed back on the fire, his posture rigid.

Shane watched him for a moment, seeing the way the light carved the unhappy line of his mouth. Although the obsessive, all-consuming alpha was gone, but in his place was a man trying desperately to do things right and chafing against any delay. Shane nudged him gently. “Hey. Add some logs?”

Ilya did, moving with efficient, economical motions. When the fire was rebuilt, its warmth blooming anew, Shane caught his wrist. “Come here.”

Ilya allowed himself to be guided, lying back down on the lounge and resting his head heavily in Shane’s lap. The moment he did, a sigh seemed to deflate him, as if the simple act of being directed, of being physically connected, released the tension he’d been holding. Shane’s fingers immediately carded through his sun-lightened hair, finding the familiar rhythm that soothed them both.

“Tell me about your brother,” Shane murmured, his touch a silent invitation.

Ilya’s eyes were closed. “He hates me. Always did. I was the better hockey player. The one our mother focused on. After the old man died... there was nothing left to say. I have not heard from him.” He stated it as a fact, without self-pity, but the bond carried a dull, old ache.

“And your mother?” Shane asked, even softer.

Ilya was silent for so long Shane thought he might not answer. Then, his voice, when it came, was different. Rougher, older. “I found her. She had been... gone for a while. The depression... it ate everything. The light, her songs, her.” He swallowed. “But before... before the darkness, she was the most beautiful woman. She was so beautiful, and funny. Always had little stories to make me laugh. She would sing. Old Russian songs. Her voice was like... like something warm you could hold onto. She would hold me and sing, taught me to dance, and for a little while, nothing in the house could touch us.”

A single, hot tear escaped from beneath Ilya’s closed eyelid, tracing a path down his temple and into Shane’s sweatpants. Shane didn’t wipe it away. He just kept stroking his hair, his heart cracking open at the image: a small, curly haired boy clinging to a fleeting island of melody and love in a sea of brutality.

“She would have thought you were too good for me,” Ilya whispered, echoing his words from the night before, but now they were wet with grief. “She would have been right.”

“She would have seen how you love me,” Shane corrected, his own throat tight. He bent, pressing his lips to Ilya’s forehead, lingering there. “She would have heard it in your voice when you talk to me. She’d know.”

Ilya turned his face into Shane’s stomach, “She would have loved you, like I love you. She would have seen that we were meant to be. But she would stopped me from making so many stupid mistakes.” A silent, shuddering breath escaping him. The bond between them hummed, not with passion, but with a profound, shared sorrow and a protective tenderness so fierce it felt like a new kind of vow.

They stayed like that as the new logs caught and blazed, the fire pushing back the cool night. Here, by the fire, with Shane’s hands in his hair and the bond a golden tether in his chest, Ilya wasn’t just surviving them. For the first time, he was allowing someone else to help him carry the weight. It was the most terrifying and necessary surrender of his life.

They stayed locked together as the fire burned down again, the warmth at their front a small defiance against the cool night and the colder places inside. The healing of their relationship and themselves, Shane understood, wouldn’t always look like passion or even peace. Sometimes, it would look exactly like this: holding on tightly in the quiet dark, simply because the alternative- letting go into that numb, wantless space, was no longer acceptable to either of them.

The morning dawned clear and cool, the kind of perfect Ontario day that felt like a reward. Shane moved with a careful deliberateness, each step a conscious negotiation with his still-protesting muscles. Ilya watched him dress, a process involving much quiet sighing and the rejection of anything with a restrictive waistband, then watched with a smile as his mate neatly folded anything he had discarded.

“A short hike>” Ilya proposed, leaning against the doorframe. “Slow, no hills.”

Shane nodded, relief in his eyes. Sex was still quietly, mutually off the table, a necessary pause for Shane’s body to recover. The trail was dappled with sunlight, fragrant with damp

earth and pine. Ilya set a punishingly slow pace, his own long strides shortened to match Shane's ginger progress. He didn't offer a hand, knowing Shane's pride and his occasional need for uncomplicated physical autonomy, but he positioned himself always on the slightly rougher side of the path, like a silent buffer.

It was peaceful. Shane pointed out a type of moss, his voice slipping into the detailed, factual tone Ilya adored. Ilya listened, asking a simple question here and there, knowing that Shane loved his facts, loved feeling useful and in control of situations. This was the Shane he'd first been drawn to across the ice- not the omega, but the fascinating, focused mind inside.

When they returned, flushed and pleasantly tired, the cottage welcomed them with its familiar quiet. The question of what to do next hovered, but the answer was easy and they just wanted to relax.

Controllers were retrieved. The screen flickered to life with the garish colors of a racing game. Almost immediately, the chirping started.

"You take turns like babushka in her Lada," Ilya said, his car effortlessly sliding around a corner.

"At least I stay on the road," Shane shot back, his tongue caught in concentration. "Your driving is like you do everything else- Recklessly and like you're hoping you don't crash out."

A laugh, genuine and surprised, burst from Ilya. It was *adorable*. Shane's chirps had never been the witty, scalding barbs of the locker room. They were blunt, oddly specific, and delivered with such earnest conviction that they were infinitely more disarming. The proud little smirk Shane got afterward, like he'd just delivered the ultimate zinger, sent a warm, dangerous curl of affection through Ilya's chest.

The urge to pounce was a physical pull. To haul Shane into his lap, to bite playfully at that smirking mouth, to kiss him until the smugness melted into a sigh. It was the alpha impulse, the possessive reflex that had once ruled him.

But he didn't. He swallowed it down, let it settle. He took his medication with a sip of water when Shane was distracted by the game. The restraint wasn't a cage anymore; it was the foundation of this new space they were building. He could love the smirk without needing to devour it. He could love the focused frown between Shane's brows without needing to control the thoughts behind it.

"You are a menace," Ilya said, his voice fond, and executed a perfect, illegal pit maneuver that sent Shane's car spinning into the digital grass.

"Cheater!" Shane cried, shoving at his shoulder, but he was laughing.

They played until the light shifted to afternoon gold, trading wins and inept insults. The bond hummed between them, not with the frantic energy of need, but with the steady, warm frequency of companionship. It was a simple joy, uncomplicated by obsession or trauma. For a few hours, they were just two athletes, rivals turned something else, teasing each other in the quiet of a lakeside cottage.

As Shane groaned in defeat after a final race, flopping back against the cushions, Ilya looked at him, the messy hair, the faded bruises, the contented exhaustion on his face, and felt a peace so profound it momentarily stole his breath. This was the healing. Not in the dramatic confessions or the fiery passion, but in this: the choice to sit beside, to play, to laugh, and to simply let the other person *be*. It was a quieter victory than any they'd ever won on the ice, but it felt, finally, like a lasting one.

Chapter End Notes

💙 ...Well. 💛

We've officially crossed one of the biggest milestones I've had planned since outlining this story.

Thank you all for sticking with me through Ilya's obsession, Shane's walls, the ugly parts, the healing, and every tiny step that got them here. None of this chapter would have worked without everything that came before it.

Hopefully that came across the way it lived in my head. 😭

As always, I'd love to hear your favorite line, favorite scene, or the moment that made you yell at your screen. (I know at least one of you is going to be screaming about THAT conversation and another about THAT promise. 😂)

Thank you again to my wonderful beta reader, my honorary writing committee of two gays, and everyone who's been leaving comments every chapter. Seriously, your comments make my entire week and keep me motivated to keep writing.

See you in Chapter 33. Things are changing now... not because they love each other, but because they finally know how to. ❤️

Chapter 33: Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

First, thank you as always to my incredible beta reader for catching the things my sleep-deprived brain completely skims over. You continue to save me from myself.

Also, a huge thank you to my favorite gay besties, who somehow manage to encourage both my emotional damage and my questionable writing decisions with equal enthusiasm.

I hope you all enjoy Chapter 33! This one slows things down a little to let everyone catch their breath... though if you've been reading this story for a while, you already know that peace rarely lasts for long.

As always, thank you for reading, commenting, and coming along on this ridiculous ride with me 

PS- Hi discord people!! Y'all are so cute and funny and kickass. 

Chapter Notes

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

The first thing Shane became aware of was not light, nor sound, but a profound, enveloping warmth that seemed to radiate from his very core. Then, the scent. It didn't just fill the air; it was the air. It wove into the fabric of his consciousness as he swam up from sleep, a rich, complex tapestry being deliberately drawn over him.

Ilya was awake. His large, warm body was curled around Shane's back, a solid fortress against the quiet cottage morning. His face was buried in the juncture of Shane's neck and shoulder, and nuzzled his face against the skin there, pressing his scent to mix with his mates. It was not the frantic, possessive marking of his rut, nor the desperate reassurance of the heat's peak. This was different. This was deliberate, meditative communion.

Shane lay still, drifting in the semi-lucent space between sleep and waking, and let himself be known. He felt the slow, hot exhale from Ilya's nose against his sensitive skin, a gentle puff that raised goosebumps. Then the inhale- deep, deliberate, a conscious drawing-in of Shane's essence. Ilya's nose traced a slow, unhurried path along the line of his tendon, up to the shell of his ear, then back down, nuzzling into the place where his scent was strongest and purest. Each breath Ilya took made Shane relax even further, removing all the intrusive thoughts he should've been having.

The scent he was absorbing, *their* scent, mixing together and becoming a layered thing. On the surface, the clean, sun-dried cotton of the sheets and Shane's own sleep-warm skin, like his usual honeysuckle and lake air. Beneath that, the deeper, more permanent signature of omega, a sweet, grounding note that was uniquely Shane's. And woven through it all, inseparable now, was Ilya himself- the dark, spicy signature of alpha, the faint, clean tang of his sweat, and something else, something fundamentally *Ilya* that reminded Shane of a storm on a distant horizon and the quiet safety of a locked room.

With every measured breath against his neck, Ilya was reading him. Checking his emotions through the bond. Tasting the lingering echoes of the previous day's tension with his parents, feeling the solid peace of the bond, confirming the absence of pain or fever. It was an act of silent stewardship, as intimate as a kiss and far more vulnerable. He was drinking Shane in, not to possess, but to *know*. To anchor himself in the reality of their shared peace.

A soft, involuntary sigh of pure contentment escaped Shane's lips. At the sound, Ilya's rhythmic nuzzling stilled. His arm, slung heavy and secure across Shane's waist, tightened almost imperceptibly.

"Solnyshko?" Ilya's voice was a sleep-roughened murmur, vibrating directly into Shane's spine. The word was breathed into his skin, part of the scenting itself.

"Mmm." Shane's hand came up, his fingers finding their home in the thick, dark silk of Ilya's hair. He pressed back slightly, arching his neck to offer more, a silent *I am here. I am yours to know*. "I'm here."

In response, Ilya rolled him with infinite care, as if handling something precious and newly forged. The world tilted gently, and Shane found himself on his back, caged by Ilya's arms, bathed in the soft, blue-grey light of dawn and the intensity of his alpha's gaze. Ilya braced himself on his forearms, his eyes searching Shane's face, not for permission, which had already been given in the offering of his scent, but for connection. His gaze traced the fading shadows under Shane's eyes, the relaxed line of his mouth, the utter lack of guard in his expression.

No words were needed. The silent conversation of scent and touch had asked and answered the only question that mattered. Shane lifted his head, bridging the small space between them

to capture Ilya's lips in a kiss that tasted of sleep and safe, familiar warmth. It was a kiss of homecoming, not hunger.

Ilya made love to him then with a patience that felt sacred, a physical continuation of the morning's quiet ritual. Every touch was a question, every shift a request for confirmation. His hands, so capable of brutal force and exquisite control, were instruments of reverence. He mapped Shane's body with a tactile devotion that avoided the tenderest bruises and worshipped the rest, the dip of his waist, the firm plane of his stomach, the strong line of his thigh. When he finally entered him, it was with a slow, inexorable care that made Shane's breath catch in a soft, broken gasp. It was not an invasion, but a homecoming, a perfect, full alignment that resonated through the golden thread of their bond.

"Okay?" Ilya breathed the word against his lips, pausing, buried deep, his entire body trembling with the force of his own restraint. His eyes, dark and unwavering, held Shane's, reading every micro-expression.

Shane, overcome by the tenderness, could only nod, his vision blurring. He wrapped his legs around Ilya's hips, not to pull him closer for more, but to hold him there, in that perfect, suspended moment of connection. "Okay," he whispered back, the word a vow.

Ilya began to move, setting a rhythm that was less about friction and more about profound, wordless conversation. Each slow, rolling thrust was a reaffirmation, a gentle pulse along the bond that spoke of protection, belonging, and a love that had been stripped of all its old, jagged edges. His focus remained entirely on Shane's face, watching for any flicker of discomfort, his own pleasure seemingly a secondary, distant concern.

"Tell me," Ilya murmured, his voice strained with the effort of his gentleness. "This is good? You are sure?"

"This," Shane gasped, his hands coming up to frame the beloved, serious face above him. He brushed his thumb over the faint stubble on Ilya's cheek. "Just this. You. Just like this."

It was the antithesis of the heat's consuming frenzy. This was conscious, mutual choosing. This was Ilya, the man whose love had once been a wildfire, now a sustained, warming hearth. It was the most profound proof of his transformation Shane could ever have imagined.

Their climax, when it came, was not a shattering, but a melting. It built slowly, a warm, golden tide that swelled through Shane, pulling a soft, shuddering sigh from his chest, a release that felt like the final surrender of a fear he'd forgotten he carried. Ilya followed him over the edge moments later, his own release a quiet, surrendering groan muffled against Shane's shoulder, his big body trembling not with unleashed power, but with the exquisite effort of his sustained tenderness.

He collapsed with careful grace, rolling them to their sides, staying joined. For a long time, they simply breathed, foreheads pressed together, the bond between them a quiet, humming glow of satiated peace, deeper and calmer than it had ever been.

Finally, Ilya pressed a kiss to the damp skin beneath Shane's eye, tasting the salt of his quiet tears. "Good?" he asked, the single word encompassing a universe of concern, hope, and fragile joy.

Shane laughed, a wet, hiccupping sound of pure, unadulterated happiness. He kissed Ilya, slow and sweet and deep. "Better than good." He traced the strong, beloved line of Ilya's brow, his touch sure. "You're... you're everything."

A faint, real smile, one that reached his eyes and softened his entire face, touched Ilya's lips. He nuzzled back into the sanctuary of Shane's neck, his arm a heavy, comforting weight across his waist. "Sleep a little more," he murmured, his voice already thick with returning drowsiness, his scent now perfectly, peacefully mingled with Shane's own. "I am not going anywhere."

And Shane knew, with a certainty that lived in his bones and sang along the bond, that it was true. He drifted off not to silence, but to the sound of Ilya's steady heartbeat against his own, and the deep, calming fragrance of their shared peace, woven into the very air they breathed.

The morning after his parents' visit, the cottage held a new kind of quiet. It was no longer the insulated silence of a secret hideaway, but the deeper, more resonant quiet of a space that had been witnessed and, however tentatively, accepted. Sunlight streamed through the windows, illuminating dust motes dancing in the warm air, still faintly perfumed with the echoes of cedar, coffee, and *them*.

They found themselves on the dock, two mugs of coffee steaming between them. The lake was a sheet of polished glass, reflecting the flawless blue of the sky and the deep green of the encircling pines. No loons called. The world was hushed.

Ilya sat with his legs stretched out, his bare feet against the sun-warmed wood. Shane was curled beside him, not quite in his lap but leaning into the solid line of his body, his shoulder a constant point of contact against Ilya's bicep. They didn't speak. They didn't need to. The bond was a live, humming wire between their sternums, conducting a low-voltage current of shared calm. It allowed for a wordless synchronicity that still felt miraculous. Ilya would shift, and Shane would adjust his weight without thought. Shane's finger would trace a knot in the wood, and Ilya's hand would cover it, their fingers lacing together automatically, a completed circuit.

It was in this profound, peaceful syncopation that Shane found the courage. The fear was still there, a cold, familiar knot under his ribs, but it was no longer alone. It was surrounded by the warmth of Ilya beside him, by the solidity of the bond, by the memory of his mother's final, searching hug that had felt more like a blessing than a blockade.

"I want to tell them," Shane said. His voice was quiet, but it didn't tremble. It was a statement of fact, dropped into the center of the silent lake.

Ilya didn't stiffen. He'd felt the shift in Shane's emotions through the bond, the resolve crystallizing out of the anxiety. He brought their joined hands to his lips, pressing a kiss to Shane's knuckles. "You do not have to. Not yet. There is no timeline on this but ours."

"I know," Shane said. He took a slow breath, organizing his thoughts like he was preparing for a game film session. "I'm not... ashamed. I could never be ashamed of you. Of this. I've always hidden this part of myself. They know I'm an omega now. They should know that I have someone in my life. Plus it might have JJ stop trying to find alphas for me." He said with a smile and squeezed Ilya's hand. "I'm nervous because they've only ever known you one way. As my rival. As the guy who..." He trailed off, the words *hired investigators, placed trackers, broke my trust* hanging unspoken but deeply felt between them. Only Scott and Rose knew most of what happened. "They protected me when I needed it. If they reject you now, I'll be... split. Between the people who held me together and the person who *is* my peace. I hate the idea of choosing."

Ilya listened, his gaze on the distant horizon. This was the consequence of his actions, a ghost he would always have to face. He had isolated Shane, and now Shane was risking his other connections to include him. The weight of it was a solemn pressure on his heart. “Whatever you want. Now or until you are sure. Their loyalty is to you. Is a good thing. I will earn my place with them, or I will not. But I will not be the reason you feel torn.”

Shane turned then, shifting so he could look Ilya directly in the eyes. The morning sun lit the flecks of gold in his brown irises and highlighted the faint, fading bruise on his jaw. His expression was utterly earnest, the structured, analytical mind fully committed to its conclusion. “Ilya,” he said, his voice firm. “I want to.”

Three words. Simple. Revolutionary.

For Shane Hollander, who had spent a lifetime compartmentalizing his omega self from his hockey self, his private pain from his public persona, his heart from his head, this was the final wall coming down. This was the conscious, deliberate choice to merge every fractured piece of his world into one, complex, integrated whole. It was terrifying. And it was freedom.

Ilya saw it all in his face. The fear, yes, but beneath it, a determination so fierce it stole his breath. He didn’t smile. The moment felt too sacred for that. He simply nodded, a slow, deep acknowledgment. “Okay,” he said. “Then we tell them.”

Shane pulled out his phone. His thumb hovered over the screen for a second, his over-analytical mind running a final run through of how he could deliver his decision. Then he began to type in the group chat, his movements sure.

SHANE– Hey everyone. I’m up at the cottage. Would you be able to come by this weekend? Around 2? I have something important I need to talk to you all about.

HAYD- We’ll be there. Mind if we bring Emma?

JJ- Yeah, of course. Make sure we have real food-not that rabbit food you like.

Scott- Noah will be excited to see Uncle Rookie. Guess we’re taking a road trip.

Rose- Some time in that fancy house and time with you? Perfect.

Back on the dock, Shane set his phone face down on the wood. The deed was done. A tremor ran through him, a final release of the old, guarded energy.

Ilya felt it. He set his own coffee aside and opened his arm. Shane went into the embrace without hesitation, turning and tucking himself against Ilya's chest, his ear over the steady, strong heartbeat. Ilya wrapped both arms around him, holding him tightly, his chin resting on top of Shane's head. He didn't offer empty platitudes. He didn't promise it would be easy. He simply held the space around Shane's courage, making it safe, making it real.

They sat like that as the sun climbed higher, the lake slowly coming to life with tiny ripples. The peace was no longer just the absence of conflict. It was the calm in the eye of a deliberate, chosen storm. The compartments of Shane's life were now open, and very soon, everyone he loved would walk through the door. The thought was terrifying. But here, anchored to the man he loved, feeling the golden certainty of the bond between them, it also felt, for the very first time, like coming home.

The group chat exploded within seconds of Shane's message.

JJ- Are you retiring? Taking a vow of celibacy? Dude, we just won the Cup.

HAYD- Is it an injury? Tell me it's not another concussion.

Rose- OMG are you eloping?? Did you meet someone at the cottage?? I'll be the best maid!

Scott- We'll be there. Whatever it is.

JJ- Maybe he's joining a monastery. Finally some peace and quiet.

HAYD- Not funny, JJ.

KIP- Hayden, breathe. He said talk, not crisis.

JJ- Are you pregnant?

HAYD- JJ, FOR THE LOVE OF GOD.

Rose- I'm bringing lemon squares.

JJ- What? It's a valid question! I've never seen an omega not pregnant during the summer.

Scott- We're bringing the baby. Will scare off Rook for a few years so we can lure him to New York..

Shane showed Ilya the scrolling messages, a faint smile on his lips. "They're worried. And JJ's being JJ."

Ilya read the 'pregnant' text, his expression unreadable. The smile faded from Shane's face as he felt the shift through the bond. The calm, steady presence from the dock was gone, replaced by a low, vibrating hum of anxiety. It wasn't the sharp, aggressive tension that he felt before they went to see his parents though. This was different. Softer. More brittle.

As evening fell, Ilya began to... pace. Not his usual predatory stalk, but a restless, circuitous wandering from the living room to the kitchen and back. He opened the refrigerator and stared blankly inside for a full minute.

"What went on between you and Rose Landry?" he asked abruptly, not turning around.

"What?"

"You and Rose Landry- I saw pictures." He closed the fridge and faced Shane, his brow furrowed with genuine consternation.

"Nothing. I mean we're just very good friends. She's one of my best friends."

"That wasn't what it looked like. You were with her while she was naked." Ilya ran a hand through his hair. "What the fuck was that?"

"Ilya, those were taken out of context. It was raining and all our clothes were soaked. She took off her clothes just to change," Shane said, though the thought sent a chill through him. "But they love me. She loves me. Please be civil."

“Civil,” Ilya repeated, the word tasting sour. “I do not want civil. I want... I do not know what I want.” He slumped onto the sofa, looking so uncharacteristically lost that Shane’s heart squeezed. This was the man who had confessed to murder without his voice breaking, who had faced down the league and his own demons. Yet the prospect of a few of his friends and their partners in their space had him unraveling.

“I do not like her near you. She’s an Alpha. A relationship with her would be easier for you.”

Shane crossed the room and sat beside him, taking his hand. He linked their fingers, sending a pulse of calm through the bond. “How do you know? She’s like me, her agent publicly has that shut down. Everyone thinks she’s an omega.” Shane said softly.

Ilya brought their joined hands to his forehead, closing his eyes. “Do you think I let anyone around you without being carefully looked into? Her people are almost as good as yours.” he whispered.

“No more investigating my friends,” Shane said, leaning into him. “But you’re learning. And it’s... it’s really endearing to see you flustered.”

Ilya peeked one eye open. “Do not ever tell Svetlana. She would never let me live it down.”

A few days later, they were getting ready for their guests. Ilya was tense the whole day before, repeatedly scenting Shane, leaving hickeys in very visible places and not the least bit sorry when Shane scolded him. Shane grumbled as the cleaners had to come earlier to air out the cottage- the whole place was drenched in their scent and the smell of sex. He knew that Ilya was feeling a little territorial over having people near him, but that wouldn’t be plausible in the long run.

Ilya watched from the doorway with a frown. Shane would wear a scent patch while people were around. Ilya would too, but he didn’t like the thought that Shane would hide his

delectable scent from him. They still needed to talk soon. They'd been in the cottage for almost a month. Their little bubble had been perfect- better than Ilya could have ever imagined but they would need to figure out a strategy going forward.

That afternoon, cars began crunching up the gravel driveway just after two. The cottage, usually a haven of peace and quiet, was soon filled with the warm chaos of arriving friends. Hayden and Jackie arrived first with a baby strapped to Hayden's back, Hayden's gaze sweeping the property like a security detail. JJ pulled in right behind, already laughing about something. Scott's SUV, with its baby seat visible in the back, arrived next, followed by Rose's little convertible.

Shane passes his eyes over the open entertaining area, making sure their clothes that Ilya had ripped off their bodies just a couple hours ago were put away, Ilya gave him one last kiss before going up to the loft to wait until Shane called him down.

Ilya observed everything from the small loft overlooking the entrance. The fact that 3 other alphas were around his mate, even though two were bonded to other people made his skin crawl. He wanted to drag Shane away, to lock them in a place that no one could ever see him again and they could just be alone. But that wasn't possible. Shane wouldn't thrive off that- even though he didn't like to be around too many people, these were his friends and he needed them.

The initial greetings were a flurry of hugs and backslaps for Shane, questions about the drive, admiration for the lake. But as they settled around the living room, the sharp-eyed observations began.

Hayden noticed first. His eyes caught on the two mismatched coffee mugs sitting side-by-side on the deck railing, still faintly steaming. One was Shane's familiar, chipped "World's Okayest Centre" mug they he'd gotten as a joke from Carter Vaughn. The other was plain black, large, the kind for guests. JJ, ever tactile, kicked off his shoes and padded to the kitchen to grab a drink. He paused in the fridge, "Since when do you buy normal soda and food?" he called out, holding up a can of Coke.

Rose, helping Shane bring out a tray of lemon squares to the coffee table, peeked into the bedroom as she passed the open door. A large, black duffel bag was visible on the floor, and draped over a chair was a soft-looking, sleeveless t-shirt that was decidedly not Shane's style or size. She paused. She knew Shane's clothes. Over time, she had practically picked

everything he had in his closet except for a few things his mom brought him or from endorsement freebies.

Scott and Kip exchanged a quiet look. Kip, holding their sleeping son, nodded subtly toward the far corner of the deck where two hockey sticks were propped. One was Shane's, with its familiar tape job. The other was a different model, the blade taped in a distinct, slightly more haphazard pattern.

The clues were mounting, painting a picture the group chat's wildest theories hadn't quite captured. The atmosphere shifted from relaxed curiosity to a charged, waiting silence. All eyes eventually landed on Shane, who stood by the sofa, uncharacteristically still, watching them piece it together.

Hayden's protective instincts, always close to the surface, locked into place. He stood up, his voice carefully neutral. "Shane. You said you had something to tell us."

Shane took a deep breath. He could feel Ilya's anxiety spiking from where he waited, out of sight just inside the sliding door. He sent a wave of reassurance back: *steady, I'm here*, and met Hayden's gaze.

"I do," Shane said, his voice clear. "And I'd like you to hear it from both of us." He turned toward the staircase. "Ilya?"

The heavy footsteps had the Alphas in the room tense. Ilya Rozanov stepped into the room.

For a moment, there was absolute, stunned silence. JJ's drink hung frozen halfway to his mouth. Rose's eyes went comically wide. Hayden's entire body went rigid, his hand unconsciously finding Jackie's shoulder.

Ilya looked, for the first time anyone had ever seen, uncertain. He stood beside Shane, his posture straight but not aggressive, his hands loose at his sides. He gave a single, slight nod to the group. "Hello."

It was Scott who broke the silence, his calm, captain's voice cutting through the shock. "Well," he said, shifting his sleeping son in his arms. "This is the 'something important.'" He looked from Shane's resolved face to Ilya's guarded one, and a small, understanding sigh escaped him. "Okay. We're listening."

The silence that followed Ilya's appearance was absolute, a vacuum that sucked all the sound from the deck. It was the kind of silence that exists between the flash of lightning and the crash of thunder, heavy with impending shock.

Everyone froze.

Hayden's hand, which had been resting on Jackie's shoulder, tightened into a fist. JJ's trademark smirk vanished, replaced by blank astonishment. Kip's eyes widened, his arms instinctively tightening around his sleeping baby. Rose's lemon square hovered halfway to her open mouth. The last person any of them expected to see standing in the doorway of Shane's sanctuary was Ilya Rozanov.

Rose was the first to recover. She set her dessert down. Her eyes, usually bright with laughter, were sharp and assessing as they darted from Ilya's carefully neutral expression to Shane's tense but resolute one. The word she breathed out was barely audible, but it shattered the silence like glass.

"...You've got to be joking."

It broke the spell of stillness, but not the tension. All eyes swiveled to Shane. He looked pale but steady, his shoulders squared against the wave of their collective disbelief. He opened his mouth, closed it, then tried again. This wasn't a line breakdown with his team or a press conference. There was no script. He reached out and Ilya threaded their fingers together.

"I, uh... I know." He swallowed, his gaze dropping to the deck boards for a second before forcing itself back up, making contact with each of them in turn. "I know what you're thinking. I know... what he did, about what the press says about us. The... everything. I know why you'd hate him. I hated him too, sometimes."

His words were stumbling, halting, stripped of all his usual analytical polish. This was raw nerve. “After... after everything, I told him to stay away. And he did. For months. He got help. Real help.” Shane’s voice gained a little strength, fueled by conviction. “And I... I missed him. Not just the... the bad stuff. I missed *him*. The person he is when he’s not... lost. The friend I had before it all went wrong.”

He took a shaky breath, his hand clenching at his side. The confession was costing him, laying his most vulnerable judgment bare before the people whose opinions mattered most. “I understand if you’re worried. Or angry. At him. At me. But this... it’s my choice. It’s real.” He finally looked directly at Ilya, who hadn’t moved from his spot, his own face a mask of strained control. Shane’s voice softened, final and sure. “I love him.”

The words hung in the air, simple and devastating.

Then, movement. A blur of furious pink.

“You bastard!”

Rose launched herself off her chair with a speed that belied her petite frame. She didn’t go for Shane; she went for Ilya, her hands curled into fists. “You scared him! You broke him! You don’t get to just show up here!” Her first swing was wild, her fist connecting with a solid thump against Ilya’s jaw. He didn’t raise his hands to defend himself. He just stood there and took it, his eyes on Shane, accepting the blow as his due.

“Rose, stop!” Shane moved, but Scott moved too, wrapping his arms around Rose’s waist from behind and hauling her back as she kicked out, her sneaker connecting with Ilya’s shin.

“Let me go! He doesn’t get to be here! He doesn’t get to love him after what he did!”

“Rose, enough!” Scott’s voice, the captain’s voice, cut through her fury. She went still in his grip, chest heaving, tears of rage in her eyes.

In the strained quiet that followed, all attention turned to Ilya. He straightened his shirt where she'd struck him, his movements slow. He looked at the circle of hostile, wary faces, and when he spoke, his voice was low, stripped of all its usual characteristic charm or arrogance.

"She is right," he said, his accent more pronounced. "I know I gave you every reason not to trust me. Every reason to want me gone." His gaze found Hayden, who was watching him with the cold, analytical focus of a defenseman studying a threat. "I hurt him. In ways I am still learning to understand. There are no excuses. I can only promise that I will spend the rest of my life making sure I never do that again. My life is his. However he wants it."

It wasn't a grand romantic vow. It was a bleak, factual statement of atonement. The sincerity in it was so stark it was uncomfortable.

Hayden broke his silence, his voice carefully controlled. "How do we know this isn't just another game to you? Another way to get what you want or to trick him?"

"You don't," Ilya admitted, meeting his gaze head-on. "You will have to trust Shane's word on that."

JJ, who had been uncharacteristically quiet, finally spoke, his tone skeptical. "So what, you're just... different now? Therapy fixed the crazy?"

A faint, pained shadow crossed Ilya's face. "No. It is not fixed. It is... managed. Every day. The wanting to control, to possess... it is a noise. I am learning to hear it, and not act on it. For him."

Scott, still holding a now-subdued but glowering Rose, shook his head slowly, a bewildered laugh escaping him. "I just... all these years. The fights, the penalties, the media crap... you two were secretly in love with each other?"

"It was not so secret at the end," Kip said softly from his seat beside Scott. All eyes turned to him. He was gently rocking their baby carrier with his foot, his expression serene. "I suspected. For a long time. The way you watched each other... even when you were fighting. It was... everything. Too much of everything."

A stunned silence met his words. Kip, the quiet omega, the one who saw the world in shades of connection and scent, had perceived the truth they'd all missed.

As if on cue, a thin, fussy wail erupted from the carrier. Baby Noah was awake and unimpressed with the tense adult drama. It seemed like Scott had a good grip on Rose, so Shane relaxed.

He looked over at Kip to get his okay and moved closer to the carrier. It was instinctual, he crossed to the carrier, his movements becoming fluid and sure. He unbuckled the straps with practiced ease, gathered the squirming, red-faced infant into his arms, and settled him against his shoulder. He began a slow, rhythmic bounce, his hand a gentle pressure on her back. "Shhh, it's okay," he murmured, his voice dropping into a soft, melodic register none of them had ever heard. "Too loud, huh? All these big, noisy alphas."

The transformation was instantaneous. Noah's cries hiccupped, then quieted into snuffles. She turned her head, nuzzling into Shane's neck, soothed by the calm, omega steadiness of him.

Ilya watched. He didn't just look; he beheld. Of course he thought Shane was hot, the most beautiful man he'd ever see. But now, he was transcendent. Every trace of tension, every defensive line in his body, melted away. His expressive dark eyes, so often sharp with calculation or dark with intensity, went soft with a kind of reverent awe. He watched Shane, the fierce hockey star, the man he loved, effortlessly hold a baby, and something in his own face settled into a peace so profound it was heartbreaking.

Rose, still held by Scott, saw it. She felt the anger drain from her own body as she watched Ilya's expression. This wasn't the hungry, consuming gaze of obsession she'd heard about when Shane had an extra glass of wine while they had one of their gossip movie nights. Could it be real? After everything that she'd heard? This was a man seeing the future he wanted, not as a conquest, but as a gift he feared he might never be worthy to receive. The fight went out of her completely.

The invitation, once the initial shock had settled into a wary truce, was met with a mix of reluctance and loyalty. Shane's quiet, "You could all stay for the weekend. If you want," was

less a suggestion and more a plea, a chance for them to see the reality he was living in, not just the bombshell he'd dropped.

Rose, ever fiercely devoted, had a filming commitment she couldn't break, but she agreed to stay until Sunday morning, her narrowed eyes promising Ilya a continued, vigilant audit. The others, after a silent round of glances and subtle shrugs, nodded. For Shane.

Dinner was a collaborative, if awkward affair. Hayden and JJ took over the grill, a familiar task that required little conversation. Scott and Kip prepared a salad, their quiet domesticity a calming counterpoint. Jackie, with her easy smile and hands resting on the gentle curve of her stomach, orchestrated setting the table with Shane, deliberately placing Ilya not at the head, but in the middle of one side, surrounded. To everyone's surprise, Kip and Jackie had put Ilya on baby duty, and after a few seconds of confusion on how to hold both of them at the same time, he looked highly pleased with himself. When Shane looked over and saw Ilya with the babies, his heart skipped a few beats and he pulled out his phone quickly and took a few pictures.

When they sat, the weight of the unspoken was a physical presence. The lake breeze and the scent of grilling beef did little to dispel it. Ilya sat stiffly, his usual predatory grace replaced by a conscious stillness, as if moving too suddenly might shatter the fragile peace. Shane, beside him, picked at his napkin, his usual conflict-avoidance screaming internally at the tension radiating from his friends.

Rose's glare from across the table was a physical force, a silent promise of violence if a single line was crossed. Hayden and JJ ate in near-silence, their communication reduced to brief, loaded glances. The only sounds were the clink of cutlery and Scott's gentle questions to Kip about the baby's schedule.

It was Jackie who broke the stalemate. Under the table, she found Shane's hand and gave it a firm, reassuring squeeze. Then she turned her warm, intelligent gaze to Ilya.

"The cottage is beautiful, guys. Who was the builder? I might have to get a house built when we finish having babies." Her tone was deliberately light, conversational, but the question was a test. An invitation to participate in the normal, to see if he could.

Every eye at the table flicked to him. Ilya set his fork down carefully. “All I had a say was in the rink and gym. A courting gift for Shane.” he said, his voice low but clear. He didn’t elaborate, didn’t try to charm. He stated the fact, then added, “Shane did everything. He planned it all out beautifully.” Shane looked down to hide his smile when he saw Jackie and Kip practically swoon at his words.

“It is,” Kip agreed softly, bouncing a drowsy Noah on his knee. He offered Ilya a small, neutral smile. “We’ve always loved it being by the water. We told my family about the pregnancy. At this beach front rental.”

The mention of the healthy, public omega pregnancy was a deliberate anchor to a positive reality. Scott picked up the thread, his captain’s ease smoothing over the roughness. “Yeah, that whole weekend was wonderful. Glad we waited a while to have the peanut though.” He looked at Ilya accusingly.

Ilya met his gaze, eyes narrowing. “Glad to know it was only you and your mate involved in that decision.”

“What’s Boston’s off-season looking like?” Jackie pressed, steering toward safe, professional ground. “Hayden says the Eastern Conference is going to be a warzone next year.”

It was a lifeline. Ilya took it, discussing matchups and line changes with a clipped, analytical precision that was purely hockey, devoid of the personal venom that used to lace his every word about Montreal. He even conceded a point about Montreal’s improved defense. Hayden, listening while methodically cutting into his steak, didn’t agree, but he didn’t scoff either.

The conversation, stilted and careful, began to flow in a narrow channel. Scott and Jackie carried most of it, with Kip adding soft comments. Ilya responded when directly addressed, his answers concise and truthful. He didn’t try to dominate. He didn’t try to win.

Through it all, Rose watched, her fury simmering. When Ilya passed the salt to Shane without being asked, his fingers brushing Shane’s lightly, purposefully, a silent *I am here*, Rose’s knife clattered loudly on her plate.

“Sorry,” she muttered, not sounding sorry at all.

Later, as dusk fell and the group dispersed to clean up or get settled, Ilya went alone to the stacked firewood, and started the stack for the fire pit. Shane knew what he wanted. Ilya had declared smores the perfect food. His movements were precise, a physical outlet for the emotional strain.

He went inside to gather the supplies for dessert, wondering if it would be weird if he brought some fruit out for himself, but that would raise eyebrows. He was loading up the tray when Rose walked in.

The kitchen was a pocket of quiet, insulated from the low murmur of voices in the living room. Shane opened the cupboard, pulling out graham crackers, chocolate bars, and a bag of marshmallows. Rose leaned against the counter, her arms crossed, the casual pose belied by the intensity of her gaze.

“Okay, Hollander. Kitchen’s clear. Spill it.” Her voice was low, no-nonsense. “Level with me. Is this... is he making you do this? That bond- I’ve read stuff. Can he... is he making you feel things?”

Shane didn’t flinch. He set the supplies down with deliberate care, lining them up, the methodical action helping him order his thoughts. He met her worried, fiery eyes. “No, Rose. It’s not like that.” He took a breath, choosing his words with the precision she knew meant he was being utterly, painfully honest. “The bond... very real. And it’s more than the bond, it’s just us. It didn’t create feelings. It just... carries them, makes them louder. I love him, Rose. Please try to understand that and accept it, for me.”

“But he *bit* you, Shane! After everything! I can ask around and we can figure a way out of it for you.” she hissed, gesturing vaguely toward the living room.

“I asked him to,” Shane said, the simple truth disarming her anger for a moment. “Before the heat really started. I wanted to go into it knowing we were... sealed. Really together.” He looked down at his hands, then back up, his expression open in a way she rarely saw. “I love him, Rose. Not because of the bond. In spite of it, sometimes. Because I know who he was, and I see who he’s choosing to be now, every day. It’s a choice. For both of us.”

He reached out and took her hand, his grip firm. “You don’t have to trust him yet. I get it. I wouldn’t either. But could you... try to get to know the man he is now? For me? He’s my mate. He’s my family. I’d like my worlds to not be at war.”

Rose searched his face- the clear, steady eyes, the absence of the subtle fear-tension that used to live around him during the worst of it, the simple, unwavering certainty. This wasn’t the haunted, compartmentalized Shane she’d comforted after nightmares. This was a man, whole and decided. She let out a long, slow breath, her defensive posture softening a fraction. “I still think he’s a bastard,” she muttered, but the heat was gone from the words.

“Noted, I *know* he’s an asshole sometimes, but I love him still.” Shane said, a tiny smile touching his lips.

They carried the supplies out to the fire pit, where Ilya was kneeling, carefully building a teepee of kindling over crumpled newspaper. The others were bringing out chairs and blankets. Rose hung back, watching.

She saw the focused intensity on Ilya’s face, but it wasn’t the chaotic, possessive energy of before. This was concentration. He struck a match, cupped the flame, and nurtured the fire to life with a quiet patience that seemed utterly foreign to the man she knew from highlight reels and locker room glares.

As the flames caught, he sat back on his heels and looked up, seeking Shane. His eyes found him immediately, and as Shane approached with the bag of marshmallows, something in Ilya’s expression shifted completely. The severe lines of his face smoothed out. The ice-blue of his eyes warmed in the firelight. It was a look of such unguarded, profound affection that it made Rose’s breath catch. It wasn’t hungry. It wasn’t triumphant. It was... quiet. Reverent. He looked at Shane like he was watching his heart beat outside his body.

“Lapochka, its starting.” Shane automatically quickly went inside, drawing the groups attention. Hayden was about to go after him when he came back out with a camera. They watched as Ilya started to take pictures of the lake, the sun setting in the horizon and the fire pit.

“He started taking pictures early this week. They’re actually really nice.” Shane complemented softly to his friends. They gathered on the low stumps and logs, the babies a few feet away in their bassinets.

Shane, without even looking, held out a marshmallow skewer. Ilya took it, their fingers brushing, and Shane immediately began explaining his preferred toasting technique, his hands moving with precision in the air. Ilya listened, nodding seriously, as if Shane were detailing a complex life altering lesson.

The evening air around the fire pit was better, but still thick with the aftermath of the tension, but a new, deliberate effort had begun. It was led, unsurprisingly, by the omegas. Jackie, with her innate sense of social calibration, and Kip, with his quiet, perceptive calm, began weaving Ilya into the fabric of the gathering.

The message was unmistakable. The power dynamics they had all feared were not what they seemed. The control in this relationship was not Ilya’s to wield unilaterally. It was a shared, negotiated thing, and Shane- they would soon see- help Ilya on his own leash, with an unexpected firm hand.

As the fire crackled back to life and conversation cautiously resumed, the group’s perception of the man at the table began, slowly, to shift. He wasn’t just a threat or a rival. He was, bafflingly, a man who was desperately in love and, as it turned out, terrified of being denied his mate’s touch. It was a humanizing flaw of epic proportions. And for the first time that evening, it felt like they might actually be starting to meet the real Rozanov.

The initial shock had worn off, replaced by a grueling social experiment where everyone was hyper-aware of every word and gesture. Shane sat stiffly between Ilya and the rest of his life, feeling the strain like a physical weight. He could feel Ilya’s own tension through the bond, a low-grade hum of defensive alertness.

It was Jackie, with a baby now again on her hip and an unshakeable sense of social grace, who finally pierced the awkwardness. “Ilya, this cottage is stunning. Shane says you helped him get it settled in?” She passed him a bowl of more crackers, a simple, normal gesture.

Ilya accepted it, his movements deliberately measured. “Maybe. He set everything up already, it just needed to look lived in.” His voice was clipped but not rude.

Kip had moved closer nearby, nodded in understanding. “Old places have character, but they keep you busy. Scott still hasn’t fixed our back gate. I like the idea of making something totally brand new.” He offered a small, commiserating smile.

Scott chuckled. “It’s on the list. Unlike some people’s skating, which is stuck in 2015.”

The jab was light, almost friendly. An opening.

Ilya’s eyes flickered, the old rivalry sparking. “My skating is better than yours. Is your aging knees that cannot keep up, Hunter.”

Hayden, ever loyal, jumped in. “Says the guy who took a checked someone last season because he was too busy glaring at our bench and overcorrected his turn.”

A smirk touched Ilya’s lips. “I was not glaring. I was admiring how simple your line is. Even a child could follow it.”

The back-and-forth continued, the insults flying about foot speed, shot accuracy, and leadership styles. It was hockey chirping, the language they all knew, but beneath it ran the current of their very real, very complicated history. What was meant to break the ice was starting to freeze it over again. Shane felt his anxiety spike. This wasn’t helping. This was just the same old war on a smaller battlefield.

Jackie and Kip exchanged a worried glance, trying to steer the conversation back to safer waters, but the competitive alpha energy had taken hold.

“and you, Pike,” Ilya said, a sharper edge entering his tone. “You play like you are afraid to get your jersey dirty. Very clean. Very boring. Terrible waste of a jersey.”

“At least I know where my own net is, instead of just staying in the penalty box for half a game.” Hayden shot back, his own smile gone.

Shane had had enough. The structured part of his mind, which craved harmony and hoping that they could all get to know each other, short-circuited. Before anyone could say another word, he stood up. In one fluid, decisive motion, he grabbed the collar of Ilya’s shirt, yanked him to his feet, and marched him toward the sliding door into the cottage.

The entire group fell silent, stunned. They watched as Shane, who usually avoided conflict like a saint, forcefully directed the formidable Ilya Rozanov out of the room. The door slid shut behind them.

For a moment, there was only the sound of the lake. Then, through the glass, his voice carried- clear, firm, and utterly exasperated.

“What is *wrong* with you? I asked you to be nice! Was that nice? ‘Boring’? ‘Aging knees’?”

A low, rumbled reply from Ilya was audible but indistinct.

“I don’t *care* if it’s true! You are on probation! You do not get to chirp my friends in my house when they are trying to give you a chance!”

Another rumble, this one sounding distinctly pleading.

“No. You lost chirping privileges. You are going to be polite, you will contribute to the conversation like a normal person, or so help me, Ilya, there will be no sex for a *week*.”

The sentence landed with absolute finality. Inside the cottage, Ilya’s response was immediate and louder, tinged with genuine alarm. “Solnyshko, no! Do not say this! I am sorry! I will

be... I will be better! I will be nice to the dinosaur and terrible teammate just for you! I will apologize to the boring one and the old one! Just... not a week. That is cruel.”

Back on the deck, a series of choked sounds erupted. JJ coughed violently into his fist. Scott’s shoulders began to shake. Hayden stared fixedly at his shoes, his lips pressed into a thin, trembling line. Jackie turned her laugh into a coo at her baby. Kip simply smiled down at his son, his expression serene.

The image was too perfect, too humanizing. The terrifying, obsessive alpha from the stories was being scolded like a teenager and bargaining desperately over his...conjugal rights.

A minute later, the door slid open again. Shane walked out first, his cheeks flushed but his posture resolved. Ilya followed, looking chastened, his earlier arrogant smirk completely erased. He didn’t meet anyone’s eyes. He went straight to the cooler, pulled out two beers, and walked over to Scott and Hayden.

He handed one to each. “My commentary was... ungenerous,” he stated, the words clearly rehearsed. “Your playing is... adequate.” he said towards Hayden. He turned to Scott, “You are not that old. Not a dinosaur, but just mature.”

It was the worst, most begrudging apology any of them had ever heard. But it was an apology. From Ilya Rozanov.

Scott took the beer, a real grin breaking through. “Thanks, Rozanov. And for the record, your backhand is still shit.”

Ilya’s lips twitched. Just slightly. “Your face is still shit, Hunter.”

This time, however, the insult lacked its earlier venom. It was just chirping. Normal, hockey-player chirping. Hayden cracked open the beer, giving a slow, acknowledging nod.

Shane sank back into his seat, the knot in his chest finally loosening. The evening didn't magically transform into easy camaraderie, but the tension had been punctured, replaced by something warmer and far more genuine: the shared, amused understanding that Shane Hollander was very much in charge of his own life, and his legendary, difficult alpha was, quite clearly, wrapped around his little finger. It was a revelation more convincing than any heartfelt speech could ever be.

When the fire died down, the cottage was a patchwork of easier coexistence. In the living room, Hayden and JJ were setting up a video game, a familiar ritual. Scott was helping Kip settle the baby in a travel crib they'd brought into the smaller bedroom. Rose was on the deck, her phone to her ear, talking to her manager in a brisk, professional tone that was at odds with her earlier fury.

Jackie sought Shane out in the kitchen as he washed the last of the pans. "He's trying," she said quietly, drying a plate. "It's... strange to see. He's so... contained. Not at all what I expected."

"He's trying," Shane said, watching Ilya through the window as he finished with the wood, his broad shoulders outlined against the darkening pines. "Jackie, he makes me really, really happy." Shane whispered.

"Oh Sweetie! Of course he makes you happy!" Jackie echoed. She rested a hand on her stomach. "That's the part that matters, isn't it? Every day." She handed him the dry plate. "We just need to see him keep doing it. You were so depressed, for so long. I don't need the details if you don't want to give it, but you have to know if he goes back to how things were, he has 4 crazy people who will make him disappear."

As night fully embraced the cottage, the group reconvened in the living room. A movie was put on, something action-packed and undemanding. Ilya sat on the floor, leaning back against the sofa where Shane was curled up. As the explosions flickered across the screen, Shane's hand drifted down, his fingers brushing through Ilya's hair. Ilya leaned into the touch, just slightly, his eyes closing for a brief moment.

Hayden, from his armchair, saw it. He saw the way Ilya's tense posture softened minutely, not with triumph, but with relief. He saw the way Shane's touch was given freely, without a trace of fear. He said nothing, but the rigid line of his own shoulders eased, just a fraction.

It wasn't acceptance. It wasn't forgiveness. But it was a cessation of open hostilities. It was a group of people who loved Shane, choosing, for his sake, to observe. To wait and see. For now, in the shared dark of the cottage living room, with the sound of a fictional war in the background and a real, fragile peace in the air, it was enough. It was a beginning.

"See?" Kip murmured softly, settling into a chair beside Rose. "The way he looks at him."

Rose could only nod, the last of her righteous anger cooling into a confused, wary wonder. The bastard was actually in love. Not obsessed. Not possessive. In love. It was, she had to admit, the most surprising thing she'd seen all day.

The last guest room door clicked shut, followed by the heavy silence of a house full of sleeping people trying very hard not to eavesdrop. The tension of the last two days- the scrutiny, the careful words, the weight of history- still hummed in the air of the cottage, a low-grade current beneath the peace.

Ilya stood by the sliding door, looking out at the moonlit lake. The rigid control he'd maintained all evening was a visible ache in the set of his shoulders. He turned, his eyes finding Shane in the dim living room. Without a word, he held out a hand.

Shane took it, his own exhaustion melting into anticipation. Ilya led him outside, the night air cool and sweet after the day's warmth. He didn't stop at the deck. He guided them down the familiar path to the dock, a thick wool blanket tucked under his arm.

At the very end, where the wood met the dark water, he spread the blanket. The moon painted a silver highway across the lake. "Lie down," Ilya murmured, his voice a soft command.

Shane laughed, a quiet, breathy sound. "Here?"

“Here. Now.” A faint, familiar smirk touched Ilya’s lips, the first real crack in his careful facade all day. “Unless you are scared of the wolf-birds.”

“You’re the one who’s scared of them,” Shane retorted, but he let himself be lowered onto the blanket. The weathered planks were firm beneath the wool, the vast sky stretched above them.

Ilya settled beside him, then over him, bracing his weight on his forearms. For a long moment, he just looked down at Shane, his expression solemn in the moonlight. Then he lowered his head and began to kiss him.

It started slow, a gentle reclamation. But the enforced distance of the day, the constant awareness of observers, had banked a fire in both of them. The kisses quickly deepened, turning hungry and searching. Ilya’s tongue swept into Shane’s mouth, and Shane arched up to meet him, a soft moan lost between them.

Ilya’s mouth left his, trailing down his jaw, back to the sacred territory of his throat. He nuzzled, then inhaled deeply, his nose pressed to the bonding bite. He scented him not with the frantic need of the heat, but with a deliberate, worshipful intensity. He desperately needed to erase the scent of the alpha’s that they’d been around for too long. It was as if he was relearning the signature of their peace, overwriting the lingering echoes of tension and wary eyes with the pure, uncomplicated truth of *them*. Each slow, deep breath against Shane’s skin was a silent litany- *Mine*.

“I wanted to climb into that shower with you so badly,” Ilya growled against his pulse point, his hips pressing down in a slow, deliberate roll that made Shane gasp. “The look you gave me... like a wet, angry kitten. All it took.”

Shane laughed again, the sound vibrating against Ilya’s lips. “They would have heard everything.”

“I do not care,” Ilya whispered, but he kissed him again, swallowing the protest, his hand sliding under Shane’s shirt to splay over the warm skin of his stomach. His touch was possessive but not demanding, a claim of intimacy rather than control. They moved together

on the blanket, a slow, fully-clothed simulation of what they both craved, constrained by courtesy and thin walls.

It was enough. Here, under the open sky, with the lake whispering beside them and the bond singing a quiet, golden note in their chests, the frantic need settled into a deep, thrumming contentment. Ilya eventually stilled, just holding him, his face buried in Shane's neck, breathing him in.

"They stayed," Ilya said, the words muffled.

"They did."

"It was... harder than I thought. Sharing you with others."

Shane's fingers carded through his hair. "You were perfect."

"I was terrified." The admission was raw, honest. "Every second. That I would slip. That I would look at you the wrong way and they would see the monster and try to take you away."

Shane cupped his face, forcing him to meet his gaze. "You didn't slip. And you're not a monster. You're the man I've chosen. They see that."

A real smile, weary but warm, finally broke through on Ilya's face. He dropped a soft kiss on Shane's nose. "I almost lost it when Landry was close to you."

They lay tangled together until the moon climbed higher, talking in hushed tones about nothing and everything- the absurdity of JJ's silent scrutiny, the surprising softness in Hayden's eyes when he'd watched Jackie talk to Ilya, the way Rose's glare had eventually faded into puzzled observation.

Finally, the chill of the night seeped through the blanket. Ilya stood, pulling Shane up with him, folding the wool carefully. Hand in hand, they walked back to the silent cottage. As they passed the closed door to the room where Hayden and Jackie slept, Ilya's grip tightened briefly.

Inside, they slipped into their own room. The house around them was full of sleeping witnesses to their fragile new reality. But here, in their private dark, Ilya simply wrapped himself around Shane, his nose once more finding its home at the nape of his neck, his body a shelter. The fear of the day was gone, burned away by moonlight and kisses. What remained was the quiet certainty of the bond, and the hard-won peace of a love that was learning, day by day, how to exist in the world, together.

The next morning, Hayden texted Shane's cell, asking to go on a run. Shane got up and got dressed in running clothes, not letting Ilya keep him in bed. With a quick kiss, he left the room as the sun was still rising.

They ran in comfortable silence for a mile, slowing down after an unspoken signal. Shane offered his water to Hayden and leaned against a tree. "How did this happen, Shane?"

He thought about it for a few minutes. "It just did. Its not like we did it on purpose. By the time of the draft, we were already orbiting each other. We have our issues to work out, but I've never been more happy then I am now, Hayd."

"This is gonna change everything this season."

"It changes nothing. Literally nothing changes, except that when he's off and comes visit, I hope my standing dinner invite extends to him."

"How can it not change? Is he even going to let you keep playing?"

"Hayden, nothing is going to change. This will be our 4th season together. You've never known me without me having Ilya in my life. And he promised that I can still play for as long as I'd like."

“Jesus Hollz. I’m just worried about you, I don’t wanna see you hurt again.”

Hayden reached out and gave him a brief hug, they turned and jogged back. Talking here and there about the upcoming season.

“We’re ok?” Shane asked shyly as they walked up the cottage steps.

“Of course we are, just make sure that Rozanov doesn’t kill me if he smells me on you.”

The few days after Shane’s friends departed were a slow, syrupy immersion into a new kind of normal. The cottage became a heaven on earth for Ilya. They learned the rhythm of each other’s days- Ilya’s pre-dawn stillness with coffee and his camera, Shane’s methodical afternoon reading. They touched constantly, a hand on a lower back passing in the kitchen, a foot nudging another under the table, not with the desperate heat of before, but with the quiet satisfaction of a confirmed truth. The bond was a settled, warm hum, a constant, comforting presence like a heartbeat in the room.

When Yuna’s call came, inviting them to dinner, the peace developed a faint, familiar crackle of anticipation. Shane’s structured mind began running protocols: what to wear, what to bring, how to navigate the unspoken questions he knew would be waiting.

The Hollander home smelled of ginger, soy, very similar to Shane’s home. The initial greetings were careful hugs, David’s calm handshake for Ilya, Yuna’s sharp eyes missing nothing, the way Ilya’s hand lingered at the small of Shane’s back, the way Shane leaned into the touch.

Dinner preparation was not necessarily tense, but the hospitality of meeting people that you were not fully comfortable with. As Yuna stirred a pot, her voice cut through the domestic sounds. “The team sent over the new contract, Shane. Four years. The numbers are very

good. And Roots came back with that endorsement offer we discussed. The photoshoot can be more casual- you outdoors, on the lake here maybe. It's perfect timing."

Shane, chopping vegetables with precise, rapid strokes, went very still. His knuckles whitened around the knife handle. He didn't look up. He gave a single, stiff nod. "Okay."

Ilya, leaning against the counter nearby, felt it like a physical jolt through the bond, a spike of pure, icy anxiety, the terrifying pressure of a future being constructed around him without his input. It was the old fear, the one that had driven him to suppressants and secrecy- being packaged, sold, and trapped by an image that had nothing to do with his truth.

The first time Yuna's call flashed on Shane's phone, Ilya was the one who saw it. Shane was in the shower, the sound of the water a steady hum in the cottage. Ilya watched the screen light up, vibrate, and go dark. He made no move to answer it, nor to tell Shane. The bond was a placid, quiet lake; he would not be the one to toss a stone into it.

It happened again the next morning while Shane was meticulously reorganizing the bookshelf by genre and then subgenre. And again that afternoon. Each time, Ilya observed the call with the detached focus of a security detail assessing a potential threat. He did not block the number. He wanted her to understand that access was no longer a given.

On the third day, a new notification appeared, this time directed to him.

Mom - Ilya, we need to talk. Just us. Name a place.

Ilya's lips curved into a humorless smile. He waited an hour, then replied with the address of a quiet, upscale café in town, neutral territory. He did not tell Shane.

Yuna was already there when he arrived, a half-finished tea growing cold in front of her. She looked tired, the sharp edges of her anger worn down into a wary exhaustion. Ilya sat without greeting, ordering a black coffee for himself.

“You’re screening his calls,” she stated, forgoing any preamble.

“I am managing his environment,” Ilya corrected, his voice calm. “Answering your calls, at this moment, would be detrimental to his peace. Therefore, I prevent it.”

“You don’t get to decide what’s detrimental for him!”

“I do,” he said, taking a slow sip of his coffee. “That is the reality you must accept. The bond grants me a clarity you lack. I do not *guess* at his stress levels. I feel them. And your conversations, as they have historically been structured, cause them to spike.”

Yuna’s hands tightened around her cup. “I am his mother. I care about his future, his security.”

“You care about his career,” Ilya countered, his blue eyes locking onto hers. “There is a difference. From what I have observed, your pattern is consistent: Shane expresses a need, a desire, or even just a feeling, and you redirect. You talk of contracts, of image, of long-term financial planning. You ignore the man in favor of the brand. You have done it for so long you no longer see the distinction.”

He leaned forward slightly, his tone becoming analytical, dissecting. “The night of the Cup win. He was overwhelmed, overstimulated. He needed quiet. What did you discuss? His media schedule for the next week. After the kidnapping, when he was fragile, what was your primary concern? The narrative, the ‘story’ to tell the press. And at the cottage, when he was finally, truly happy just to be, he’s introducing you to his mate, you spoke of morality clauses

and family-friendly campaigns. Your priority is the business of Shane Hollander. My one priority is the happiness of Shane. They are not the same thing.”

Yuna opened her mouth to protest, but the sheer, unassailable accuracy of his observations stole her words. He had seen her, truly seen the dynamic, and had categorized it as a threat.

“I am not eliminating you,” Ilya continued, his voice dropping, becoming almost confidential, which was somehow more frightening. “I am retraining you. You may remain in his life if you can learn a new role. That of a mother who asks about his day, not his statistics. Who admires the lake with him, not the potential endorsement value of the property. The business discussions will happen when he is ready to initiate them, with me present to ensure the focus remains on his well-being, not your anxiety.”

He finished his coffee and set the cup down with a definitive click. “This is not a negotiation. This is the new direction for your family. You can adapt to it, or you will become a relic he visits on holidays, supervised. The choice is yours.”

He stood to leave, then paused, as if remembering an addendum. “And you should know, we are discussing starting a family. When that happens, my tolerance for any stressor near him will be zero. My advice is to learn this new role quickly.”

He left her there, the cold truth of his words settling around her like a frost. Ilya walked back to his car, the bond in his chest a quiet, steady hum. He had protected his mate’s peace, yet again. He had drawn a line in the sand around their world, and he would bury anyone who tried to cross it. For Shane, he would be both sanctuary and sword, and the balance between those two things was a burden he carried not with guilt, but with absolute, terrifying conviction.

Yuna stared at the cold dregs of her tea, the fight seeping out of her not with a bang, but with a weary, defeated sigh. The café’s quiet hum felt deafening compared to the brutal clarity of Ilya’s words. He had not shouted. He had dissected her relationship with her son with the precision of a surgeon and the finality of a judge.

She quickly followed him out and caught up to him. “You see him,” she admitted, the words tasting like ash. “In a way I... got too busy to.”

Ilya said nothing. He offered no absolution, only waited.

“I will... calm down. About the career, the contracts. I’ll wait for him to come to me.” She looked up, meeting his glacial blue eyes. The mother’s worry, however, found a new, practical outlet. “But you’re bonded. The season starts in a few months. Montreal and Boston. How does that work? You can’t be apart for long. The bond sickness...”

A flicker of something- gratitude that she was finally asking a relevant question perhaps, crossed his face. “It is being managed. The distance will be difficult, but not impossible with planning. Short, frequent visits. Neutral cities on off-days.”

“And the league? The media? The second anyone sees you two together outside of a game-”

“Is my problem to solve,” Ilya cut in, his voice returning to that calm, unnerving certainty. “I am working on a plan. There are options. A trade, a leave. A strategic... narrative.”

He leaned back, the picture of controlled intent. “You worry about the ‘how’ because you see obstacles. I see a system with variables. My only variable is Shane’s well-being. Every other factor contracts, cities, journalists- is a piece on a board to be moved. I will move them.”

He stood, placing cash on the table for his coffee. “Your role is to be a soft place for him to land, not another source of wind resistance. You ask what the plans are? The plan is his happiness. The logistics are mine. I will take care of everything.”

He didn’t wait for a reply. He walked away, leaving her with the chilling reassurance of his total confidence. He wasn’t just promising to try; he was stating a fact as simple as gravity. The man who had burned a rival to ash and systematically rebuilt himself in therapy would now turn that same formidable, focused will to the mundane complexities of dual NHL careers. For Yuna, it was terrifying. For Shane, she finally understood, it was the most ironclad safety imaginable. The obsessive love that had once shattered him was now the

engine that would move heaven, earth, and the entire National Hockey League to keep him whole.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! Every kudos, comment, bookmark - genuinely makes my day.

The next chapter... well. It might have a few surprises. Whether those surprises are good or bad honestly depends on the vibes while I'm writing. I have an outline that I usually follow, but sometimes the characters decide they've suffered enough... and sometimes I decide they absolutely have not.

Also, if anyone has ever wondered how some of these scenes happen, the answer is almost always: me, several cups of caffeine deep, with an aggressively toxic playlist blasting in my headphones while I type like my life depends on it. The emotional whiplash is apparently part of my creative process.

Until next time... be nice to Shane.

...Actually, no promises. 😊

Chapter 34: Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

As always, endless thanks to my incredible beta reader for saving my grammar, to Anna, to my favorite gay gremlins Tony and B for enabling every emotionally devastating idea that crosses my mind, and to my sister, who once again suggested I tone things down, saying that people don't have sexy times in lake water. Naturally, I interpreted that as constructive criticism to make it worse. 

Enjoy the calm while it lasts.

Chapter Notes

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

The days after their friends' departure settled into a rhythm so sweet and remarkable it felt like a miracle. The cottage was no longer just a refuge from the world; it became the entire world, and it was enough.

Mornings began with the smell of coffee and the quiet maneuvering of the shared space. Shane, systematic as ever, would measure the beans with exacting precision. Ilya, leaning against the counter, watched his hands move, then would reach around him to adjust the flame under the kettle a fraction, his chin brushing Shane's shoulder. He would use any excuse to be touching his mate.

Ilya had developed a new habit, documenting. His phone and camera were now constantly out. He'd snap a picture of Shane frowning in concentration over a crossword, the morning light turning his hair into a dark halo. He'd capture the chaotic beauty of their lunch preparations - vegetables diced with geometric perfection by Shane next to a haphazard pile of herbs torn by Ilya's hands. He'd turn the camera around, pulling Shane against his chest, and take a selfie of their combined reflection in the window, the lake a blur behind them. Shane would blush and grumble, "Why do you need so many?" but he never truly protested. He saw the reverence in Ilya's eyes, the need to prove this reality was not a dream.

One afternoon, the summer heat pressed down, and the lake glittered with invitation. They swam, the cool water a shock that turned to relief. Ilya, a powerful, smooth stroke, circled Shane, who floated on his back, eyes closed against the sun. The bond was a lazy, contented hum. Ilya sent a pulse of playful affection through it, and Shane smiled without opening his

eyes, sending back a wave of pure, sun-warmed relaxation. They tested it like children with a new secret language. Shane focused on a sudden, fond memory of Ilya's ridiculous fear of the loon, aiming the burst of amused tenderness at him. Ilya, treading water, snorted, water bubbling around him. "Cheating," he called, but his grin was wide.

Later, on the faux ice of the practice rink, they laced up their skates. This was their oldest mutual language, their need to prove they that they were each others equals in this. They passed a single puck back and forth, the sound a familiar, comforting echo off the large empty space. Ilya executed a leisurely spin, all unnecessary flair, and Shane poke-checked the puck away with a smirk. There was no audience, no score, no judgement. Just the glide and carve of blades, the effortless reading of each other's bodies, and the bond singing between them in harmony with their movements. Shane pushed himself into a sudden, hard sprint, and Ilya felt the exhilarating burst of competitive joy as if it were his own. He chased, not to stop him, but to join him, and when they collided gently in the corner, breathless and laughing, it felt like coming home to a place they'd both been searching for all their lives.

As evenings drew in, they cooked side-by-side, Shane following a recipe with all his focus, Ilya tasting and adjusting by instinct when Shane's back was turned. The kitchen filled with the scent of garlic and herbs. A surge of emotion, too vast and quiet to be named, swelled in his chest, profound gratitude that was almost grief for all the years they hadn't had this. He didn't try to hide it; he let it flow down the mental thread between them.

Shane's hands stilled on the plate. He looked up, his brown eyes soft and understanding. He didn't speak. He simply walked over, pressed his forehead against Ilya's damp shoulder blade, and let the feeling settle over them both. The bond carried what words could not. *I feel it too. We're here now, we finally made it.*

The nights usually had them curled together on the outdoor couch, the fire pit embers glowing, there was no desperate passion, only the profound comfort of presence. Ilya's nose was buried in Shane's hair, breathing in the scent of lake water and clean skin and them. The frantic, possessive obsession had been refined into this: a steadfast devotion that asked for nothing but the right to be exactly here. All that remained was this quiet awareness, this ability to feel the echo of a sigh or the flutter of contentment from across the room. It was not a cage, but a harbor. And for the first time in both their turbulent lives, they were finally, completely, at anchor.

The fire crackled, a living, breathing heart of light and heat in the deepening twilight. Shane was curled against Ilya's chest, his back to Ilya's front, wrapped in a blanket and the secure circle of Ilya's arms. The day's warmth had faded, leaving the clean, cool scent of the lake and the woodsmoke that clung to their clothes. Ilya's chin rested on top of Shane's head, his phone held loosely in one hand, the screen dark.

He'd spent the afternoon, as he often did now, capturing moments. A series of shots of Shane, elbow-deep in soil, repotting a fern with intense focus. A slow-motion video of water droplets catching the sun as Shane shook his hair after their swim. A dozen selfies of them on the practice slab, cheeks flushed, sticks crossed, grinning breathlessly. The phone was a testament to a happiness he still, some days, couldn't believe was his to keep.

They always seemed to naturally settle into this position- Shane laying in some way on top or cradled on Ilya, leaning into him as close as possible. Ilya holding him tightly, one hand usually ended up on his lower belly, the other in Shane's hair or tracing the pattern of freckles on his face. No words needed sometimes they just needed to be together as close as possible. It was into this silence that Ilya finally voiced the thing that had been sitting between them since his call with Marly that morning.

"Marly called," he said, his voice a low rumble against Shane's spine. "They are asking about my plans. I still haven't signed the contract for the upcoming season and my agent said that I have 7 offers waiting."

He felt Shane's breathing hitch, just slightly. The relaxed muscles along his back tightened a fraction.

"I told him I want to sign for one more year. It gives us time. To figure out... logistics. Without pressure."

The word 'logistics' hung in the air, clinical and cold. It meant lawyers and trades and media strategies. It meant the end of the cottage, of mornings measuring making breakfast together, of impulsive swims and skating just for the joy of it.

Shane didn't speak for a long moment. He stared into the flames, watching a log collapse into a shower of embers. The comfortable warmth of the fire suddenly felt insufficient against a chill that came from within. The bond, so calm a moment ago, carried a new, subtle frequency: a low thrum of dread, the quiet, structured mind beginning to run frantic calculations about distance, schedules, and separation.

"One more year," Shane repeated, his voice flat. He'd known this was coming. The world hadn't stopped. The NHL schedule was a merciless, ticking clock. But hearing it stated as a decision, as a plan, made it real in a way it hadn't been before. "So we go back. You to Boston. Me to Montreal. Back to... not seeing each other for weeks. To hotels and stolen days. To hiding again." The last word was barely a whisper. His voice was flat, but when Ilya shifted him so that they were sitting face to face, Shane wrapping his legs around Ilya's waist, Ilya saw all the emotions crossing his eyes.

Ilya's arms tightened around him. He nuzzled into the soft hair at Shane's temple, inhaling his scent, trying to press the anxiety back through the bond with pure, solid presence. "It will not be like before," he vowed, his lips moving against Shane's skin. "No hiding. Not for us. Only from the cameras, maybe. The distance... we will manage it. We can take advantage of any days off, make some short trips. Is a problem but we can fix anything, solnyshko. We will get through it."

But Shane was already trapped in his mind. The bond sickness they'd read about, the physical ache of separation that grew worse with time and distance. The relentless scrutiny. The exhaustion of constant travel on top of an 82-game season. The sheer, grinding difficulty of it all, when here, now, it was so perfectly simple.

"I don't want to go back," Shane admitted, the confession torn from him, raw and childlike in its honesty. He wasn't talking about hockey. He was talking about this- the fire, the quiet, the uncomplicated rightness of their joined bodies, of being together and not having to be quiet or sneak in and out of hotel rooms.

"I know," Ilya murmured, his own heart aching with the same want. He thought of the pictures on his phone, a digital shrine to a life he was terrified of losing. "I will come up with something, we just need to have you protected and then we can be public. If I thought you wouldn't reject the idea or hate me after, I'd just tell you to quit, start giving me babies and be happy at home. But I know that you need more than that and deserve more too. So all I say is whatever you want, I'll fully support. Sign the contract you want. I'll take care of the rest."

In the flickering firelight, Shane's eyes were wide, the fear in them stark and real. Ilya cupped his face, his thumbs stroking his cheekbones. "I am not losing you again to schedules and cities. I burned the world for you once. You think I will let a few hundred miles win? No. We have fought harder things."

He kissed him then, slow and deep, pouring every ounce of his terrifying certainty into it. The bond flared, the dread momentarily swamped by a wave of fierce, possessive love. When they broke apart, Shane's breath was uneven, but the rigid tension had softened.

"One year." Shane said, leaning his forehead against Ilya's.

"One year," Ilya agreed. "To plan our forever."

They settled back into their embrace, Shane turning once more to watch the fire. The anxiety wasn't gone. It lingered at the edges of the bond, a shadow of the future. But layered over it now was Ilya's resolute promise, a plan already forming in the strategic depths of his mind. The cottage, the lake, this peace, it wasn't an ending. And as Ilya held the man he loved, feeling the steady beat of his heart, he knew with absolute clarity that he would move heaven, earth, and the entire NHL to make this feeling permanent. The fire crackled on, a small, defiant light against the vast, encroaching night.

The lingering scent of woodsmoke and pine still clung to their skin as they moved from the cool darkness of the cottage into the warmer, more intimate darkness of the bedroom. The conversation by the firepit, the dread of separation, the stubborn hope, had settled into a quiet, mutual resolve that now thrummed beneath their skin, seeking physical expression. The routine of preparation was a silent ballet: the click of the bathroom light, the whisper of a toothbrush, the soft sigh of cotton as shirts were shed and left in the hamper for Shane, on the floor for Ilya. Moonlight bled through the window, painting Ilya's shoulders in silver and leaving Shane's form in sculpted shadows.

Ilya guided him to the bed, his hands not demanding but unquestionable, large palms skating down Shane's flanks with a possessiveness that was now a comfort. He settled back against the carved headboard, the old wood cool against his spine, and drew Shane into the cradle of his thighs. They came together face-to-face, Shane's knees sinking into the mattress on either side of Ilya's hips. It was a position of profound exposure and deeper trust, allowing Ilya to see every fleeting thought that crossed Shane's face- the slight worry in the set of his brow, the softening of his mouth into anticipation.

Ilya set the pace, a slow, deep, rolling rhythm that was less about friction and more about profound, cellular realignment. His hands mapped Shane's back, each vertebra like a pearl under his seeking fingertips, the wings of his shoulder blades shifting like living sculpture with each movement. He could feel the fine tremors in Shane's thighs, the clutch of internal muscles around him, the hot puff of Shane's breath against his collarbone. It was worship, a liturgy of touch and connection, and the bond between them glowed with a steady, golden warmth, a silent echo of the *rightness* of this.

Lost in the languid, building pleasure, Shane let his forehead drop to Ilya's shoulder. His lips found the salt-damp skin of Ilya's throat, nuzzling into the primal scent-map there- alpha, spice, *home*. His mouth journeyed upward until it met the distinct, raised topography of the bonding bite. He kissed the scar, then, driven by a surge of fierce, possessive love that mirrored Ilya's own, he let his teeth scrape experimentally over the mark. He felt Ilya's breath catch, felt the powerful rhythm stutter. Emboldened, Shane opened his mouth and pressed down, not with enough force to wound, but with a deliberate, claiming pressure that sent a jolt of pure lightning through both of them.

The sound Ilya made was raw, torn from a place deeper than language. "Blyad!" The controlled, reverent pace shattered. In a blur of motion that spoke of coiled strength unleashed, Ilya's arms became steel bands around Shane's torso. He flipped them with a single powerful surge, pressing Shane down into the yielding mattress, his own body a heavy, covering weight. The look in his eyes, moments ago soft with adoration, was now dark as a storm-lashed sea, pupils swallowing the blue irises whole.

"You play with fire, solnyshko," he growled, his voice a gravelly vibration against Shane's lips.

He drove into Shane anew, but this was a different kind of joining. The rhythm was relentless, punishing in its intensity, each thrust a physical punctuation to the claim Shane had just reasserted. The careful reverence was gone, replaced by a raw, hungry need that sang through the bond like a live wire. His hands gripped Shane's hips, fingers pressing into bone, holding him immobile as he took his pleasure, as he gave Shane his. The kiss he captured Shane's mouth with was all heat and demand, a tangling of tongues that was more battle than caress.

Yet, the bond did not scream with anger or fear. It roared. It became a conduit for this heightened, ferocious connection, amplifying every sensation- the slap of skin, the creak of

the bed, the ragged symphony of their breaths. Pleasure coiled, sharp and bright, built not just from physical friction but from the terrifying, exhilarating depth of their surrender to each other. Shane's climax tore through him with a silent, arching cry, his body seizing, his fingers digging into the hard muscles of Ilya's back. Ilya followed a heartbeat later, his release a hoarse, guttural shout lost against the sweat-slick skin of Shane's neck, his teeth finding Shane's bonding mark once more in a final, instinctual seal.

He collapsed, his great weight a spent burden, but even in his ruin he was careful, rolling to his side and dragging Shane with him, tucking him fiercely into the curve of his body. Their hearts hammered against each other's ribs, two frantic drums slowly finding a shared, exhausted cadence. Ilya's nose was buried in the damp mess of Shane's hair, his breaths deep, shuddering draughts as he scented him- relearning, reaffirming, the complex perfume of *them* now layered with the salty tang of exertion and the electric afterburn of shared conquest.

A long, trembling minute passed. Then, Ilya's lips moved against Shane's temple, his voice a wrecked and wondering whisper in the dark. "Derkay."

A slow, utterly satisfied smile curved Shane's mouth against Ilya's chest. He traced the faint, new ache his teeth had left on Ilya's bond mark. He really needed to learn Russian. By the tone of his voice, he knew Ilya had said something good and he wished he could make his brain function better to ask what he just said.

Ilya's arms tightened, a wordless admission. He pressed a kiss to Shane's forehead, this one infinitely soft, a tender seal on the tempest they'd just weathered. In the quiet aftermath, the bond settled not back into a simple hum, but into a rich, resonant, and deeply contented pulse- a living testament to a love that encompassed both sanctuary and storm, and was, in all its terrifying, beautiful complexity, forever and completely theirs.

Shane woke to a silence that was too absolute. The deep, restful dark of the cottage bedroom felt suddenly oppressive, the weight of the future pressing down on him like a physical thing. Beside him, Ilya slept, a solid, warm presence, his breathing even and deep. But Shane's mind was a whirlwind of logistics and dread, playing out a miserable highlight reel of airport goodbyes, sterile hotel rooms, and the gnawing, hollow ache of the bond stretched thin over hundreds of miles.

The peaceful rhythm of their summer- the shared coffee, the lazy swims, the silent understanding that thrummed between them- felt like a beautiful, fragile dream from which they were about to be rudely awakened. They couldn't go back. He couldn't go back to a life where Ilya was a static image on a screen, a voice on the phone, a phantom presence in a city he wasn't allowed to publicly visit.

A tremor ran through him. He turned, pressing his forehead against the heat of Ilya's shoulder blade. The bond, a constant golden hum in his chest, flickered with his spike of anxiety.

"Ilya," he whispered, his voice rough with sleep and fear. He shook him gently. "Ilya, wake up."

Ilya was awake instantly, a lifetime of hyper-vigilance erasing sleep in a heartbeat. He rolled over, his eyes searching Shane's face in the sliver of moonlight. "Solnyshko? What is wrong? Are you hurt?"

"No. It's... I can't stop thinking." The words tumbled out, a quiet, frantic confession. "We go back in a few weeks. You to Boston, me to Montreal. The hotels, the distance. We... we just got this. How do we survive going back to how it was? I don't think we can. I don't think *I* can."

The raw panic in Shane's voice, so rarely voiced so plainly, was a blade in Ilya's heart. The old him would have promised impossible things, would have dictated a solution built on control. The man he was now, the one who had learned the shape of his own damage, simply opened his arms. Shane curled into him, his face buried against Ilya's throat, breathing in the anchoring scent of him.

"We are not going back to how it was," Ilya murmured, his hand a steady, stroking pressure down Shane's spine. "That life is dead. We are building a new one. It will have... complications. But they are just problems. And we solve problems."

"How?" The word was muffled against his skin.

“Give me time. A few days. Let me think, let me make calls.” Ilya’s voice was low, a planning voice. “There are options. My contract is one year, then I think of new team. Closer to you. Your focus must be on your game, on your Cup. My focus will be on us. On the plan.”

The structured part of Shane’s mind, soothed by the concept of a ‘plan’, latched onto it. “My next heat,” he said, the clinical term a contrast to the intimacy of their position. “It’s in about four months. Mid-October. I’ll postpone it to next summer.”

Ilya went very still. The mention of heat was no longer just a biological event; it was a milestone, a decision point. “No,” he said carefully. “We follow the plan. You’ll do better with the 4 heats a year. They’ll be shorter if you don’t wait all year.”

“You’ll have your endorsement trips,” Shane said, already mapping it. “But you could... you could fly to me. If you wanted to, I mean. For the peak of it. If you wanted.”

“I will be there,” Ilya vowed, no hesitation. “Wherever you are. However you need me.” He paused, his next question deliberate. “And the shot? The suppressant?”

Shane was silent for a long moment, his fingers tracing idle patterns on Ilya’s chest. “I was thinking... I wouldn’t take it. This time. But I should. I can’t play if it takes. I wouldn’t want to risk it.”

The air left Ilya’s lungs in a soft, controlled rush. The want, the deep, alpha-driven, bond-amplified *need*- that he kept locked down tight, surged against its restraints. A baby. Their baby. The thought was a dizzying, terrifying bliss. But he heard the rest of Shane’s sentence before it was spoken.

“But after,” Shane continued, his voice gaining strength, his analytical side taking over. “After the heat, I need to play. I need to win. The new contract... it’ll be huge. The pressure will be higher than ever. I want another Cup, Ilya. I want to prove I can do it all. That I can still play hockey while we have the bond... a family, someday. But the timing...”

Ilya turned his head, pressing a kiss to Shane's temple. He understood. This was not a rejection, but a sequencing. A championship first, cementing his legacy on his own terms. Then the next, even more profound chapter.

"Then that is plan," Ilya said, the words a bedrock. "We navigate season. We win your Cup. And when time is right, we build our family." He held him tighter, the bond humming with a new, purposeful energy. "The distance is temporary. The pressure is temporary. This," he said, his hand splayed over Shane's back, right over the beat of his heart, "is forever. We have already survived the impossible. A few hundred miles and some hockey games are nothing."

Shane let out a long, slow breath, the frantic whirlwind in his mind settling into a manageable, if daunting, checklist. Ilya was right. They were a team now, in every sense. They had a strategy. They had a timeline. They had each other, and the unbreakable tether between them that no schedule could sever.

The moonlight traced a path across the floor as they lay entwined, no longer sleeping, but no longer afraid. The future was a complex playbook, but for the first time, they were drafting it together.

The morning sun was a pale gold through the cottage windows, and the peace was so deep it felt woven into the very air. Shane was methodically wiping down the already-clean countertops, a soothing rhythm of circular motions, when his phone buzzed with a call from his father.

"Dad? Hi."

"Shane. I hope we're not interrupting your morning." David's voice was calm, as always. "Your mother and I were wondering if we might come by the cottage. To see you. And Ilya of course. We could bring dinner."

The request was simple, but it sent a sudden, staticky fizz through Shane's mind. Which recipe did Mom use last time? Should we grill? Did Ilya eat that salad? What did we talk about that made everything go quiet? The questions stacked up, a jam of social calculus and past tension. A faint, lightheaded sensation began to swim at the edges of his vision as he tried to sort the memories, to plan the perfect, conflict-free script.

The soft pad of bare feet on wood floor. Ilya appeared from the bedroom, his hair damp from a shower, his gaze immediately finding Shane. He took in the slight pallor, the way Shane's free hand pressed flat against the countertop for balance. He crossed the room in three silent strides.

"Who is it?" he asked, his voice low.

"My dad. They want to come for dinner."

Ilya's expression shifted, not into anger, but into a focused, analytical calm. The protective instinct was immediate, but it was channeled now- a general assessing a potential battlefield rather than a storm about to erupt. He gently took the phone from Shane's hand.

"David," he said, his tone polite but firm. "We would be happy to see you. Come tonight. We will be here." He listened for a beat. "Yes. That is fine. We will see you then." He ended the call and placed the phone on the counter.

His hands came up to frame Shane's face, his thumbs stroking over his cheekbones. "Breathe, solnyshko. It is just dinner. You are in your home. You are safe. I am here."

He leaned in and scented him gently at the temple, a slow, deliberate inhalation that was as much for his own reassurance as Shane's. The bond, which had flickered with chaotic static, steadied under the deliberate warmth of Ilya's presence. The dizzying spiral of questions receded.

"She will be on her best behavior," Ilya murmured, his lips against Shane's skin. "She has learned her lesson."

The Hollander's car arrived just before six. The atmosphere was cautious, but not icy. Yuna carried a baking dish; David had a bottle of wine. Ilya stood just behind Shane's shoulder in the doorway, a silent sentinel, his eyes missing nothing.

Dinner was, against all odds, pleasant. Yuna had brought a roasted chicken with sweet potatoes for Shane, regular ones for the rest, a simple, familiar comfort. She asked about the lake, the fishing, the peacefulness. She did not mention hockey once.

It was only as they were clearing the plates that she gestured to a slim folder she'd placed on the sideboard. "The updated contract from the team is there, Shane, whenever you're ready. The terms are much better. And the endorsement from Roots... I left the details. It's a good fit, but there's no rush."

Shane felt a familiar, slight tightening in his chest. He nodded stiffly. "I'll look at it later."

Before the old pattern could take hold- Shane's anxiety, Yuna's pressing, Ilya's hand came to rest on the small of Shane's back. A simple point of contact. Yuna's eyes flicked to the movement, and then away. She simply nodded. "Of course. Whenever you're ready."

It was a surrender. The real revelation of the evening was David. While Yuna talked, David watched. His quiet eyes tracked Shane's micro-signals, the way he leaned towards Ilya when seeking calm, the slight tap of his finger against his leg when he'd had enough of a topic, the unconscious way his shoulders relaxed when Ilya passed him the salt without being asked. David didn't comment. He simply observed, and his interventions were subtle: redirecting Yuna with a question about the garden, offering Ilya a second helping with a quiet.

Once, when Shane excused himself to the bathroom, David turned his calm gaze to Ilya. "He seems stronger," he said, a simple statement.

"He is," Ilya replied, meeting his eyes. "He is learning he does not have to carry every weight alone."

David gave a slow, approving nod. It wasn't effusive praise. It was the quiet acknowledgment of a fact. It meant more than any dramatic speech could have.

When they left, the night was clear and full of stars. Yuna hugged Shane, her grip tight but not desperate. “We’ll see you soon,” she said, and it sounded like a promise, not a demand.

David shook Ilya’s hand. “Take care of our boy.”

“Always,” Ilya said.

Back inside, the cottage settled around them. Shane let out a long, slow breath, leaning back against Ilya’s chest as they looked out at the dark lake. “That was... okay. It was actually okay.”

Ilya hummed, nuzzling into his hair. “She is learning. Your father... he sees you. He always has.”

“He likes you,” Shane said, a note of wonder in his voice.

Ilya’s arms tightened around him. “He loves you. That is why.” He fell silent for a moment. “This is good. This peace. I’ve never met parents before.”

For the first time, the family peace didn’t feel like a temporary ceasefire or a fragile illusion. Shane closed his eyes, listening to the steady beat of Ilya’s heart against his back, the bond a quiet, golden hum of contentment. The past was not erased, but the path forward, for all of them, finally looked clear.

The golden, honeyed light of late afternoon streamed through the cottage windows, catching the dust motes they’d disturbed while cleaning. The silence was companionable, filled only with the soft sounds of domesticity: the scrape of a knife on a cutting board, the hiss of the faucet, the click of Ilya’s phone camera.

Shane was at the counter, cutting a bell pepper into perfect strips, his brow furrowed in concentration. Ilya leaned against the fridge, not helping, just watching. He lifted his phone and captured the moment: the focused dip between Shane's eyebrows, the precise angle of his wrist. He swiped to the previous photo- one he'd taken that morning of David Hollander, standing stoically on the dock, nodding slowly as he surveyed the lake.

A soft chuckle escaped him. Shane glanced up, a silent question in his eyes.

Ilya turned the screen toward him, toggling between the two images. "You are too pretty for your own good," he said, his voice warm with teasing affection. "Makes up for being so boring," he added quickly, seeing Shane's lips begin to form a protest. Shane threw some vegetable pieces at him and he game to swoop him into his arms, plopping him on the counter to give him a kiss. "Is... deeply concentrated. It is good, I love it. Boring is good."

He let Shane get back to cooking. "Is one of the things I love most."

Shane relaxed into the hold, the faint defensive line in his shoulders melting. He leaned his head back against Ilya's chest. The bond, that ever-present thread between them, hummed with a contented frequency that felt like sunlight made tangible. It carried the echo of Ilya's sincere joke and Shane's accepting blush, mingling them into a single, warm emotion.

Later, after a dinner they'd cooked in a messy, collaborative tangle of limbs and instructions, they found themselves side-by-side on the couch, Shane's feet in Ilya's lap. Ilya's thumb absently stroked the arch of Shane's foot as he scrolled through the day's photos on his tablet, thinking about their plans.

"Training camp starts in five weeks," Shane said quietly, not looking away from the flames of the fire pit they could see through the window. The anxiety from his midnight spiral was gone, replaced by a calm, if sober, acceptance.

"I know," Ilya murmured. His hand stilled on Shane's foot. "My endorsement trip to Stockholm is in three. Then I come to you."

“And after?” Shane asked, finally looking at him.

“After, you play. You win your Cup.” Ilya’s voice was certain, a bedrock beneath the uncertainty of the season ahead. “And I will be there. In Boston, in Montreal, in neutral cities. We will solve the distance, one day at a time. The plan is not just for October. It is for every day after.”

He set the tablet aside and shifted, pulling Shane properly into his arms until Shane was straddling his lap, face to face. The bond pulsed warmly between their chests. Ilya’s hands framed Shane’s face, his thumbs tracing the line of his jaw. “Everything will be alright,” he whispered, his gaze intense. “I’ll give you anything and everything you want, Shane. Just give me some time to figure it out. Years from now, when we’re old and grey we can look back at this time and be proud that we made all our goals and dreams come true.”

Shane believed him. He felt the truth of it, not just in Ilya’s words, but in the steady, unwavering signal flowing through the bond, a love that had been stripped of obsession and refined into devotion. He kissed him, a slow, deep promise against his lips.

Outside, the first stars began to pierce the twilight. In this present moment, with the man he loved breathing the same air and sharing the same silent, golden thread in his soul, Shane Hollander was not just safe. He was home. And for the first time, he knew with absolute certainty that no distance, no game, no headline could ever change that.

The morning light felt brittle over the breakfast table. The easy silence of the past weeks had been replaced by a quiet tension that had lingered since their friends' departure, a subtle reminder that the outside world, with all its complications, still existed. Ilya watched, his gaze tracking the precise, minimal movements of Shane’s fork as he pushed a few pieces of scrambled egg around his plate.

A muscle in Ilya’s jaw ticked. The protective, monitoring instinct that had once been a sickness and was now a carefully managed impulse flared. It wasn’t about control, he told himself. It was about care. About ensuring the man he loved was sustained.

“You do not eat enough,” Ilya stated, his voice cutting through the quiet. It came out flatter, more accusatory than he intended.

Shane’s head snapped up. His eyes, usually soft with focus, turned guarded and sharp. He set his fork down with a deliberate click. “I eat what I need. Just because you shovel down enough for four people doesn’t mean that’s the normal amount, Ilya.”

The words were a direct hit to Ilya’s old, deep-seated insecurities- the alpha who needed to be strong, to consume, to provide. It was also a firm boundary. Shane’s body, his routines, were his own. The memory of the trackers, the surveillance, hung in the air between them.

Ilya’s nostrils flared. He saw the defensive wall go up behind Shane’s eyes, the same wall from when they did not know how to communicate properly. The bond, which had been a calm hum, tightened into a wire of mutual frustration. “I am not trying to be your keeper. I am trying to just help you,” Ilya said, the words strained.

“If I need help I would ask,” Shane shot back, his voice low. “I don’t need you to try to fix every problem for me.” He stood, his chair scraping back. “I’m going for a walk.”

The cottage became tense for the next while. Ilya cleaned the kitchen, throwing dishes haphazardly into the dishwasher, tossing the uneaten food in the garbage bin, the scent of lemon cleaner doing nothing to mask the fading trace of Shane’s unhappy omega scent. He stomped to the practice rink, skated hard and pointless laps until his lungs burned, trying to outrun the clenching worry in his gut. He was doing it again. The wanting to fix, to manage, to *ensure*. It was the shadow of the obsession, dressed up as concern. He took a long, slow breath, the cool air searing his throat. *He is an adult. He is capable. Back off.*

Shane walked the perimeter of the lake, his mind a whirlwind of recrimination. He’d reacted too harshly. Ilya was trying, in his own blunt and frustrating way. But the comment had tapped into a lifetime of people- coaches, nutritionists, his mother- treating his body like public property, a vessel for performance. With Ilya, it was supposed to be different. It *was* different. But his habits were louder at times when he tried to reconcile himself that things were different now.

For two hours, they stayed apart. The bond was a low, discordant thrum, carrying pulses of regret from both ends, but neither willing to cross the space and voice it.

Ilya was on the back deck, staring unseeingly at the trees, when the sliding door opened. He didn't turn, bracing for more words, for the cold silence to continue.

Shane didn't speak. He moved behind Ilya's chair, his hands coming to rest on Ilya's tense shoulders. For a moment, they just stayed like that, Shane's touch a silent question. Then, his hands slid down Ilya's chest, and he sank to his knees on the sun-warmed wood.

Ilya's breath caught. "Shane- "

"Shut up," Shane murmured, his voice firm but not unkind. His fingers made quick work of Ilya's sweatpants. There was no preamble, no teasing build-up. He took Ilya into his mouth with a devastating, focused intensity that stole the air from Ilya's lungs.

This wasn't the slow, worshipful intimacy of their lazy mornings. This was something else, as if Shane was staking his own claim on Ilya. A silent, physical argument of its own. Shane's mouth was hot and demanding, his tongue clever, his hands gripping Ilya's hips to hold him still, to take complete control. The sensations were blinding, short-circuiting the frustrated, churning thoughts in Ilya's head. The pine-scented air, the dappled sunlight, the rough grain of the deck under his knees, it all faded into a white-noise buzz behind the overwhelming, exquisite focus of Shane's mouth.

Ilya's head fell back against the chair with a thud. A broken, guttural sound was torn from him, fingers tangling helplessly in Shane's hair, not to guide, but to anchor himself. The bond, which had felt almost constricting throughout the day, suddenly sang with a single, searing note of shared sensation- Ilya's shockwave of pleasure, Shane's fierce satisfaction in wielding it.

When it was over, Ilya was boneless, trembling, utterly spent. He slumped forward, his forehead coming to rest on top of Shane's, his breathing ragged. Shane rested his cheek against Ilya's thigh, his own breaths coming fast.

The silence now was now different, cleansed.

Slowly, Ilya reached down, his hands trembling, and cupped Shane's face, urging him up. He looked wrecked, his eyes dark, his lips kiss-swollen. "Moy khoroshiy," he breathed, the words a prayer and an apology. He kissed him, deep and slow, tasting himself on Shane's tongue. "I am sorry. I was... I was in my head. It was a stupid thing to say. But understand that I do worry about you. Is my job now."

Shane leaned into him, the fight gone, replaced by a weary softness. "I know. I overreacted." He nuzzled into Ilya's throat, breathing him in. "Just... my body is mine. Even from you. Especially from you. I need to keep some part of myself that is independent."

"I know," Ilya whispered, holding him tight. "I forget, sometimes. The line between loving you and... the old way. I am sorry." The fight, the distance, the reason for it- it all seemed ludicrous now, washed away in a wave of shared vulnerability and pleasure. All that remained was the relief of connection, the bond humming once more with its steady, golden warmth.

They stayed tangled together on the deck as the sun climbed higher. The disagreement wasn't solved, not really. The underlying tension, Ilya's hyper-vigilance, Shane's defensive autonomy, would likely surface again. But for now, they had found their way back to each other, not with words, but with a language that, for them, was often more honest. The peacefulness settled around them once more.

The bond settled back into its familiar, golden hum, the brief static completely erased. They sat tangled together in the grass as the sun began its descent, the forgotten clippers lying nearby. The conflict hadn't been solved with words, but with a language older and more direct. And as Ilya held his mate, feeling the solid, alive weight of him, he understood that some arguments weren't meant to be won, only forgotten in the perfect, consuming reminder of what truly mattered.

Shane didn't need to understand the words. The meaning was clear in the rigid line of Ilya's shoulders, the way his free hand clenched and unclenched. Boston was pushing. Hard. They were offering the moon- a multi-year deal with a massive resigning bonus, even whispers of

future equity. A legacy contract. And Ilya was refusing it all, a king turning down a crown, for the simple, terrifying reason that stood in the kitchen making coffee.

A cold knot of guilt settled in Shane's stomach, heavy as a stone. He looked down at his own phone, where an unopened email from his agent sat. The offer from Montreal was staggering: five years, eight million per. A commitment that would cement him as a franchise cornerstone for the prime of his career. It was everything he'd ever worked for.

And the thought of signing it, of locking himself into five years of a life that would forcibly keep him hundreds of miles from his bonded mate for most of the year, made his breath shorten. He'd been stalling, citing a need for his lawyer to review every clause, knowing he was trying to buy time for a miracle solution that wouldn't force one of them to sacrifice everything.

Ilya was sacrificing right now. Turning down generational wealth and security, all for the flexibility to be with him. The guilt twisted, sharp and acidic.

The pacing stopped. Ilya's voice changed, the tension bleeding into a tone of final, steely negotiation. More Russian, slower now. Then, in English, clear and firm: "Ten. For the one year. And the extension clause if we make the playoffs. Yes. Tell them yes."

The call ended. For a moment, Ilya stood perfectly still, staring out at the water. Then he turned. When he saw Shane watching from the kitchen, the severe mask of the negotiator melted away. A real, triumphant smile broke across his face, transforming him. He looked like the man who had just scored an overtime winner, all blazing joy and relief.

He walked into the kitchen, the predatory stalk replaced by a buoyant stride. "Ten million," he announced, his voice rich with satisfaction. "For one year. With an automatic extension if we make the playoffs again. They'll agree."

The numbers were astronomical. A one-year deal at that sum was a statement of supreme value, a bet that Ilya Rozanov was worth the premium of his own unpredictable terms. It was a victory.

Shane was moving before he'd fully processed it. He crossed the space between them and launched himself into Ilya's arms, the guilt momentarily overwhelmed by a surge of pure, proud elation. "Ilya, that's incredible! Ten? For one year? That's... that's amazing!"

Ilya caught him, laughing, his arms wrapping tightly around Shane's waist as he spun him once in a giddy circle. "They know what they have," he said, his smile pressed against Shane's hair. "They know they must pay for the privilege."

As Shane clung to him, the celebration thrumming through the bond, the guilt whispered back. This was a reprieve, not a solution. Ilya had bought them one more year of flexibility with his own staggering worth. Shane's own five-year offer still loomed, a monolith of expectation and dread. He had pushed his world into Ilya's, and Ilya had moved a mountain to make space. The weight of that debt, of that love, felt heavier than any contract.

He buried his face in Ilya's neck, breathing him in, trying to let the shared joy drown out the calculation. For now, they had this. A record-setting deal, a morning in their kitchen, and another year to fight for a future that belonged to both of them. The rest- the guilt, the looming decision, the terrifying logistics of a life spent in two cities- could wait for another hour. Right now, his alpha was smiling, and the bond was singing with victory, and that, for the moment, had to be enough.

The ten million dollar echo seemed to hang in the air of the cottage long after the call ended, a shimmering, gilded reprieve. Ilya's triumphant smile, the way he'd spun Shane in the kitchen- it was a perfect, buoyant moment. But by that evening, as they cleaned up from a dinner Shane had cooked with meticulous, quiet focus, the other shoe dropped.

Shane's phone buzzed on the counter. A new email from his agent, the subject line screaming **URGENT: MTL Final Offer**. He didn't need to open it. The terms were etched in his mind: five years, eight million per year. The contract that his mother had given him had been discussed with his team earlier and they had gone back to the Voyguers with their counteroffer..

Ilya, drying a plate beside him, felt the shift instantly. It wasn't a spike of panic this time, but a slow, cold seep of dread through the bond, like ink dispersing in water. He set the plate down silently and moved behind Shane, his front to Shane's back, his arms coming around to rest on the counter on either side of him, caging him in warmth.

“They sent the final offer,” Shane stated, his voice hollow.

“Are you going to check?” Ilya murmured into his hair. Ilya watched as Shane grabbed his phone and opened the email.

“Five years, Ilya.” Shane’s hands, which had been methodically wiping a spotless counter, stilled. “If I sign it... that’s five years of this. Of us being stuck.”

The guilt was back, a living weight. Ilya had just moved a financial mountain for him, and his own path seemed to be leading them into a labyrinth.

Ilya turned him gently, his hands framing Shane’s face. His blue eyes were serious, but the old, frantic intensity was tempered now into a deep, resolute calm. “Listen to me. My deal is not a sacrifice. One year of maximum value, maximum flexibility. It is a bet on us, and on me. It is good business.” He brushed his thumb over Shane’s cheekbone. “Your contract is also a strategy. But you are looking at it as a prison sentence. It does not have to be.”

“How?” The word was a plea.

“We do not solve five years today. We solve the first month. Then the second.” Ilya’s mind, the one that could break down a power play or orchestrate a complex international escape, was already whirring. “My agent, Anatoly, is drawing up the Boston papers. He is also... exploring other options. Quietly.”

Shane’s eyes widened. “A trade?”

“It is one option. A difficult one. But an option.” Ilya kissed his forehead. “Your signature buys time. It buys you the Cup you want, on your terms, with your city. The rest- the where, the how, is a separate negotiation. And I am very good at negotiations.”

He said it with such unshakable certainty that some of the icy dread in Shane's chest began to thaw. Ilya wasn't dismissing his fear; he was treating it as a tactical problem to be systematically dismantled. The obsession had refined itself into this: a relentless, focused commitment to carving out a shared future, no matter the obstacles.

"I hate this," Shane whispered, leaning into him.

"I know, sweetheart. I hate it too." Ilya held him tighter. "But we are not the men we were. We do not have to choose between love and our lives. We are learning to build one around the other."

Later, curled together on the couch, the fire pit a dying glow outside, they talked in low tones about the mundane mechanics of the looming separation. Ilya's endorsement trip to Stockholm. Shane's early training camp schedule. The date of Shane's heat in October.

"Anatoly will handle the Boston signing. I will be here," Ilya said, his fingers tracing idle patterns on Shane's arm. "Then I will go to Stockholm for four days. Then I come back to you. We will have two weeks before your camp starts. We will not waste a minute of it."

It was a plan. A fragile, complicated mosaic of a plan, but it was theirs. He felt Shane's relief like a second heartbeat with a mixture of anxiety and a new, tenuous hope- the hope of a partnership that could face down not just personal demons, but the impersonal, grinding machinery of their professional world.

The next morning, Shane sat at the table with his laptop. He opened the email from his agent. He scrolled past the dizzying numbers to the signature line. His hand didn't shake. He felt Ilya's presence in the next room, a steady, calming pulse through the bond, a silent sentinel.

He didn't sign it. Not yet. But for the first time, he hit 'Reply'.

Received. I have a few specific clauses regarding family-related leave and media obligations I'd like to discuss before signing. Please set up a call for next week.

It was a stall, but it was a strategic one. He was no longer just a player to be managed. He was a man with a partner, a future, and a formidable, relentless ally who had just bet ten million dollars on their ability to figure it out. As he closed the laptop, he looked out at the lake, where Ilya was stacking firewood with efficient, focused grace. The fear was still there, a cold undercurrent. But riding above it was something new: the quiet, fierce determination of a man who was finally ready to fight for every piece of his life, with the one person who had already proven he would burn the world to protect it.

The cottage kitchen was a battlefield of organized chaos. Three different cookbooks lay open, their pages weighted down with jars of spices. Shane's tablet glowed with a dense Russian food blog, machine-translated captions hovering over pictures of glossy, braided dough. His movements were a study in focused intensity- measuring flour by weight, clarifying butter with a thermometer, chopping dill, salmon, and hard-boiled eggs into precise, uniform pieces.

"Go," Shane said, not looking up from where he was carefully sealing the edges of a long, oblong dough parcel. "Call Marleau. Call Svetlana. Tell them the news. I'm cooking."

Ilya hovered in the doorway, wanting to help, to touch, to be part of the process. But Shane's posture- the set of his shoulders, the absolute concentration on his face, was a clear boundary. This was his operation. His celebration. After a moment, Ilya retreated to the living room, making his calls. He could hear the rhythmic thump-thump of knife work, the sizzle of onions hitting hot butter, the warm, rising scent of baking dough beginning to weave through the cottage.

For two hours, the symphony continued. Ilya finished his calls- Marly's whoop of disbelief at the sum, Svetlana's dry, knowing "Only you could get them to agree to that", and simply listened, the bond humming with Shane's quiet, purposeful joy. It was a different frequency than the anxiety of contract talks or the heat of passion.

Finally, Shane's voice, tight with nerves, called from the dining area. "Ilya? Can you come in here?"

Ilya walked in and stopped dead.

The familiar, rustic dining table was transformed. Their usual mismatched plates were gone, replaced by the simple, elegant stoneware they'd bought together on a whim in town and never used. Two tall, white candles stood lit in wrought iron holders, their flames dancing in the dimming evening light. A small vase held a few wildflowers that grew around the front entry. It was understated, perfect, and utterly devastating.

Before Ilya could speak, Shane vanished back into the kitchen, returning with a large baking tray. On it rested the Kulebyaka. It was magnificent. The golden-brown braid of the pastry crust was shiny with egg wash, intricately woven. He set it down with a soft thud, then brought out the sides: a bowl of shimmering, deep red beetroot salad, another of crisp, cooling cucumber and sour cream, small dishes of coarse salt and fresh horseradish.

He stood back, wiping his hands on a towel, his cheeks flushed from the oven's heat. He wouldn't meet Ilya's eyes. "The blog said it's traditional. For celebrations. I... I hope it's right."

Ilya couldn't move. The contract he was signing was good, a great show to the entire NHL of his worth and Marly was agreed to follow his secret plan that he hadn't shared with Shane yet, it all dissolved into smoke. All that existed was in front of him right now, this food, this man who had spent hours figuring a foreign language blog to recreate a piece of his home, for *him*. The bond didn't just hum; it resonated with a profound, aching sweetness that tightened his throat.

He crossed the room in two strides. He didn't kiss Shane. He framed his face with hands that felt too large, too clumsy for the fragility of the moment, and simply rested his forehead against Shane's.

"Solnyshko moyo," he breathed, the words ragged. "You made this? For me?"

"For us," Shane corrected softly, his hands coming up to clutch Ilya's wrists. "It's a good deal. You deserve a celebration."

"This," Ilya said, pulling back just enough to look at the table, then back into Shane's earnest, worried eyes, "... This..." He gestured, lost for words in any language. "This is everything."

Shane's anxious posture finally melted. A small, proud smile touched his lips as he served himself. Ilya stared at the table, at the candles, at the magnificent Kulebyaka. The bond in his chest wasn't humming; it was a resonating chord struck so deep it threatened to shatter him. The sight of this, of Shane having poured his meticulous, beautiful focus into a piece of his childhood, into a celebration of him, unraveled every last thread of his control. It was too much. The love, the devotion, the sheer *seeing* of him was a tidal wave, and the only way he knew how to weather it was to consume and be consumed.

His voice, when it came, was rough. "Solnyshko, can we... put it back? In the oven? Just for a few minutes. To keep it warm."

Shane blinked, pulled from his nervous appraisal of the table. "Oh. Yeah, of course. It might dry out a little, but- " He moved quickly, carefully transferring the heavy tray back to the oven, turning the heat off to let the residual warmth cradle it.

He turned back, and the breath left his lungs.

Ilya was already naked. He'd shed his clothes in silent, swift movements, and now he stood like a statue hewn from moonlight and want, his eyes dark pools of fixed, desperate intensity. The ten million dollars, the contract, the entire world outside these walls, none of it existed. There was only the scent of dill and baking pastry, the flicker of candlelight on Shane's surprised face, and the roaring need to reclaim, to fuse, to thank him in the only language that felt big enough for this moment.

"Ilya- " Shane's protest was cut off as Ilya closed the distance. He pinned him against the wall beside the stove, his mouth crashing down on Shane's in a kiss that was all possession. There was no patience, no tender question. His hands fisted in Shane's shirt and tore, the soft fabric giving way with a sharp sound. Buttons pinged against the floor. Shane gasped into the kiss, his own hands coming up to clutch at Ilya's bare shoulders, not to push away, but to hold on as the world tilted.

Ilya's mouth was everywhere- his jaw, his throat, worrying the bonding bite with a growl- as he made quick, brutal work of the rest of their clothes. Then his hands were on Shane, turning him, bending him over the cool granite of the kitchen counter. The unfinished salad, the bowl of smetana, were carefully pushed aside with a sweep of his arm.

There was no preparation but the slickness of their own want. Ilya entered him in one deep, claiming stroke, a hoarse sound torn from both their throats. It was quick, it was dirty, it was a furious, physical prayer. One hand clamped on Shane's hip, controlling the frantic, driving rhythm. The other fisted in the longer hair at Shane's nape, the hair he hadn't wanted to leave the cottage to cut, using it as an anchor, tilting Shane's head back to expose the line of his throat as Ilya pounded into him.

The bond was a live wire, screaming with a feedback loop of overwhelming emotion, Ilya's awe transmuted into raw need, Shane's surprise melting into slick, desperate surrender. It was over in minutes, a cataclysmic release that left them both shuddering, Ilya collapsed over Shane's back, his teeth locked on the bonding mark, his breaths ragged gusts against sweat-damp skin.

For a long moment, there was only the sound of their breathing and the distant, gentle heat of the oven. Slowly, Ilya softened, withdrew. He turned Shane in his arms, his hands coming up to cradle his face, his thumbs wiping at a stray tear tracked from the corner of Shane's eye. His kiss this time was different- soft, apologetic, infinitely tender. A silent *thank you, I'm sorry* and *I love you* all at once.

Shane, legs unsteady, simply leaned into him. "The food," he mumbled against Ilya's chest.

Ilya let out a shaky laugh. "Da. The food, the delicious food that you made for me. I can't wait."

They cleaned up quickly with damp cloths. Shane, with a stubborn, endearing pragmatism, insisted they at least put on their underwear before sitting down to eat. "We can't eat naked. It's... unsanitary."

So they sat at the beautiful, candlelit table in nothing but their boxer briefs, skin glowing in the soft light, the air now thick with the combined scents of sex, sweat, and savory pastry. Ilya served them both, his hands remarkably steady. He took his first bite of the Kulebyaka, now slightly warmer from its second stay in the oven.

He closed his eyes. It was still perfect. Maybe more so.

“This,” Ilya said, his voice still rough but filled with a wonder that had nothing to do with the sex and everything to do with the man across from him. “This is the most incredible thing anyone has ever made for me.” He reached across the table, his fingers linking with Shane’s. “You are... you are a miracle. Thank you.”

He praised every component, the flakiness of the pastry, the seasoning, the sharp bite of the horseradish. Each compliment had Shane practically preening, a blush forming across his face. They ate the entire meal there, half-dressed in the candlelight, the bond between them settling not into a deep, resonant, and utterly satiated peace. The celebration wasn’t for the contract. It was for this very moment, the terrifying, wonderful fact of *them*, and the forever they were building, one imperfectly perfect moment at a time.

The full moon hung over the lake like a polished coin, bleaching the night of its true darkness and painting the world in shades of silver and obsidian. Inside, Ilya lay awake, the possessive calm of the evening dinner thoroughly burned away by a newer, more restless energy. The bond was thrumming within it. He turned his head on the pillow. Shane was asleep beside him, his breathing deep, the line of his throat a pale invitation in the lunar glow.

Ilya didn’t wake him with words. He slid a hand over Shane’s hip, his thumb stroking the dip of his waist. Shane stirred, a soft, questioning sound in his throat. “Mmm?”

“Come,” Ilya whispered, his voice gravelly with intent. He was already slipping from the bed, pulling Shane with him.

Shane came willingly, sleep-soft and pliant, his bare feet silent on the cool floors. Ilya led him through the sliding door, the night air a crisp shock that made Shane gasp softly. The world was monochrome and vast, the lake a sheet of liquid mercury under the moon’s relentless gaze.

Ilya didn’t stop at the dock’s edge. He walked them right down the weathered planks to the very end, where the wood met the black water. Without preamble, he stepped off, pulling Shane with him.

The water was shockingly cold, a sharp bite that stole Shane's breath and made him cling to Ilya. "Ilya- !"

"Hush," Ilya murmured, his arms like bands of iron, holding him close as their bodies adjusted. The cold was a fleeting protest, soon forgotten under the heat of skin on skin. The water came to their chests, lapping against them, making every movement slow and weighted.

Ilya backed Shane against the rough poles of the dock. The wood was solid and unyielding at his back. Ilya's hands found his hips, his grip firm, anchoring him there. In the bright, unforgiving moonlight, every detail was etched with stark clarity: the water droplets beading on Ilya's shoulders, the dark fan of his lashes against his cheeks, the absolute focus in his blue eyes.

He kissed him, and it tasted of lake water and midnight. There was no patience in it, only a hungry, consuming need that the water seemed to amplify. His hands were everywhere, sliding over slick skin, relearning the territory he owned by right of love and bite. He nuzzled into Shane's throat, his nose cold against the heated skin, and inhaled deeply- a long, shuddering draught that was pure, uncut possession. He was erasing everything but this: the chill of the water, the scent of their mingled arousal, the moon, *them*.

Positioning Shane with confident movements, Ilya entered him in one smooth, deep thrust. The water provided a strange, slowing resistance, making every movement feel monumental, every sensation amplified. Shane cried out, the sound swallowed by the vast, quiet night. His arms locked around Ilya's neck, his legs around his waist, holding on as Ilya set a relentless, driving rhythm.

Shane was pinned, truly pinned, between the immovable dock and the irrepressible force of his alpha. Ilya's hands braced against the wood on either side of Shane's head, his body a piston, his face buried in the curve of Shane's neck. He was murmuring in Russian, the words a hot, broken stream against his skin, filthy promises, worshipful curses, the raw, unvarnished poetry of his need.

The bond was not a quiet hum. It was a roaring confluence. Shane's pleasure crested in a blinding, silent explosion, his body seizing, his mouth open in a soundless scream against Ilya's shoulder. Ilya followed him over, his own climax a guttural shout bitten into Shane's skin, his hips stuttering as he spilled into the welcoming, clinging heat.

For a long moment, they stayed fused, suspended in the cool water, their ragged breaths the only sound. Slowly, Ilya's arms slid from the dock to wrap around Shane, holding him up, holding him close. He pressed his forehead to Shane's, their noses touching, their breaths mingling.

The frantic energy was spent. What remained was a profound, water-logged peace. Ilya nuzzled his cheek, a slow, tender slide of skin on skin, and took one last, deep, satisfied breath of their mingled scent, now irrevocably layered with the clean, mineral smell of the lake.

Wordlessly, he helped Shane back onto the dock. They didn't rush. They sat for a moment on the edge, legs dangling in the water, letting the air dry their skin. No towels, no clothes, just the night air and the solid, warm presence of the other.

Finally, Ilya stood and pulled Shane to his feet. Hand in hand, they walked back up the dock toward the dark cottage, two silvered figures in a moon-washed world, leaving the ripples of their union to slowly fade into the vast, quiet blackness of the lake.

The week before their departure from the cottage seemed to accelerate, each sunset arriving with a swift, cruel finality. They hosted Shane's parents for a final lunch, and it was, by all accounts, a success. Yuna asked about the garden. David helped Ilya fix a loose step on the dock. The conversation was easy, the tension from previous visits a ghost they all politely ignored. Yet, as his parents drove away, Shane felt the quiet of the cottage settle around him not as peace, but as a prelude to an ending.

Ilya felt it too. He saw it in the way Shane would sometimes stare out at the lake, his coffee cooling forgotten in his hand. He felt it through the bond, a deep, mournful undertow beneath the daily rhythms. The dread was mutual, a shared current pulling them toward a cliff edge. And as it often did with them, the psychic tension manifested physically, transforming their lovemaking.

The tender, exploratory pace of their early summer was gone. In its place was a reclaiming. A desperation. Ilya's hands, which had learned such gentleness, began to leave faint bruises again on Shane's hips, not from carelessness, but from a need to imprint, to memorize the feel of him down to the cellular level. His mouth sought the skin of Shane's throat, his collarbones, the inside of his thighs, leaving purpling marks that Shane would trace in the mirror the next morning with a strange sense of satisfaction. They were proof. They were his.

Shane, in turn, became insatiable. The structured, conflict-avoidant part of him was overwhelmed by a more primal directive: *store this feeling up*. He began waking Ilya in the deep, silent hours of the night, not with words, but with the heat of his mouth or the sure, seeking pressure of his hands. There was no patience in it, only a hungry, focused intent that left Ilya gasping and wrecked before he was fully awake.

One such night, after Shane had wrung a shuddering climax from him and then curled possessively around his back, Ilya finally caught his breath. He turned and pulled Shane against his chest, his nose buried in his sweat-damp hair.

"You are having mini-heat," Ilya murmured, the joke a rough whisper in the dark. "My greedy omega. You cannot get enough."

Shane let out a shaky breath that wasn't quite a laugh. "It's not a heat." He knew Ilya knew. It was the separation. It was the terrifying prospect of empty beds in different cities, of a bond stretched thin across state lines, of having to relearn how to breathe alone. The physical ache was a preemptive echo of the one to come.

"I know," Ilya said, his arms tightening. The humor was gone. His own possessiveness, the obsessive core that therapy and medication had banked but not extinguished, flared in response to Shane's need. It was a mirror. He understood this language of desperation perfectly. His own kisses grew more biting, his own grip more urgent, as if he could fortify Shane against the coming distance by sheer force of will.

That old, hyper-vigilant instinct now turned inward, toward their own precious, dwindling time. He found himself cataloguing sensations: the exact sound Shane made when he came, the pattern of his breathing in deepest sleep, the way the morning light caught the dusting of freckles across his shoulders. He was building a mental archive, a treasury to survive on in between the times when they could be together.

Shane lay awake in the dark, the numbers and maps in his head refusing to quiet. The bond was a low, restless hum against his sternum, attuned to Ilya's deep, even breaths beside him. For weeks, the problem of distance had been a silent, looming presence in the back of his mind. Tonight, a potential variable had crystallized, and it refused to wait for sunrise.

He turned, the sheets whispering. In the faint moonlight, Ilya was a solid silhouette, the severe lines of his face softened in sleep. Shane reached out, his fingers brushing a curl from his forehead. "Ilya," he whispered. "Wake up."

Ilya was awake instantly, a lifetime of hyper-vigilance erasing sleep. His eyes opened, blue even in the dark, sharp and searching. "Solnyshko? What is wrong?" His hand found Shane's arm, grip firm, already scanning for threat.

"Nothing's wrong. I just... I need to ask you something. I can't stop thinking."

Ilya's body relaxed a fraction, but the intensity in his gaze remained. He shifted onto his side, propping his head on his hand. The bond carried the tail end of his sleep-fog and the quick, alert focus replacing it. "Ask."

Shane took a steadying breath, organizing the points in his mind. "Your one-year deal is going to get a lot of attention." He paused, meeting Ilya's eyes. "Ottawa."

Ilya blinked, processing. "Ottawa?" he repeated, his voice gravelly.

"They're rebuilding the team. They're not... they're not a real contender right now. But they have cap space. They'll need someone like you. And they're only a couple hours from Montreal." The words came out in a quiet, rushed stream. "When your year is up. If you went there... we could be together, a lot more often. We could have a home, one home, between cities. No more neutral hotels. Just... us."

The room was silent. Ilya's expression was unreadable, his therapist's calm a mask over whatever storm the suggestion had stirred. The old Ilya might have seized the idea with possessive fervor, dictating terms. The man he was now, the one who took his medication and valued Shane's autonomy above all, simply listened.

"You have thought about this," he finally said.

"Constantly."

"You would have me leave Boston, after giving them their first cup in 20 years, for a team at the bottom."

"You're right, it's not fair," Shane said, the raw honesty laid bare. "I forget that I said anything, sorry..." He reached out, his hand settling over Ilya's heart, feeling the strong, steady beat. "We'll think of something else next year."

Ilya covered Shane's hand with his own, holding it there. He was silent for a long time, his thumb stroking Shane's knuckles. The anxiety eased without either of them speaking, with a complex frequency- surprise, deep consideration, the faint, old ache of his own possessive want finally offered a legitimate outlet.

"It is a big ask," Ilya murmured, but there was no refusal in it. It was an acknowledgment of scale. "My value is high now. It may not be in a year if I have a bad season. Ottawa may not want an aging Russian with a... complicated reputation."

"They'd be lucky to have you, and we're not aging. This is the first real contract after our rookie ones." Shane said fiercely.

A small, weary smile touched Ilya's lips. He leaned in and pressed a kiss to Shane's forehead. "You are my agent now, yes? My fierce, little negotiator." He sighed, the sound full of the weight of futures. "Let me talk to people. I have a plan and this might work. I can't think of anything I'd want more than for us to be together like that. My agent would have heart attack. But," He looked at Shane, his eyes serious. "That... means more than you know."

He pulled Shane into his arms, tucking him against his chest, his nose finding its home in Shane's hair. He took a long, deep breath, scenting him, anchoring himself in the reality of the man who was planning a future with him, not in spite of his career, but intricately woven through it.

"We will look at it," Ilya whispered into the dark. "When the season starts. We will watch their games. We will see. Is a possibility." He kissed the top of Shane's head. "Now sleep."

The frantic, spinning thoughts in Shane's mind finally stilled. Wrapped in the heat of Ilya's body and the steady pulse of the bond, the anxious energy bled away, replaced by a tentative, hopeful peace. The future was still a tangled mess, but for the first time, they were both looking at the same corner of it, imagining the same destination. Together.

Their last days were a paradox of sweetness and hunger. They would skate on the practice rink in the afternoon, the easy, wordless communion of their sticks and the puck a bittersweet joy. Then, as evening fell, Ilya would push Shane against the boards, his mouth desperate, his hands mapping him through their clothes as if for the first time, or the last.

The peace they had built was not shattered, but it was strained, pulled taut by the future. It was no longer the quiet of healing, but of lovers trying to drink each other in before the drought. They clung to each other not just in passion, but in sleep, in the kitchen, on the dock, two creatures trying to merge into a single, fortified entity strong enough to survive the world that waited for them just beyond the tree line.

The last day dawned with a grey, misty quiet that seemed to hold its breath. They spent it in bed. The world beyond the sheets- the packing, the goodbyes to the lake, the return to reality, felt like a distant, hostile planet.

They surfaced only for necessities, a shared, unspoken pact. They'd pad to the kitchen, a tangle of limbs and sleep-warm skin, to forage for fruit, cheese, and the last of the bread, eating it standing up at the counter, feeding each other bites. Then they'd retreat, burrowing back into the nest of their bed, the duvet a shield against the inevitable.

The conversations meandered, full of future plans and wishes for their shared life.

“We should get a house with a big pool,” Shane said, his head pillowed on Ilya’s chest, tracing the lines of his tattoo.

“A big one.” Ilya replied with an indulgent smile.

“Yes, and a hot tub.”

Ilya chuckled, the sound vibrating under Shane’s cheek. “This is how it begins. Next you will want a rink too. Ask for whatever you want, sweetheart. I will give it to you.”

They talked about the season, the pressure a tangible thing in the room. Shane mentioned the weight of the new contract, the “family-friendly” expectation from the Roots campaign that still made his stomach clench. Ilya listened, his hand stroking Shane’s hair, not offering solutions now, just absorbing the worry, sharing the load through the bond. He spoke of Boston’s new coach, the system changes, the ten million dollar target now on his back. It was scary. It was also theirs.

“Christmas,” Shane said later, as afternoon light struggled through the clouds. “We should... have everyone. Here. If the lake is frozen, we could skate. My parents, our friends... everyone.”

The idea was a lifeline thrown into the future. A fixed point of light in the long, dark tunnel of the season. Ilya’s arms tightened around him. “Da. A big, chaotic Canadian Christmas. I will wear an ugly sweater. I will lose to your father at whatever boring board game he chooses. It will be perfect.”

It was a promise. A declaration that their life together would have holidays, traditions, and crowded, noisy rooms full of the people they loved, no longer in separate orbits.

Eventually, the practical could no longer be avoided. With a shared sigh, they reached for their phones. Side-by-side against the headboard, they pulled up their calendars, a mosaic of color-coded obligations: team flights, exhibition games, endorsement trips, media days.

“You have a day off after the game in New York,” Ilya said, his finger tapping Shane’s screen. “I fly in that night. We have thirty-six hours.”

“You’re in Chicago on the 12th. I could meet you there after my game in Winnipeg,” Shane countered, already calculating flight times.

They mapped the preseason, a patchwork of stolen hours in hotel rooms just like before. It wasn’t great. It was a grueling itinerary of red-eyes and frantic reunions. But as they slotted the pieces together, a fragile pattern emerged. It was more than they’d dared hope for. “It could be worse,” Shane murmured, leaning his head against Ilya’s shoulder.

“It will be hard,” Ilya admitted, his voice low. He put the phones aside and turned, gathering Shane fully into his embrace. He nuzzled into his neck, breathing him in, as if trying to store the scent for the coming drought. “But we have a plan. We have Christmas. We have this.” He placed a hand over Shane’s heart, where the bond lived.

As the final evening settled, they made love once more. It was slower now, not with the frantic hunger of the previous week, but with a profound, aching sweetness. A memorization, a vow.

The goodbye was a quiet, private devastation. The car idled at the departures curb, its dark window tint a shield from the world. Inside, there were no grand speeches. Ilya held Shane’s face, his thumbs brushing away the tears that hadn’t yet fallen. His own expression was a study in controlled stillness, the new medication and hard-won discipline keeping the storm of his own separation anxiety locked down tight.

“One phone call. Every morning when you wake up,” Ilya murmured, his forehead pressed to Shane’s. “No matter the time.”

Shane could only nod, his throat too tight for words. He poured everything into the kiss- a final, desperate infusion of *them*. When Ilya pulled away, it was with a surgeon’s precision, severing the moment before it could destroy them both. He gave Shane’s hand one last, crushing squeeze, then slipped out of the car.

Shane held it together until the driver's door clicked shut. The sound was a guillotine. A ragged, broken sound was torn from his chest as he watched Ilya's broad back, straight and unyielding, disappear into the terminal crowd without a backward glance. He knew why Ilya didn't look back. To do so would have been to crumble. The understanding didn't lessen the ache. Two weeks. Then a day and a half in a hotel room between flights. It felt like a sentence.

His Montreal apartment felt like a museum of a past life. Too quiet, too sterile, smelling of cleaning products and absence. He'd barely dropped his bag when his phone buzzed, not a text, but a voicemail notification. The team owner's personal assistant, her voice smooth and urgent, requesting his presence at the office for a meeting. "At his earliest convenience," of course, meant now.

An hour later, Shane sat in the sleek, oppressive boardroom. Across from him sat the head coach, the GM, and the owner himself. The new, "family-friendly" contract lay on the table between them like a peace treaty that felt like a declaration of war.

"Shane," the owner began, smiling with too many teeth. "We're so thrilled about your future here. We feel an eight-year term shows real commitment. To show ours, we're prepared to improve the salary. Make it an even nine million."

The pressure was a physical weight, the same kind that had once sent him into a panic at his mother's kitchen table. He felt the old urge to fold, to nod, to escape the conflict. But he also felt the ghost of Ilya's hand on the small of his back, and the echo of his own voice from the cottage.

He looked at the three men, their expectant faces. "The term is three years," Shane said, his voice clearer than he felt. "The AAV is eight. That was my final compromise. It's the last offer before my management starts taking calls from other teams."

The GM leaned forward. "Shane, be reasonable. You're the face of this franchise. We need stability. Don't we treat you right? We have you as the star. Your career is defined with us."

“You have stability,” Shane replied, the analytical part of his mind clicking into gear, treating this like a systems problem. “You have three years of my prime. All the plays have me as the focus instead of the whole team. You have a lot of talent here and don’t use it..Send the final version of the three-year deal to my lawyer. That’s the only version I’ll be signing.”

He stood up, the legs of his chair scraping loudly in the stunned silence. He didn’t wait for a dismissal. He walked out, his heart hammering against his ribs.

In the empty, echoing hallway outside the executive suites, he sagged against the cool wall. The adrenaline bled away, leaving him trembling. He fumbled for his phone, his fingers dialing by muscle memory.

Ilya answered on the second ring. “Solnyshko? You are home?”

“I just told the owner, the GM, and the coach to go fuck themselves, I think.” Shane blurted, the words tumbling out in a rush.

There was a beat of silence on the line. Then, Ilya’s voice, rich with a pride so profound it vibrated down the line. “Molodets. Tell me everything.”

Shane did, the story spilling out in fractured pieces- the improved offer, the pressure, his own flat refusal. As he spoke, the trembling stopped. Ilya listened, interjecting only with soft, affirming sounds, a steady presence in his ear.

“You were perfect,” Ilya said when he finished. “You stated your boundary. I’m very proud of you. They will give you what you want, Montreal is shit without you.”

“It felt... good. Terrifying, but good.”

“That is how it feels to choose yourself,” Ilya murmured. “I am so proud of you I cannot breathe with it.”

They talked for a few more precious minutes, the conversation drifting to mundane things- what Ilya had eaten on the plane, the weird smell in Shane's apartment after being closed for so long, simply to stay connected, to delay the click of the call ending.

Suddenly, Shane heard a distant, muffled call on Ilya's end. "Rozanov! Gear check!"

Ilya sighed, the sound full of regret. "I must go. Call me tonight. Any time."

"Go," Shane said, already missing him. "I will."

The line went dead. Shane pushed off the wall, straightening his jacket. The hallway no longer felt like a retreat. It felt like a runway. He walked toward the exit, not with the weight of a boy being managed, but with the sure stride of a man who had finally decided, for himself and for the life he was building, what his own game would be.

The two weeks apart had been an exercise in exquisite, daily torture. The bond, that golden thread that had become as essential as breath, stretched thin over the distance, hummed with a constant, low-grade ache. Phone calls and video chats were poor substitutes, leaving them both feeling hollow and strangely disembodied. Shane moved through preseason training in Montreal like a ghost, his body executing drills while his mind was perpetually elsewhere- tracking Ilya's flight to Tampa, his morning skate in Sunrise, the time difference until their next scheduled call.

So when his agent mentioned the Rolex shoot in New York, Shane's heart didn't just leap; it performed a full gymnastics routine. He checked Ilya's schedule with a focus usually reserved for playoff opponents. A back-to-back against the Admirals. Two nights in the city.

"I can make that work," he'd said to his agent, his voice impressively casual. "The timing's good."

The Rolex people were thrilled. “Timeless excellence,” the creative director gushed over Zoom. “The poise under pressure. The quiet confidence.” Shane nodded along, thinking only of the digital clock on his phone counting down to 7:03 PM, when Ilya’s team bus was estimated to arrive at their Manhattan hotel.

The shoot itself was a blur of sharp tailoring, diffused lighting, and the cool weight of a platinum Daytona on his wrist. He was directed to gaze thoughtfully into the middle distance, to exude an aura of serene mastery. All the while, his internal world was a riot of static. Every minute was a minute closer. The bond, so muted and mournful for a fortnight, began to vibrate with a gathering frequency, a live wire sensing the closing circuit.

He texted from the town car, his fingers unsteady: Room 1412. I’m here.

The reply was instantaneous: Elevator. Now.

Shane’s heart hammered against his ribs. He fumbled with the key card, the green light flashing. He pushed the door open.

Ilya was already there, having come straight from the arena after a morning skate. He stood in the middle of the suite, still in his track suit, a duffel at his feet. For a frozen second, they just stared. The distance collapsed not with a bang, but with the sheer, overwhelming reality of each other’s presence. He looked tired, a new tension around his eyes that hadn’t been there at the cottage, but his gaze was a physical touch.

Then Shane kicked the door shut and they crashed together.

It was not gentle. It was a collision. Ilya’s bag went flying. Shane’s carefully styled hair was demolished by hands that speared into it, holding him still for a kiss that was pure claiming. There was no finesse, only two weeks of starvation poured into lips and teeth and tongue. Shane clawed at the zipper of Ilya’s jacket, pushing it off his shoulders. Ilya’s hands were everywhere- under Shane’s crisp, borrowed shirt, mapping the planes of his back as if checking for changes, for damage.

“Bozhe moy,” Ilya gasped against his mouth, breathing him in like a man surfacing from a dive. “You are here. You are real.”

They stumbled toward the bed, shedding clothes in a frantic, graceless trail. The Rolex, worth more than some cars, was carelessly tossed onto the nightstand. Time, for once, was irrelevant. There was only this: the shocking heat of skin on skin, the solid weight of Ilya pinning him to the mattress, the desperate, perfect fit of their bodies reconnecting. Ilya entered him in one deep, sure stroke, and Shane cried out, his back arching, not from pain but from the profound, seismic relief of a void being filled. The bond, strained and silent for so long, roared back to life, a feedback loop of sensation and emotion so intense it bordered on unbearable.

It was fast, fierce, and over too soon- a necessary conflagration to burn away the separation anxiety. They collapsed, slick and panting, limbs entangled. For long minutes, the only sound was their ragged breathing syncing, slowly, into one rhythm.

Then, the reclaiming began in earnest.

Ilya rolled them, urging Shane on top of him. “Let me see you,” he murmured, his hands skating over Shane’s flanks, his stomach, his chest. His touch was no longer frantic, but reverent, cataloguing. He drew Shane down for another kiss, slower now, pouring a different kind of hunger into it. He nuzzled along his jaw, down his throat, burying his face in the junction of his shoulder with a deep, shuddering inhale.

“You smell like airplane and cologne,” Ilya muttered, displeased. “And strangers.”

“It’s called ‘Eau de Photoshoot,’” Shane managed, his voice wrecked.

“I prefer ‘Eau de Shane,’” Ilya said, and began the work of overwriting every other scent with his own. He kissed and licked and gently bit his way across every inch of skin he could reach, a slow, meticulous re-scenting that had Shane trembling with a different kind of intensity. It was possessive, yes, but it was also profoundly grounding. It was Ilya rebuilding their shared atmosphere, molecule by molecule.

After, wrapped in the hotel's stiff sheets, they finally talked. Not the stilted, compressed conversations of their calls, but the meandering, sleepy exchanges of true intimacy.

"The shoot?" Ilya asked, his lips against Shane's temple.

"Boring. They wanted 'poise.' I mostly thought about this."

A rumble of satisfaction vibrated through Ilya's chest. "Good. My games were just time to pass until now."

"How's the new coach?"

"Demanding. But smart. It is... fine." Ilya's hand stroked down Shane's spine. "Your contract?"

"Signed. Three years. They didn't do an announcement though since they will want to extend it after we get another cup. It's done."

Ilya held him tighter. "Moy khoroshiy mal'chik." The praise warmed Shane more than any blanket.

They ordered obscenely expensive room service and ate it naked in bed. They showered together, Ilya washing Shane's hair with a focus usually reserved for sacred rituals. They napped, Shane curled into Ilya's side, the bond humming a contented, drowsy song it hadn't managed in weeks.

Later, as dusk painted the New York skyline in shades of orange and grey, Ilya propped himself on an elbow. "Christmas," he said, tracing Shane's lower lip. "At the cottage. We will need a tree. A big one. And I will learn to make... what is egg drink?"

“Eggnog?” Shane smiled, a real, easy smile for the first time in days. “It’s vile. But we can get some.”

“We will make our own. It will be superior.” Ilya’s blue eyes were soft in the fading light. “We will fill the place with noise and light. And make memories. It will be ours.”

The fantasy was a balm. For a few precious hours, the relentless grind of the season, the separate cities, the public scrutiny, all faded away. There was just this room, this bed, the steady beat of Ilya’s heart under his ear.

Reality, of course, was waiting. Ilya had a game tomorrow night. Shane’s flight back to Montreal was at noon. Their time was measured in hours, not days.

But as they drifted off that night, Shane’s head on Ilya’s chest, the bond was no longer a thin, aching thread. It was a cable of reinforced steel, tempered by distance and reforged in reunion. They had survived the first separation. There may be one or two more occasions for them to meet within the next month. The Christmas plan was a beacon. And the next time they had to say goodbye, they would do so knowing this- this perfect, stolen harmony in a anonymous hotel room- was what they were fighting to get back to, over and over, until they could build a life where goodbyes were the exception.

A few weeks later, Yuna met him at his sleek, minimalist hotel near the studio for some sports drink he was collaborating on. She looked different- softer. The sharp, managerial edge was sheathed. Over tea in the quiet lounge, she didn’t mention contracts or endorsements.

“I’ve been doing a lot of thinking,” she began, her hands wrapped around her cup. “About the pressure. I... I saw how I made you feel. At the cottage. For years, really. I was so afraid of you losing your security, your place, that I forgot to ask if you were happy in it. I’m sorry, Shane.”

The words, so simple and direct, disarmed him completely. He set his own cup down, the structured part of his mind fumbling for a response to this new, uncharted input. “It’s okay,” he finally said, the old reflex. Then he corrected himself. “Thank you. For saying that.”

They talked then, truly talked. About the quiet of the lake, about the peace he’d found there. And slowly, carefully, Shane led them to the heart of it.

“I’m happy, Mom,” he said, the words feeling monumental. “With Ilya. It’s... it’s not what anyone would have planned. It’s messy and complicated and sometimes still really hard. But he sees me. All of me. And he’s trying so hard to be someone who deserves... this.” He gestured vaguely, encompassing himself, his peace.

Yuna watched his face, seeing not the guarded tension of old, but a quiet, settled certainty. She reached across the table and squeezed his hand. “He threatened to take you to Siberia if I stressed you out again,” she said, a faint, wry smile touching her lips. “I believe him. And... I think I’m starting to believe in him. For you.”

It was more than he’d ever hoped for. The final knot of familial tension, the one that had lived in his stomach for months, began to loosen.

Chapter End Notes

Whether the next chapter is hopeful or emotionally devastating honestly depends on what my playlist decides while I’m writing. 😊

Thank you all for reading, commenting, screaming in the comments, and taking this journey with me. Every update feels a little less terrifying because of you. I’ll see you all in Chapter 35. 💙✍️

Chapter 35 will be posted late Sunday/early Monday. I’ll be tweaking chapters 2-12 to improve them.

Chapter 35: Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

First things first... sorry this one took me a little longer than I planned. 🙊 I had two versions of this chapter and nuked the cutesy one.

As always, the biggest thank you to my amazing beta reader for catching all the things my eyes skip over. You're an absolute lifesaver. 💙

And to my favorite gay besties...I appreciate you more than you'll ever know. 😂

And Karen, you had me smiling so huge as I was reading your comments!

I have a question for you all... 🙄

Would it be absolutely terrible if I extended the chapter count a little?

When I first outlined this story, I thought I knew exactly how many chapters it would take. Every time I try to combine plot points into one chapter, it starts feeling rushed, and there are so many little moments together that I don't want to sacrifice just to hit an arbitrary number. I'd much rather let the story breathe than smush important details together.

So... if the chapter count quietly creeps up a little, I hope y'all forgive me. ❤️

As always, thank you all for being here, for reading, for commenting, and for loving these two as much as I do. It genuinely means the world to me.

Now... Hope y'all enjoy Chapter 35. 🥺

Chapter Notes

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

The house was too quiet.

Three weeks ago, waking up meant a warm body wrapped around him and the scent of cedar, honeysuckle, and coffee filling the room before the sun did.

Now it meant an alarm clock, stale coffee, and an empty bed that smelled like nothing.

Bond sickness wasn't dramatic anymore. It was quieter than that. A constant awareness that something essential was missing. Their few stolen hours last week would have to do for another month. Then a day or two between next month and Shane's next heat if he really did go off the suppressants for the 3 or 4 days.

Ilya laid in bed, unable to sleep in frustration. There was a reason why omega's usually stayed home after being mated. Alpha's and omega's were not meant to be apart. Now, when

he was on the phone with Shane and they were talking about how they thought the season would go, it seemed unlikely that they really would have time for Shane to have his heat in the middle of a season, even more unlikely that he will want to try to conceive during the season.

The obsessed and irrational side of Ilya, that he was managing was louder in his mind when he was alone. One order in the right tone would have Shane go into that perfectly submissive state and they'd be living together and expecting a baby in less than a month. But Shane would hate that, possibly resenting him for taking away his choice over something so big.

The air in the Boston practice facility was stale with recycled cold and the sharp tang of sweat. For Ilya, day three of training camp was a study in profound, grinding boredom. The drills were elementary, the systems review something he could diagram in his sleep. He'd already made the team ten million dollars. Now, he was just a highly paid asset going through mandatory motions, orbiting the ice while wide-eyed rookies flailed around him like startled fish.

His mind, always too loud, was elsewhere. Specifically, it was on a lake in Quebec, or in a Montreal practice facility, tracking another schedule entirely. His hand kept drifting to his phone in his pocket. The instinct was muscle memory by now. See something absurd, like rookie defenseman Carson face-planting during a simple edgework drill, and reach to record. Open the thread with Shane and hit send. Waiting for the laughing emoji or the dry observation that would inevitably be sharper and funnier than the video itself.

His thumb hovered over the camera icon as Carson, red-faced, scrambled back to his feet. But the thread with Shane was now a time zone and a brutal schedule away. Sending it now would be an interruption. Shane was probably still on the ice, dissecting a power play with that terrifying, beautiful focus.

A familiar, hollow ache settled behind Ilya's sternum. Irritation, sharp and sudden, washed over him. At the monotony. At the distance. At the fact that the simplest joy of his daily life, sharing stupid shit with the person who got it, was now logistically complicated.

He didn't close the camera. Instead, he framed the shot: Carson, now desperately trying to look nonchalant as he rejoined the line, the ghost of ice burns on his cheek. Ilya hit record for a few seconds. Then, on a pure, stubborn impulse, he opened Instagram. He didn't caption it. He just posted the seven-second clip and shoved the phone back into his pocket, a petty, digital message in a bottle tossed into a sea of strangers.

The follower count ticked over the 750k mark. Ilya stared at his phone, propped against his locker, a protein bar forgotten in his other hand. The notification was absurd. He hadn't done anything. He'd just posted a clip of Marleau attempting, and catastrophically failing, to do a TikTok dance the rookies had taught him. The comments were a torrent of crying-laughing emojis and demands for more.

"Live!" one top comment read. "Go live at practice please!"

“Do it for the people, Rozanov!”

“We need to see the chaos in real time!”

He shrugged, finishing the protein bar. It was a Tuesday. Practice would be tedious. If the internet wanted to watch tedious, who was he to stop them?

He didn’t announce it. Just as the team was starting warm-up laps, he leaned his phone against the glass at the end of the bench, opened Instagram, and hit ‘Live’.

For the first minute, it was just a shaky, slightly distorted view of the ice, the sound of skates and distant shouts. Then the comments started flooding in.

User742: IS THIS REAL?

RaidersFan4Life: OMG HE ACTUALLY DID IT

HockeyHumor: Is that Marleau? He looks hot.

Ilya, skating past, glanced at the phone. He smiled, his eyes crinkled slightly. He held up a gloved hand in a brief, silent wave before gliding away. The comment count exploded.

He didn’t host. He just... let it run. He’d leave the phone there, a silent observer, while he did drills. Every so often, he’d skate back, pick it up, and pan slowly across the ice. He zoomed in on a rookie concentrating so hard his tongue was sticking out. He caught their goalie, Bower, in a full, dramatic argument with a goalpost after letting in a soft shot during a scrimmage.

The team, already conditioned to his filming, dialed their antics up to eleven for the live audience without knowing.

Marleau spotted the phone, pointed at it, and launched into an exaggerated, terrible impression of their head coach’s stern face. A defenseman, seeing Ilya approach with the camera, “accidentally” fired a puck gently at his own teammate’s butt, then threw his hands up in mock innocence. The comment section was pure bedlam.

PuckLife: I’M WHEEZING

NewFanHere: This is the best team chemistry I’ve ever seen.

MarleauStan: PUT HIM ON BROADWAY

For twenty minutes, the Boston Raiders’ official practice dissolved into a gentle, hilarious anarchy, all silently orchestrated by Ilya’s wandering phone. He said his commentary the whole time, giving the viewers insane facts, a slow zoom, or simply holding the frame on something absurd for a few seconds too long.

As practice wound down, he skated back to the bench, picked up the phone, and turned the camera to his own face. He was flushed, a little sweaty, his hair plastered to his forehead. He looked directly into the lens, his expression deadpan.

“See?” he said, his voice a little rough from the cold air. “Very boring.” He gave a single, small nod. “Now you know.”

He ended the live.

When he got home, he spent few minutes replying to comments. The DM's were too wild for him, so he ignored that. He scrolled through his camera roll and posted a collage of from the summer, no faces or anything to really identify the location or who he was with. He simply wrote in the caption 'Heaven on earth. Ты стал моим домом.'

He confirmed the post then texted Shane to see when he'd be free to talk. Half hour later, they were both in bed, on Facetime. Shane looked exhausted so they only spoke for a few minutes, when Ilya asked if he was okay, Shane's shrug told him all that he needed to know. Neither of them were doing too good with being separated.

A week later, he was cornered near the protein bar station by a woman from the media department whose name he immediately forgot.

"Ilya! Those clips you've been posting? They're fantastic."

He stared, chewing methodically. "Da."

"The little videos! From practice and you all having dinner- Brilliant! The one where Marleau yelled at the espresso machine until it spat foam everywhere? It's all over social media. The engagement is crazy. Higher than our official behind-the-scenes content. And you're bringing attention to our own socials. "

Ilya swallowed. He hadn't posted for the social engagement. It was an idea that had started while they were still at the cottage. He'd posted it because Shane found Marly's feud with inanimate objects hysterical, and the sound of his laugh was a drug Ilya was currently in withdrawal from. They'd had a few nights where they looked through pictures.

"We'd love it if you kept doing it," she pressed on, smiling brightly. "Maybe even let us repost some on the team account? With your permission, of course."

He shrugged, a slow roll of one shoulder. "Okay." It cost him nothing. If the Raiders wanted to become part of his plan, that was their business.

Over the next week, his following grew to two million. His teammates didn't mind hamming up to the camera if he was in frame. When he posted that any income he was gaining from socials to the top suggested charity. The league picked up on that post and promised to match the donation total. The downside was that he had to be interviewed that weekend while they had an off day so he wasn't able to visit Shane.

It became a game. A harmless, stupid camp ritual. "Roz's filming!" someone would whisper, and a wave of performative goofiness would ripple through the group. A goalie would start singing off-key in the shower. Two players would stage a mock stick-fight over the last orange Gatorade. Ilya would stand in the middle of it, a silent, amused conductor, capturing

the chaos. He never directed. He just observed, and posted. The captions, when he used them, were simple. “Gatorade is serious business.” Or just a single emoji. Interspersed with team postings, he’d dropped so of the pictures taken during the summer.

The comments section began to fill. “I didn’t know Rozanov had a sense of humor.” “This is the most relatable NHL content ever.” “He’s actually hilarious.”

The narrative, bafflingly, began to shift. The psycho rookie, the relentless predator, the “Russian Menace” was being quietly replaced in the public eye by the funny, observant guy with the surprisingly wholesome team content.

When a reporter finally asked, “What’s behind the new social media vibe, Ilya? You seem... happier,” Ilya just met his gaze, his blue eyes clear and calm.

“I am happy, we are having a good preseason, I feel very confident that we will go to playoffs again this year.” he said, and offered nothing more.

He was in bed, not wanting to start the day one morning when his next picture went up on a Tuesday morning. No people. Just two coffee mugs sitting side-by-side on the weathered wood of the dock. A soft morning fog hung over the lake, turning the world silver and quiet.

The caption read: Sometimes peace looks like this.

The fan reaction was wild:

Beautiful view.

Where is this?

WHOEVER KEEPS LEAVING THE SECOND COFFEE CUP THERE... WE SEE YOU!

Nice mugs. Who does the second one belong too?

But in a Montreal apartment, Shane stopped scrolling, his smoothie forgotten. He knew. He remembered that exact morning. The chill in the air, the way Ilya had stolen half his blanket and grumbled about Canadian summers being a lie. His thumb drifted, as it always did, to the heart icon beneath the photo. He hovered. He could see the number tick up. If he tapped it, his name would appear in the list of ‘likes’.

He closed the app. Opened his texts.

Shane- Miss you.

The reply was instantaneous.

IGR- I miss you too. Are you ready to start season?

It became their thing. For every post - a video of a rookie sleeping upright in the locker room, a photo of two skewers roasting smores at cottage, would get a sweet text from Shane.

He began posting more and more picture collages, including things from the summer and wishing Shane would just one day say- lets just tell everyone. He knew that wouldn’t come

but one could hope.

Two weeks later, another photo. This one was indoors. A book lying open on a rumpled blanket. In the corner of the frame, just barely visible, was the arm of a pair of reading glasses.

Best afternoons don't need much. He captioned.

This time, the comments section prickled with new curiosity.

Who's reading?

Two pairs of legs under that blanket!

Are you dating someone, Ilya?

He ignored them all with a smile.

Meanwhile, Shane read every single comment, a small, private smile on his face. He particularly enjoyed one that read, "Plot twist: we will all be depressed when it comes out that Rozanov is secretly married or mated or both..." He wanted to reply something, like "He needs to propose soon."

Late one night, their faces on a video call, Shane finally gave voice to the quiet tension that thrummed beneath every notification.

"I have alerts on," he admitted, his voice quiet. "For your account. So I don't miss one."

Ilya, propped up in his sterile Boston bed, felt something warm and fragile unfold in his chest. "For all of them?"

Shane nodded against his pillow. "I don't want to miss one." He hesitated, the silence stretching. "I hover over the heart every time. I want to."

"Then why don't you?" Ilya asked, though he thought he knew.

"Because I'd never stop," Shane whispered, the confession raw in the dark. "I'd like every picture with me in it. I'd comment. I'd tell everyone the blue mug is mine and that you make terrible coffee and that you're scared of loons." He took a shaky breath. "I hate pretending those memories aren't ours. That you're not mine. That they're from the best time of my life."

The words hung between them, a testament to everything their love still cost. It wasn't about Instagram. It was about the brutal reality of their public lives, where the most ordinary act of devotion, like acknowledging the person you love, was a luxury they couldn't afford.

Ilya reached out, his finger touching the screen where Shane's cheek was. "They are ours," he said, his voice low and sure. "Every single one. The internet gets the joke. Only you get the

truth.”

It was a small consolation, but in their distance, it was a fortune. He would keep posting his coded messages. And Shane would keep reading them, sending his texts after, waiting for the day when the world would finally allow them be out in the open, for everyone to see.

The call came through on a quiet Friday evening, just as Ilya was finishing a solitary dinner of reheated pelmeni at his Boston house. Some of the team were out at a new club, but he wasn't in the mood. The screen flashed Yuna Hollander. His spine straightened automatically, a conditioned response to potential conflict, or something happening to Shane. He answered, his voice carefully neutral. “Mrs. Hollander?”

“Ilya, hello. I hope it's not a bad time.” Her voice was different; softer, without the underlying current of managerial urgency.

“No. It is fine.” He muted the hockey game on his TV.

“David's here too, I have you on speaker.” David's calm baritone offered a quiet, “Hello, Ilya.”

“Hello, Mr. Hollander.” Ilya waited, his senses sharp, braced for the pivot to them trying to forbid him from continuing his relationship with their son, or schedules, or a delicate interrogation about Shane. Distance pulled at the connection until it felt threadbare, stretched thin over the miles, offered no clues.

“We just saw the announcement about your partnership with Nike,” Yuna said. “The ‘Rozanov Regeneration’ line. That's very impressive. Congratulations.”

Ilya blinked. “Thank you.” It was a massive deal, a legacy-level endorsement, but he'd only texted Shane about it. He hadn't expected them to notice.

“How was your day?” David asked.

The simple question disarmed him completely. People didn't ask Ilya Rozanov about his day. They asked about his shot, his shift length, his take on a trade rumor. “It was... fine. Video review, the gym. Nothing special.”

“And how are you finding Boston this fall?” Yuna asked. “The weather turning yet?”

They continued like this for seven minutes. They asked about his plans for the rest of the week (practice, a team dinner, nothing exciting). They mentioned an article they'd read about Boston's new power play coach and asked if his techniques were difficult to learn. It was stilted, a little awkward, but utterly benign. No demands. No pressure. Just... conversation.

When the call ended with a “Take care of yourself, Ilya,” from David and a “We'll talk soon,” from Yuna, he sat holding his phone, staring at the blank screen. The quiet in his house felt encroaching.

His thumb moved on instinct, calling the only person who could make sense of this.

Shane answered on the second ring. “Hey. Everything okay?”

“Your parents just called me,” Ilya said, the words tumbling out. “Yuna and David. On the phone together.”

He heard the faint rustle of sheets, Shane in his Montreal bed. “And? Is something wrong?”

“That is what I am asking you. Are they... alright? Was there a problem they did not want to tell you?”

Shane was silent for a moment. “What did they say?”

“They congratulated me on Nike deal. They asked about my day. About the weather. About my plans.” Ilya heard the bewildered frown in his own voice. “They did not ask for anything. They just... talked.”

On the other end, Shane let out a soft, understanding breath. “Oh.”

“‘Oh’? What does ‘oh’ mean?”

“It means they were just checking in, Ilya.” Shane’s voice was warm, a little sad. “They like you. They were seeing how you’re doing.”

The concept was so foreign it short-circuited his understanding. “Why?”

“Because you’re family,” Shane said, as if it were the simplest equation in the world. “That’s what family does. They call. They ask about your day. Even when it’s boring.”

Silence.

Ilya didn't answer. He simply stared at the wall across from him.

Family. No one had ever used that word and meant him. Ilya’s throat tightened. He looked around his pristine, empty room. No one had ever called him just to ask about his day without wanting something. Not a coach, not an agent, certainly not a parent. Calls were for instructions, negotiations, or crises. This...this casual, pointless checking-in was a language he didn’t fully understand.

The bond, that constant thread to Shane, hummed with a sudden, complex frequency. It carried Shane’s affectionate amusement, his quiet happiness that this bridge was being built. And it carried Ilya’s own stunned, wary, but deeply felt recognition. This was what he had seen in the Hollanders’ kitchen, what he had fought for Shane to have: a love that asked for nothing but your well-being in return.

“I... did not know,” Ilya finally said, his voice rough.

“I know,” Shane murmured. “It’s good, though, right?”

Ilya closed his eyes, leaning back against his couch. Every heartbeat echoed through the connection, he sent a pulse of feeling, gratitude, confusion, a profound, disorienting warmth. “Da,” he whispered. “It is good.”

He stayed on the line, listening to Shane's quiet breathing, the familiar sound of his solitude now accompanied by a new, fragile thread of connection stretching not just to his mate, but to a family that had, against all odds, decided to include him in their circle of care. It was a different kind of peace, and he held onto the sound of it long after they said goodnight.

The month apart had been a study in structured misery. Phone calls in the dark, their connection a constant, low-grade ache like a tooth that wouldn't stop throbbing. Preseason had been a gauntlet of meaningless games and sterile hotels, every moment underscored by the silent, screaming fact of his absence.

Shane stood at the arrivals gate at Logan Airport, a still point in the chaotic swirl of reunions. He wore a baseball cap pulled low, a hoodie, waiting for the crowd to thin out. His heart was a frantic bird against his ribs. Then, the doors slid open.

Ilya emerged, not with the swagger of a celebrity athlete, but with the focused, weary stride of a man that had just finished his road trip and took the earlier flight so that might meet at the airport in relative privacy. He carried only a duffel, his shoulders tense under his leather jacket. His gaze swept the sparse crowd, not seeking fans or cameras, but a single point of coordinates.

Their eyes locked.

Time didn't slow. It shattered.

There was no running, no dramatic call. They moved toward each other with the grim, gravitational certainty of collapsing stars. Three paces apart, two, and then they collided.

The impact was solid, real, knocking the air from Shane's lungs. Ilya's duffel hit the floor with a dull thud. His arms, steel bands, wrapped around Shane, one hand fisting in the back of his hoodie, the other splaying across his spine to crush him closer. Shane's face buried itself in the cold leather of Ilya's jacket, then found the warm skin of his neck. He inhaled, a deep, shuddering draught that was pure, uncut Ilya, jet fuel, cold air, and the essential, dark spice of him.

Ilya did the same, his nose pressing into Shane's hair beneath the cap, his breath hot and ragged. He scented him with a desperate, consuming intensity, a silent, primal verification. Mine. Alive. Here. The hollow space vanished the instant they touched, strained and thin for weeks, roared back to full, blinding volume, a circuit closed, a severed nerve screaming back into connection.

The airport ceased to exist. The announcements, the chatter, the moving crowds, it all dissolved into white noise. Someone nearby coughed awkwardly. Neither of them registered it. They stood fused in the middle of the terminal, two men clinging to each other as if the world were trying to drag them apart by force.

Long moments later, Shane's lips moved against the pulse hammering in Ilya's throat. The word was a breath, a vibration more than a sound.

“Hi.”

Ilya’s arms tightened convulsively. He turned his head, his lips brushing the shell of Shane’s ear. His voice was a wrecked, gritty thing, soaked in relief.

“Much better.”

The car ride to Ilya’s Boston home was a silent, charged with anticipation. They sat next to each other, Ilya’s hand wrapped around Shane’s thigh, grip firm to the point of pain, as if he needed the physical tether to believe he was real. They didn’t kiss. The reunion of their mouths could not happen in a space outside of the house even with the window tinting, a downside of having Ilya’s sports car so easily recognizable in this area.

Inside the house, the door had barely shut before Ilya had him pinned against it. This kiss was not gentle. It was a hungry, devouring search. It tasted of longing and a month of empty beds. Clothes were shed in a desperate, clumsy trail from the foyer to the bedroom.

Ilya laid him down on the cool sheets and worshipped him with a single-minded intensity that left Shane breathless. He mapped every inch of him with his mouth, as if checking for changes, for damage. His hands were everywhere, not just arousing, but reaffirming ownership, clutching tightly, surely leaving bruises in their wake but neither of them cared. When he finally pushed inside, it was with a slow, relentless pressure that made Shane cry out, his back arching off the bed. It was an exquisite, stretching fullness, a physical answer to the hollow ache that had lived in him for weeks.

“Look at me,” Ilya growled, his voice thick.

Shane’s eyes, hazy with pleasure, found his. Ilya held his gaze, moving with deep, measured strokes, each one forging the connection anew. The world narrowed to the point where their bodies joined, to the sweat-slick slide of skin, to the blue fire in Ilya’s eyes. Shane’s focus began to soften, then dissolve. The pleasure was a rising tide, but deeper than that was a profound, yielding peace. The noise of the world faded. There was only Ilya’s weight, his scent, his breath on his lips, and the golden, singing certainty of the bond. He was floating, safe, anchored only to the man above him. He was sinking into that warm, silent space where nothing was required of him but to feel, and to be possessed.

Ilya saw the moment it happened. Saw Shane’s eyes lose their focused sharpness, grow soft and distant. Saw the last tremble of resistance melt from his muscles, leaving him pliant and open in a way that was both utterly trusting and devastatingly vulnerable. The complete surrender. A possessive, triumphant heat surged through Ilya, darker and more primal than anything else. His rhythm grew more urgent, driving them both toward the edge. The words boiled up in his throat, fueled by a month of fear and the intoxicating sight of Shane so perfectly surrendered.

Don’t go back. Stay here. Tell them you’re done. I’ll fix everything, just don’t leave.

The command trembled on his lips. He wanted to seal this moment, this perfect vulnerability, into a permanent state. To lock the door and throw away the key.

But he saw it- the ghost of the tracker in Shane's neck, the terror in his eyes when he'd discovered the surveillance, the hard-won trust that had been built from ashes. This surrender was a gift, given freely. To demand more would be to poison it.

He choked the words back, swallowing them with a guttural sound. Instead, he bent his head, his forehead pressing against Shane's, his breath coming in ragged gasps. "Solnyshko moyo," he whispered, the endearment a prayer. "My good, perfect boy. I have you."

It was permission, not an order. And with that, Shane fell apart completely, his climax tearing through him with a silent, shuddering intensity. Ilya followed, his own release a hoarse shout against Shane's shoulder, as he spilled deep inside, marking him, claiming him in the only way he now allowed himself.

After, he gathered Shane's boneless form against him, tucking him into the curve of his body. He nuzzled the nape of his neck, breathing in the layered scent of sex, sweat, and their mingled peace. Shane was already asleep, deeply under, his breathing slow and even.

Ilya held him, watching the city lights paint faint stripes across the ceiling. The urge to command, to control, still hummed in his blood. But it was quieter now, banked by the greater need, the need to be the man worthy of this trust, of this sacred, surrendered emotion that they were sharing. The season would start. Shane would go back to Montreal. The distance would return. But for now, he was here. And for the first time in a month, the world, for both of them, was exactly the right size.

Their breathing had calmed, they showered together and were tangled up in the bed again. Shane and Ilya lay in a heap of exhausted limbs.

Shane's head was pillowed on Ilya's chest, listening to the strong, steady beat of his heart. Their shared awareness became almost blinding was a saturated, golden hum, so full of peace it felt like a physical warmth in his veins. He traced idle patterns on Ilya's stomach, his mind, for once, not racing with schedules or strategies, but was finally still, basking in the peace that his alpha brought him.

"I was thinking," he said into the quiet dark, his voice soft but clear. "Um, I'm due to get my period in the middle of December." Shane's face grew warm with embarrassment but he carried on. "So I was thinking... I could get off the suppressants right after Christmas. We could have the extra few days at the cottage, after everyone's gone for my heat. Just us, before we have to report back."

Ilya's breathing hitched, just once. The hand that had been stroking lazy circles on Shane's back stilled. For the first time in weeks, breathing felt effortless, an intense surge of emotion, a hope so sharp it was almost painful, immediately followed by a wave of deliberate, careful control. He'd learned the cost of letting his wants roar unchecked.

"The birth control," Ilya said, his voice a low rumble under Shane's ear. It wasn't a demand. It was a question, a request for data points on the map Shane was drawing.

Shane burrowed closer, pressing his face against Ilya's skin. "I know. I've thought about it. A lot actually." He took a shaky breath. "I want that. I want... everything with you. But can we... can we plan it? Properly? Not just let it happen in the heat, but... choose it? When we're ready. Maybe we can talk about it near the end of the season?"

He was asking for time. For autonomy. For the opposite of the desperate, obsessive claiming that had defined the beginning of them. He was offering Ilya the future he craved, but on a path built with intention, not instinct.

Ilya was silent for a long moment. The old him, the one who had hired investigators and placed trackers, would have seen this as a hurdle to overcome, a negotiation to win. The man he was now heard the profound trust in the request. Shane wasn't saying no. He was saying 'yes, with me, as partners'. He was offering the one thing Ilya's obsession had never been able to seize: willing, collaborative creation.

Ilya's arms tightened around him, not in possession, but in profound gratitude. He turned his head and pressed a long, lingering kiss to Shane's temple. "Da," he murmured against his skin. "We will plan. We will choose. Together." He took a deep, steadying breath, the last of the frantic hope settling into a determined, patient warmth. "The extra days after New Year's. Just us. That is a good start."

Relief, sweet and heady, flooded through Shane. He tilted his head up and found Ilya's lips in the dark, the kiss soft, a seal on the promise. There were no more words needed. The fear of losing control, the ghost of trackers and surveillance files, was banished by the simple, staggering reality of this: a future, discussed in whispers in their safe, quiet bed, built on a foundation of 'together' and 'when we're ready'.

As they settled back into the sheets, limbs intertwining, the bond settled into a new frequency- not just the hum of contentment, but the deep, resonant pulse of a shared path unfolding, one carefully chosen step at a time.

The lavish spread from the upscale chinese restaurant covered the small kitchen table, a fragrant, steaming monument to Ilya's desire to share a piece of himself. For the first time since the season began, the rigid line of his shoulders softened. Over fried rice and orange chicken, they traded stories- Ilya's impression of Boston's newest rookie, Shane's dry recounting of a media day mishap. They laughed, truly laughed, about the absurdity of Ilya's accidental social media fame.

Ilya watched him, his own contentment a warm glow in his chest. He was so relieved to be here, to be listening, that he didn't register the pattern at first. He finished his serving, the rich flavors making his mood even better. It was only when he reached for another egg roll that he truly looked at Shane's plate.

His own was nearly empty. Shane's was still full, each component meticulously separated and barely touched. A few exploratory bites, nothing more. It wasn't the anxious, visible restriction of before the kidnapping. This was subtler. A gradual, quiet cessation, as if his body had simply switched off its hunger without informing him.

Wordlessly, Ilya used his fork to slide a plump dumpling from the serving dish onto the clear space on Shane's plate.

Without looking up, Shane used the edge of his own fork to gently, precisely, push the dumpling back onto the serving platter.

The soft click of porcelain was louder than a shout.

Ilya set his fork down. "You have eaten three bites of meat, one half of a dumpling, and some vegetables from the rice," he said, his voice carefully neutral. It was just an observation, born of a hyper-awareness that had once been pathological and was now simply a fact of his being.

Shane's shoulders tightened almost imperceptibly. "I'm full."

"You are not." Ilya kept his gaze level, his hands flat on the table. "I know what 'full' looks like for you. At the cottage, you would have finished this and taken more. This is not full. This is something else."

The air in the room cooled. The bond, which had been humming with warm reconnection, tightened into a thin, tense wire.

"It's been a long month," Shane said, his eyes fixed on his plate. "I'm busy. My body's just adjusting to the schedule. My appetite always changes with the season."

"This is not just a change." Ilya's voice remained low, but it held the unyielding certainty of a man who had built a life on observation. He wasn't accusing. He was presenting evidence. "You are running on nothing. You will break."

"I know my own body." The defensiveness was there now, a sharp edge beneath the quiet tone. It was the sound of a man who had his autonomy violated so profoundly that even concerned observation could feel like a siege.

"I know it too," Ilya countered. "I am not trying to control you. I am trying to see you. And I see you getting thinner."

Shane pushed his chair back, the legs scraping against the floor. He didn't leave, just put physical space between them. "I can't just turn it on like a faucet, Ilya. The stress... it sits in my stomach. I'm handling it."

"By not feeding yourself?" Ilya shook his head, frustration bleeding through his calm. "This is not handling. Laurant tells me that you do not eat enough either."

"Maybe that's all I have right now!" The words burst out, hushed but vehement. He ran a hand through his hair. "You have your pills. And you're getting all this attention now. I have... this. And I'm dealing with it my way."

It was the first real argument in a while. Not earth shattering like past problems, but a quiet, stubborn crack in the present. Ilya saw the wall behind Shane's eyes, the one that said drop it. He also saw the faint shadows beneath them, the slight sharpness returning to his jawline.

The protector in him roared to fix it, to command, to make him understand. The mate, the one who had learned the cost of that instinct, sat in the agony of silence.

Ilya looked from Shane's defiant, weary face to the untouched feast, a gesture of love now grown cold between them. He didn't know how to bridge this gap. He was facing a career high, but he couldn't negotiate his mate into nourishing himself.

"I cannot watch you starve yourself," Ilya said finally, the words stripped bare. It wasn't an argument. It was a confession.

Shane hugged his arms around himself, the defensive posture softening into something exhausted. "I'm not. I'm fine."

But they both felt the space between them, charged with a new kind of distance. The bond hummed with a discordant frequency, Ilya's frantic concern, Shane's overwhelmed resistance. The leftover food sat congealing on the table, a monument to a reunion that had found its first, fragile limit. They were left in a frustrated, aching silence, both desperate to protect the other, and utterly stuck on how.

Ilya stood and began to clear the table, the clatter of plates a sharp counterpoint to the heavy silence. Shane didn't move. He watched Ilya's jerky tense movements, the frustration in the line of his back, and felt the cold shame of being seen so completely. He'd been caught. Not in a lie, but in a slow, quiet unraveling he'd convinced himself something he need to maintain control.

When the dishwasher was loaded and the leftovers were put away, Ilya leaned against the counter, his arms crossed. He didn't look angry. He looked devastated. "Did this start again," he asked, his voice barely above a whisper, "when we separated?"

Shane stared at his own hands on the table. There was no point in deflection. The bond hummed with the awful, naked truth. "It started with lunch," he admitted, the words dragged out of him. "Preseason schedules were chaotic. One of the trainers said I had gained some weight. It was easy to just... skip it. Then mornings were early. Coffee and a shake were faster. And then..." He swallowed. "I just stopped noticing I was hungry. The feeling went away."

He forced himself to look up, to meet Ilya's pained gaze. "And part of it... part of it is the noise. The pressure. To stay lean, to be fast. To prove to myself that an omega can handle the grind without getting... soft." The word was a vile, hissed thing. "I look at a plate and I see calories and media scrutiny and the potential to lose a step. I don't see food anymore."

Ilya closed his eyes for a moment, a muscle ticking in his jaw. The horror Ilya felt wasn't at the desire to be fit; it was at the chilling reality that Shane's own body had become an opponent to be managed, a system to be tricked, rather than the vessel of the man he loved. "At the cottage," Ilya said, opening his eyes, his voice thick, "you laughed. You slept through the night. You ate fine but at first... I did notice sometimes you didn't."

He pushed off the counter and came to kneel in front of Shane's chair, taking his hands. "I am not asking for control. I am asking to help. Let me help you remember how to stop thinking

about this strange hockey diet of yours for five minutes. How to be a person who needs fuel.”

The fight had gone out of Shane, leaving behind a hollow, weary ache. “How?”

“Just stop trying to control everything. What if those few pounds were just muscle and not fat? I mean, I look at you and you have the perfect body.” Ilya said, his thumbs stroking Shane’s knuckles. “A problem to solve together. A shared calendar alert for lunch. I will call you. We will talk about nothing for ten minutes while you eat. I’ll tell Laurant to keep making the meal prep for you so food is not something you have to think too much about. I’ll make more of an effort and we can have video calls for dinner.

The ideas were practical, structured. They weren’t demands, really but suggestions. Shane felt the rigid panic in his chest begin to soften. This wasn’t Ilya trying to take over. He was offering a partnership in this, too.

“Okay,” Shane whispered, nodding. “Okay. We can try that.”

Much later, Shane woke to the deep, silent hours of the night, his stomach a tight, empty knot. The bed beside him was empty. He found Ilya in the kitchen, illuminated by the soft light under the cabinets. The kettle was just beginning to whisper. On the counter, some of the steamed dumplings in a small pan.

Ilya didn’t startle. He simply glanced over. “You are awake.”

“I couldn’t sleep.”

“I know.”

Ilya poured the hot water over tea leaves in Shane’s favorite mug. He slid the now-steaming dumpling onto a plate and set it on the counter in front of Shane, along with a fork. Then he turned back to the tea, letting it steep just like Shane liked it. They had such little time together and he didn’t want Shane to leave in a couple hours on a bad note.

Shane stared at the plate. The gesture was so simple, so devoid of orders or a lecture. Ilya hadn’t woken him. He hadn’t demanded he eat. He had simply predicted the need and quietly met it. This wasn’t about controlling anything. This was the same instinct that made Shane organize everyone’s schedules, or remember how Jackie took her coffee, or ask David about his garden. It was care. Ilya was trying to take care of him without forcing it and he appreciated that.

Leaning against the counter, Shane ate the dumpling. It was perfect. Savory, comforting. Ilya placed the finished mug of tea beside the empty plate. Without a word, Shane used his fork to take one of the two remaining dumplings from the container in the fridge and warmed it in the pan himself. From the corner of his eye, he saw Ilya’s shoulders relax. He pretended to be very interested in the steam rising from his tea.

“It’s harder,” Shane said softly, staring into his mug, “to let someone take care of you than it is to do the caring.”

Ilya moved to stand beside him, their shoulders touching. “I am learning this also,” he murmured. “To accept care without thinking it is in exchange for something or a weakness.” He bumped his shoulder gently against Shane’s. “We are both very bad at it.”

A small, tired smile touched Shane’s lips. He finished the second dumpling and sipped his tea, the warmth spreading through his chest, soothing the hollow knot. The bond hummed quietly, no longer tense with conflict, but with a new, steady understanding. They stood there in the peaceful dark, not fixing anything grand, but tending to a single, quiet need, a foundational act of love, built not on words, but on communication and understanding.

The morning light filtering through the blinds in Ilya’s bedroom was pale and hesitant, as if it, too, understood the day’s inevitable end. They woke still tangled, Shane’s back to Ilya’s chest, Ilya’s arm a heavy, secure weight around his waist. For long minutes, neither moved. There was no frantic, early-morning need for sex, only the profound luxury of shared warmth and the slow, synchronized rhythm of their breathing. The bond was a deep, quiet pulse, a satisfied hum after the nourishment of the night.

The unspoken knowledge of Shane’s afternoon flight lay between them, a silent third presence in the room. By unspoken agreement, they ignored it. Today was not for hockey or itineraries. It was for the stolen, ordinary grace of a rare shared morning.

The shower was a slow and steamy. Ilya washed Shane’s hair with a focusing on every sensation while they could, his fingers massaging his scalp. Shane leaned back into the touch, his eyes closed, the hot water sluicing over them both. They brushed their teeth side-by-side at the sink, shoulders bumping, making faces in the mirror, a silly, wordless competition that ended with Ilya flicking water at him and Shane elbowing him gently in the ribs.

In the kitchen, Ilya made coffee with his usual single-minded intensity, while Shane scavenged for eggs and bread. “Your coffee is still terrible,” Shane commented, leaning against the counter as Ilya scowled at the machine.

“It is strong. You have a Canadian palate, it is weakened by maple syrup and politeness.”

“It tastes like motor oil filtered through a dirty sock.”

Ilya turned, catching him in a loose headlock and planting a noisy kiss on his temple. “You will drink it and you will like it, don’t be boring.”

They ate at the small table, sunlight finally breaking through to pool on the worn wood. Ilya talked about a ridiculous interaction he’d had with a barista who didn’t recognize him. Shane recounted a story from Montreal training camp about a rookie who’d tried to challenge him for a powerplay spot. The conversation was light, meandering, intentionally trivial.

As he ate, Shane felt Ilya’s gaze. It wasn’t the intense, monitoring stare from the dinner argument. It was softer, a gentle, peripheral awareness. Ilya was watching, but he was trying not to watch. Shane looked down at his plate, scrambled eggs, toast, a handful of berries he’d found.

He made a quiet decision. He finished his eggs. He ate the last piece of toast. He didn't do it for praise or to end the observation. He did it because he understood the fear that lived beneath Ilya's concern, the terror of watching him disappear by inches, of being helpless to stop it from hundreds of miles away. As he took the last bite, he saw it from the corner of his eye: Ilya's shoulders, which had held a faint tension since he'd sat down to eat, finally sank into a true, deep relaxation. Ilya said nothing. He simply reached over and stole a berry from Shane's plate, popping it into his own mouth with a faint, satisfied smirk.

The rest of the morning unfolded in a series of small, shared tasks. They folded the laundry from Ilya's duffel together, arguing playfully over the proper way to match socks. They made the bed in unison, a silent, efficient team. Shane put on a playlist of ambient music; Ilya groaned and switched it to some Eminem, leading to a mock wrestling match over the phone that ended with them both breathless and laughing on the freshly made bed, stealing slow, lingering kisses.

It felt profoundly natural. The rhythms they'd forged at the cottage, the silent understanding in the kitchen, the casual touches, the way they moved around each other without thought, had survived the separation. They had become, in these quiet moments, a unit.

But time, relentless and impersonal, moved forward. The packed bag by the door became impossible to ignore.

The ride to the airport was quiet, their hands linked between the seats. At the departures curb, they sat there for a few minutes. Ilya pulled Shane into his arms over the console, holding him tightly, his face buried in his hair for one long, deep inhale. Shane clung back, memorizing the solid feel of him, the scent of his soap and his skin.

"Text me," Ilya murmured against his temple.

"When I land," Shane promised.

They shared one last, soft kiss. Then Shane picked up his bag, and Ilya let him go. He didn't watch him walk away. He got back into the flow of traffic and made his way home.

In his pocket, his phone buzzed ten minutes later.

A single photo: an empty airplane seat, a window showing endless blue sky.

Shane- Miss you already.

Ilya stared at the message, the ghost of a smile touching his lips. The separation ached, a fresh, familiar hollow opening in his chest. But it was no longer a yawning chasm of panic, they would manage this separation like the other ones. It was the new, difficult, ordinary shape of their love, and for the first time, it felt like something they could sustain.

The rhythm of the NHL season settled into a grueling, familiar cadence: flights, hotels, games, ice. The distance between Boston and Montreal was a fixed, aching constant in their

lives. But in the digital space, a curious, heartwarming counter-narrative was unfolding.

Ilya's Instagram, had become a beloved oddity, growing daily during the preseason. From road trips, he posted a ten-second clip of a rookie defenseman, wide-eyed, trying calamari for the first time. From practices, a slow-motion video of a water bottle exploding after being hit by a stray puck. The caption: "RIP." The comments section was a full of laughing emojis and growing affection.

The "cottage core" posts, as fans dubbed them, were the real catalyst for speculation. They were sporadic, never more than once every few days but each went viral with peoples speculations.

A photo of two coffee mugs on a dock rail, steam rising into a cold morning. The black one and the blue one.

A picture of two fishing poles leaning against a weathered shed, only one small fish on the stringer that he'd captioned: One of us is a professional.

A shot of a hardcover book left open on a blanket, a pair of rectangular reading glasses perched on the spine and he included a big heart over the part where Shane's hand had been. It was obvious that there was a hand there, but not identifiable.

The comments section blew up at that one- many messages along the lines of : You can't just drop these cottage vibes and not tell us who is in the pic with you!!

The theories blossomed. Compilation videos titled "The Mystery of Rozanov's partner" garnered thousands of views. Fans pored over reflections in windows, analyzed shadows, debated the identity of the other person. The prevailing, hopeful sentiment was summed up in one popular comment: "He's not just happier. Someone is making him happy. And they're feeding us with these pictures."

Ilya, bafflingly, had become one of the league's most likable personalities. The "Russian Beast" was now the deadpan, observant uncle of the NHL. When a reporter asked about his social media shift during a press junket, Ilya simply said, "Life is good. Hopefully I can give everyone more details soon."

His teammates fully embraced the bit. "Rozanov's filming!" became the cue for good-natured chaos. Marleau would launch into absurd, mock-serious interviews with equipment managers. The goalies would have synchronized dance routines during warm-ups. It was a release valve for the season's pressure, and Ilya was its silent, amused curator.

On the ice, their separate worlds were demanding excellence. Boston, with Ilya playing a focused, disciplined game, sat near the top of the Eastern Conference. His ten-million-dollar deal looked like a bargain. In Montreal, Shane was playing the best hockey of his life. The weight of his new contract was met not with anxiety, but with a ferocious, quiet determination. He was faster, smarter, a leader on and off the ice. The "family-friendly" endorsement campaign launched, and the image of a wholesome, dedicated Shane Hollander

was everywhere, though the man himself still texted Ilya from photo shoots, a single eyeroll emoji saying it all.

Their lives were a whirlwind of accolades and obligations. But every night, without fail, Shane would scroll. In the silence of his Montreal apartment or the sterile quiet of a hotel room, he'd open the app and absorb every comment on Ilya's latest post. He'd smile at the jokes, feel a weird pride at the correct theories, and his thumb would hover, always hover, over the heart.

He never tapped it publicly. But the moment after he closed the app, his text would chime on Ilya's phone.

The world saw a wholesome mystery and a reformed personality. Shane saw a love letter, posted in plain sight, a testament to a peace they had built and a future they were patiently, stubbornly weaving together, one silent like at a time.

The preseason unfolded as a series of stolen moments when their schedules allowed. The distance was a constant, low-grade ache in the bond, a phantom limb that never stopped throbbing, but it no longer felt like a crisis. It had become a condition of their life, and they were learning to manage it.

Their reunions were brief, often no more than a couple of hours, making them tense and anxious when they waited too long to reunite. But somehow, they made it function with the goal in mind that this would be over soon. That they would be able to figure out how to be together.

Ilya's flight landed at midnight. Shane was waiting just outside the baggage claim, a hoodie pulled up against the chill. The nearly empty airport making Shane brave enough to get out of the car so that they can have every single second possible. They saw each other, and the frantic energy of the airport dissolved. They didn't run. They walked into each other's space and collided, Ilya's duffel dropping to the floor as his arms locked around Shane. He buried his face in Shane's neck, inhaling deeply, a full-body shudder of relief running through him. Shane clung just as tight, his fingers fisting in the back of Ilya's jacket. No words. Just the silent, desperate recalibration of proximity. A businessman wheeling a suitcase past gave them a wide berth. They didn't notice.

Two weeks later, the room service cart pushed into the corner, containers of Thai food open on the desk. They ate cross-legged on the bed, still in their practice gear, shoulders touching. Ilya talked about a new coach, his hands moving to diagram plays in the air. Shane listened, adding a quiet observation about forechecking angles. It wasn't an important conversation, but more so the time they had together. After, they fell asleep halfway through a movie, Shane's head on Ilya's chest, the blue light of the screen flickering over their exhausted, peaceful faces.

Their flights left in opposite directions two hours apart. They woke before dawn. Ilya made coffee in the small machine, and they drank it standing at the window, watching the city lights blink off as the sky lightened to grey. Shane leaned back against him, Ilya's chin resting on his head. Neither spoke about the coming separation. They talked about the weird art in the lobby, and whether the hotel pillow smelled like chemicals. Ilya's hand rested, a steady weight, on Shane's stomach, a silent, vigilant check-in. Shane finished his toast without being asked, and Ilya's thumb stroked a small, approving circle against his shirt. "Just think, this time next year, we'll be in a home, no more hotels." Ilya whispered, tugging the collar down and kissing his bite.

The routines were their lifeline. The shared calendar alerts for meals. The photo of an empty plate texted after dinner, followed not by interrogation, but by a heart emoji. The nightly call, even if it was just two minutes of sleepy breathing before one of them fell asleep. Ilya's Instagram continued- a deadpan clip of a teammate trying to wrestle a suitcase onto a shuttle bus. The rare night that Ilya went out with them to a club was documented now too.

The bond still ached with every mile put between them. But it no longer felt like it would snap. It had been tested, and it had held. They were not just enduring the distance; they were building a bridge across it, one quiet goodbye, one shared coffee, one silent airport hug at a time. It was hard, and mundane, and deeply unglamorous. And it was, in its own stubborn, quiet way, working.

The air in the Boston locker room before the season opener thrummed with a familiar, electric anticipation. Ilya sat before his stall, methodically taping his stick, the repetitive motion a tactile mantra. The usual pre-game focus was there, sharp and clear, but layered beneath it was a new, steadying frequency of the bond, a constant, low hum of connection stretching north to Montreal, where Shane would be lacing up for his own opener in a few hours. They were nervous. They were excited. They were, for the first time, starting a campaign not as rivals, not as hidden lovers, but as partners navigating the same treacherous waters from different ships. They had a plan where when Montreal was playing Boston at the end of the month, Shane, Pike, JJ and his parents were all going to dinner with him. Dinner at a very nice exclusive restaurant where they would be sure to get spotted, it would be the first step into being public.

A name cut through his focus, spoken by a teammate reviewing the opposition's lineup: "Kent's on the top line for them. Looks pissed."

Dallas Kent.

The hum in Ilya's chest didn't spike into panic; it hardened into something cold and diamond-sharp. The memory was visceral- the sickening crack of Shane's body hitting the boards, the silence that followed, the helpless fury as he'd watched from a few feet away, barred by rules from intervening. The late hit that had put Shane in the hospital. The man who had delivered

it would now on the ice, and the league's schedule, with its cruel irony, had placed him directly in Ilya's path for Game One.

The old, black fire of obsession stirred in its cage. The Ilya of a year ago would have already been planning it, a devastating, "accidental" collision in the neutral zone, a slash across the back of the knees where the cameras wouldn't see, a promise of worse to come whispered in a face-off circle. He would have willingly ruined the game, and possibly his season, for that revenge.

He finished his tape job, the ripping sound final. He looked at his hands. These were the hands that had burned a man alive for Shane. They were also the hands that learned to give his mate comfort, to sooth instead of destroy. But he could not let that hit go.

Protection was not possession. Devotion was not destruction. His therapist's words, and Shane's steadfast belief in them, were the new rules of engagement.

He stood, pulling his jersey over his head. The noise of the locker room faded into a tunnel of pure purpose. Revenge was a selfish, chaotic impulse. What he needed was something cleaner, more absolute.

On the bench for the opening face-off, his gaze found Kent. The man was glaring across the ice, a brute force looking for a soft target. Ilya felt nothing but a cold, analytical disdain.

The game was a whirlwind. Boston's line was crisp, and Ilya played within it, a model of efficient, well practiced teamwork. He finished his checks, but they were legal, emphatic statements of territory, not attempts to maim. He skated, he passed, he shot. And he watched Kent.

He saw the frustration growing shift by shift. Kent, a player who fed on intimidation, was being neutered by Ilya's impersonal, professional violence. He tried to engage, to chirp, to lure Ilya into a penalty.

During a scrum in front of the net, Kent shoved his glove into Ilya's facemask. "What's the matter, Rozanov? Forget how to hit?"

Ilya didn't shove back. He simply turned his head, looking past Kent to the referee. He said nothing. The utter dismissal, the refusal to even acknowledge the feud, was more infuriating than any slash.

The opportunity came in the third period. Boston was up by three. Kent, pressing desperately, tried to cut across the middle with his head down, looking for a pass. Ilya read it a second before it happened. He didn't line him up for a hospital pass. He stepped into the lane, not with a reckless charge, but with perfect, disciplined timing.

The hit was monumental. Clean, shoulder-to-chest, at full speed. It expelled the air from Kent's lungs in a loud whoosh and sent him flat onto his back on the ice, the puck skittering harmlessly away. The crowd roared.

Ilya didn't stand over him, he dropped his gloves and knelt next to the prone body, letting out his rage. Marly and a few others came to separate him but they struggled. He skated immediately to the penalty box as the medics came to get him, Ilya watched from his vantage point that he hadn't regained consciousness. As he sat down, he allowed himself one more glance. The crowd was roaring, loving the fight in the first game.

The referee announced that he'd be off for 5 minutes, a bit long for it being a legal hit, but it was worth it.

Later, in the quiet of the post-game locker room, his phone buzzed.
Shane- Saw the hit.

Ilya waited, humming with a curious tension.
A second later, another message arrived.
Shane- Thank you.

Ilya stared at the words. He hadn't done it for thanks. He'd done it because it was right.

The dawn of December 21st was brittle and bright, the kind of cold that seared the lungs and made the frozen lake crack like gunshots in the quiet. Ilya's car crunched up the gravel drive just as the sun breached the treeline, setting the cottage windows ablaze. He'd taken the first flight out, needing the buffer of silence, the re-establishment of their space before the invasion of Shane's friends.

Shane was waiting at the door, wrapped in a thick sweater, steaming mug in hand. No frantic collision this time. They met in the doorway, and Ilya simply pulled him in, burying his cold face in the warm hollow of Shane's neck. He inhaled the scent of honeysuckle, snow, and coffee, and felt the final, tense coil of the season's travel unwind in his chest. The bond, perpetually stretched over miles, snapped back into its full, resonant harmony.

"You're early," Shane murmured, his voice rough with sleep.

"I am greedy," Ilya replied, his words muffled against his skin. He finally pulled back enough to kiss him, a slow, deep caress that said everything the phone calls could not.

An hour later, the cottage was warm, filled with the smell of browning sausage and brewing coffee. Yuna and David arrived, bearing a basket of fresh pastries and the easy, unforced calm that had become their new language. Ilya had grown closer to Shane's parents over the past few weeks. They called him almost as much as they called Shane and other than a few times where Shane was overbooked for brand deals, he thought Yuna and David were wonderful parents.

They settled around the kitchen table, sunlight streaming in. The conversation was effortless, catching up on the news that they'd missed during phone calls. David asked about the travel, the different cities. Yuna inquired about Ilya's social media, with genuine interest. It was normal, according to Shane. They were a family.

The talk turned, inevitably, to hockey. Yuna smiled, a real one. "I saw the stats this morning. You two keep going back and forth on the scoring race."

Shane ducked his head, a faint blush on his cheeks. "It's early. Lots of games left."

"He is saving his energy," Ilya said, deadpan, stirring his coffee. "Being boring and wise now. Letting the better hockey player do the flashy work and then... poach the rebounds." He kicked Shane's foot gently under the table.

Shane kicked back. "Says the man whose last 'flashy' move ended with him in the goalie's lap. The highlight reel was set to clown music."

David chuckled softly. Yuna shook her head, but her eyes were bright. "And your teams?"

"Neck and neck," Shane said, the analyst in him taking over. "The conference is a logjam. Every point matters. We play each other right after New Year's."

"Will be a good game," Ilya said, and the old, predatory gleam was there, but it was tempered now by affection. It was for the game, not for blood. "I will have to humble your son. For the good of the league."

"You can try," Shane said, meeting his gaze, a challenge and a promise in his eyes.

The ease of it, the gentle teasing where there had once been only vicious barbs or suffocating silence, was a miracle Ilya still felt in his bones. He watched Shane, who was actually eating, cutting a sausage link with methodical care. He saw Yuna watch them too, her gaze lingering on the way Ilya's hand rested on the back of Shane's chair, not gripping, just present. She saw the sweet, mindless touches and smiles that her son gave to Ilya, and she approved.

Later, after Shane's parents had left with promises to return the next day with the others, the cottage settled back into its deep, contented quiet. They stood side-by-side at the sink, washing the few dishes. Outside, the sky was a clear blue.

"They're happy for us," Shane said softly, not a question.

Ilya nodded, drying a plate. "They see you are happy. That is all they ever wanted, I think." He set the plate down and turned, pulling Shane against him, his back to Ilya's chest. They looked out at the frozen lake, at their quiet, waiting world. The chaos of love and friendship would descend tomorrow, filling the rooms with noise and light. But for now, they had this: the solid ground of their healing, the playful rivalry of their careers, and the steadfast, quiet certainty that they had built something that could last, not just through a holiday, but through all the seasons to come.

The afternoon was bitingly cold, the kind that made the snow squeak under their boots. They drove Shane's 'boring' SUV down a slushy back road to a choose-and-cut farm Shane had researched. The silence between them was comfortable, filled with the warmth of the heater and the low, contented hum of the bond.

"Remember," Shane said, staring out at the rows of fragrant fir and spruce, "full symmetry. No bare patches on the south side. The trunk has to be straight. And the top spike needs to be sturdy enough for the star."

Ilya cut the engine and turned to him, a slow smile spreading across his face. "Ah, yes. The list. I have it memorized. 'Needles must hold firm. Branch spacing must accommodate standard ornament diameter.'" His impression of Shane's analytical tone was perfect. "You did not want a real tree. I know you like the plastic ones that look perfect."

Shane flushed, but a smile tugged at his lips. "I just want a good tree. It's our first Christmas together like this."

"You want a perfect tree. There is a difference." Ilya reached over and brushed a stray snowflake from Shane's cheek. "I like this difference. Is very you. Any tree will be perfect because we are together."

They crunched through the snow, their breath pluming in the air. Ilya watched as Shane examined each candidate with extreme focus. He'd circle a tree, frown at a gap in the branches, kneel to check the straightness of the trunk. Ilya followed, his hands buried in his pockets, his gaze rarely leaving Shane.

"This one!" Shane declared finally, standing before a magnificent, nine-foot Fraser fir. It was indeed nearly perfect: dense, symmetrical, with a strong, straight top.

Ilya walked up behind him, wrapping his arms around Shane's waist and resting his chin on his shoulder. "It is adequate," he murmured, his lips close to Shane's ear. "I approve the procurement."

Shane elbowed him gently, but leaned back into the hold. Together, they sawed through the trunk, the scent of fresh sap filling the air. Ilya did the heavy lifting, hauling it back to the SUV and securing it to the roof with a series of efficient, tight knots.

Back at the cottage, the process of settling the tree in its stand became a quiet, collaborative dance. Shane held it upright, calling out minute adjustments, "A little left. No, back. Stop." while Ilya crouched beneath the branches, tightening bolts in the stand.

"Your demands continue, lord help me when you're pregnant." Ilya grunted from the depths of the tree, a needle poking his cheek.

"You're the one who wanted to help," Shane said, trying to hide his smile.

Once the tree was stable and watered, they brought in the boxes of decorations. They'd chosen them together the week before during a video call, their screens shared as they browsed an artisan's website. Shane had been drawn to the classic, hand-blown glass baubles

in deep blues and silvers. Ilya, to Shane's surprise, had pointed immediately to a set of delicate, hand-painted wooden ornaments from Russia: nested matryoshka dolls, a troika with horses, a tiny izba.

Now, they unpacked them side-by-side at the foot of the tree. Shane handled each glass orb with meticulous care. Ilya unwrapped his wooden figures, his fingers tracing the painted patterns with a quiet reverence.

"You never had a tree like this before, did you?" Shane asked softly, hanging a silver bell.

Ilya shook his head, fixing a painted horse to a sturdy branch. "No. Not like this. At least not since my mother. This is... all wonderful." He looked at Shane, his blue eyes soft in the string light's glow. "Is better."

They worked in peaceful silence for a while, the only sounds the soft clink of ornaments and the rustle of tissue paper. The tree transformed, a fusion of their worlds: Shane's orderly elegance and Ilya's bold, nostalgic colors. It was them.

Finally, Shane produced the star. He handed it to Ilya. "You should do it."

Ilya took it, his expression solemn. He climbed the stepladder, reached up, and carefully settled the star onto the strong, central spike of the perfect tree. It caught the light, gleaming.

He climbed down and stepped back to stand beside Shane. Ilya slid an arm around his waist, pulling him close. They looked at their handiwork, at the lights twinkling against the dark green, at the blending of their chosen decorations.

"It is perfect," Ilya said, and this time there was no tease in his voice, only a deep, settled certainty.

Shane leaned his head against Ilya's shoulder, feeling so happy, that he just wanted to stay in their little bubble forever. "Yeah," he whispered. "It is."

The fire had burned down to a bed of glowing, pulsating embers, painting the living room in waves of amber and deep shadow. The Christmas tree stood in the corner, its lights a silent, twinkling galaxy of blue and silver.

They were curled together on the large, plush rug, Shane's back to Ilya's chest, watching the flames. Ilya's hand stroked slowly, rhythmically, up and down Shane's arm. His voice, when he spoke, was a low rumble against Shane's spine.

"Solnyshko," he murmured, his lips brushing the shell of Shane's ear. "Would you... would you let me make love to you? Like this? Only the fire and the lights. No other light."

The request was so tender, so deliberately framed, it made Shane's breath catch. This was the man who had once drowned spaces in scent, who had communicated through possession and fear. Now, he was asking for permission to create a sanctuary of shadow and soft light.

Shane turned in his arms, finding Ilya's eyes in the flickering gloom. They were dark, serious, full of a quiet yearning that had nothing to do with hunger and everything to do with

reverence. “Yes,” Shane whispered, leaning in to kiss him. “Just the lights.”

What followed was a slow, silent unraveling. They undressed each other without haste, clothes becoming soft pools on the rug. The firelight danced over Ilya’s skin, gilding the planes of his chest, the scar, the powerful lines of his body, transforming him into something ancient and beautiful. Shane felt seen in the same way, the warm light smoothing his edges, making him feel not exposed, but adored.

Ilya laid back against the cushions they’d pulled down, his gaze holding Shane’s. His hands came to rest on Shane’s hips, a steady, warm weight. “Here,” he said, his voice barely audible over the crackle of sap. “Come here.”

He guided Shane to straddle him, his movements patient and sure. There was no urgency, only a profound, focused intent. He helped Shane sink down onto him, the joining so slow and gradual as Shane struggled a bit to take him after two weeks without him. A soft, shuddering sigh escaped them both as they became fully connected, seated in each other’s lap, face to face in the fire-glow.

For a moment, they simply stayed there, breathing each other’s air, foreheads touching, fully connected, vibrating with a harmony that was both serene and intensely alive.

“Move for us,” Ilya whispered, his hands sliding up to cradle Shane’s face. “Take what you need.”

Guided by those hands and the deep, wordless pull of the bond, Shane began to move. It was a rocking, rolling rhythm, a gentle rising and falling that was less about friction and more about sustained, exquisite connection. Ilya’s hands drifted down, mapping the shift of muscle in Shane’s back, the curve of his spine, not directing, but worshipping. His eyes never left Shane’s, reading every flutter of his lashes, every parted breath.

The world shrank to the circle of firelight, to the constellation of tree lights reflected in Ilya’s dark eyes, to the perfect, slick heat where their bodies met. Pleasure built not in a sharp crest, but as a warm, expanding glow that seemed to emanate from their linked souls outward. When Shane began to tremble, his rhythm faltering, Ilya’s arms encircled him fully, holding him close, and with a few deep, perfect rolls of his own hips, he carried them both over the edge.

Their climax was a silent, shivering release, a melting into one another that left them breathless and fused. Shane collapsed forward, his face buried in Ilya’s neck, and Ilya held him there, one hand tangled in his hair, the other splayed possessively across the small of his back.

Long minutes later, Ilya stirred. Without a word, he shifted his grip and stood, lifting Shane effortlessly into his arms. Shane, boneless and spent, looped his arms around his neck, nuzzling into his throat.

“Shower,” Shane mumbled, the thought automatic.

“No,” Ilya said, the word firm but gentle as he carried them through the dark cottage to the bedroom. “Not yet.” He laid Shane down on the cool sheets and immediately gathered him close, skin to sticky skin, wrapping them both in the duvet. He buried his nose in Shane’s hair, inhaling deeply, the scent of their joining a primal, satisfying perfume. “Tonight, you smell like us. Like me. I want to keep it.”

The old possessiveness was there, but its edges had been sanded smooth. It wasn’t a demand for ownership, but a request for continued intimacy, a desire to prolong the tangible proof of their union. Shane understood. He nodded, too tired and too content to argue, and settled against him.

Later, in the deep quiet of the night, Shane stirred from a half-dream to find the space beside him empty. A moment of instinctual panic was soothed by the bond’s steady hum. He heard a soft click from the living room, the faint scrape of the fireplace screen. Then, Ilya reappeared in the doorway, a silhouette against the faint glow, holding a glass of water.

“Drink,” he said softly, sitting on the edge of the bed.

Shane pushed himself up and took the cool glass, drinking gratefully. Ilya watched, then took the empty glass and set it aside. He slid back under the covers, his body immediately seeking Shane’s, aligning them front to back, his arm a heavy, secure band across Shane’s chest.

“Fire’s out,” Ilya murmured, his lips against Shane’s shoulder blade.

“Thank you.” Shane mumbled, not really awake.

“Sleep, sweetheart.”

And they did. Tangled inextricably in each other, the scent of their love and the fading perfume of woodsmoke clinging to their skin, they slept a deep, dreamless sleep in the silent, sacred dark of their home.

The air inside the cottage was a fragrant tapestry of pine, baking gingerbread, and slow-roasting pork. Outside, a fresh dusting of snow glittered under a pale winter sun, turning the lakefront into a postcard. For weeks, Shane’s mind had been a color-coded spreadsheet of logistics: grocery lists, sleeping arrangements, a minute-by-minute schedule for the two days before Christmas Eve. He had researched diligently, his browser history filled with tabs on Sochelnik and Kutya, determined to weave threads of Ilya’s heritage into their first holiday.

Now, it was the final test. Can Ilya blend in with his closest friends, the people who were his family? Plus he would meet Svetlana today. Ilya’s other best friend. The best friend who had slept with his mate before and was still very close with him.

The cottage, thrummed with warm, crowded life. In the living room, Yuna and David were admiring the Christmas tree they had decorated with a mix of classic baubles and delicate, hand-painted Dymkovo ornaments. Jackie was helping Emma string cranberries and popcorn, while Hayden and JJ debated the best way to build up the fire and whether the lake was

frozen enough to skate on. From the smaller bedroom came the soft, sleepy gurgles of Scott and Kip's baby boy.

The kitchen was command central. Svetlana, Ilya's sharp-eyed 'sister', had taken over one counter, efficiently shredding cabbage for a vast bowl of salad. Marly, laughing, was attempting to shape dough for pirozhki under her direction, flour dusting his beard. And at the heart of it all was Shane, moving with focused calm between the stove, where a pot of kutya simmered, and the oven, which held the main course of a pork roast marinated for days in spices and garlic according to a recipe Svetlana had grudgingly approved.

Ilya leaned against the doorway, silently watching the scene. His gaze tracked Shane's movements, the bond between them a steady, warm hum beneath the cacophony. He could feel the fine thread of anxiety running through Shane's meticulous focus, the desire for everything to be perfect. The old, possessive part of Ilya, the one that had drenched this very cottage in scent months ago, prickled at the presence of so many other alphas in their space. But seeing Shane here, creating a home that was theirs for all their people to share, banked the fire into a low, contented ember.

"He has done too much," Svetlana said in Russian, not looking up from her cabbage. "The table, the food, the little traditions. He is trying to give you a piece of home."

"He is giving us a home," Ilya corrected quietly, also in Russian. His eyes softened as he watched Shane carefully adjust the temperature on the oven. "He researches everything to make it all perfect."

Rose bustled in, carrying an armful of freshly cut evergreen boughs. She stopped, surveying the scene, the Russian and English conversations mingling, the fusion of smells, Shane in an apron that said 'Kiss the Cook' in Cyrillic that Ilya had bought him as a joke. Her usual protective glare had mellowed into something more observational, though no less sharp.

"Where do you want these, boss?" she asked Shane, a teasing note in her voice.

Shane blinked, pulled from his mental checklist. "Oh. The mantelpiece, please. And some on the dining table. It's traditional," he added, almost to himself. "For greenery."

As the afternoon melted into evening, the plan gave way to a richer, messier reality. The dining table, extended to its limit, groaned under the feast: the glorious pork roast, the kutya, steaming pirozhki, mountains of vegetables, and dishes the others had brought. The scent patches Shane and Ilya wore were a necessary formality, but the air was so thick with other aromas they were hardly needed.

They ate packed shoulder-to-shoulder, a cacophony of clinking cutlery, laughter, and overlapping conversations. David asked Svetlana thoughtful questions about Moscow in winter. Marly had JJ and Hayden in stitches with a story about a rookie's disastrous first practice. Kip and Scott passed their sleeping son between everyone with ease. Yuna watched it all, her eyes occasionally finding Ilya's, and she would offer a small, genuine smile that no longer held tension.

Later, as the group settled with drinks around the christmas tree, the fire crackling and the tree lights twinkling, Shane finally stopped moving. He stood by the kitchen archway, a dish towel over his shoulder, and simply watched. His spreadsheet was forgotten. The schedule was irrelevant.

Ilya appeared at his side, a solid, warm presence. He didn't speak. He just slid an arm around Shane's waist and pulled him close, tucking him against his side. He pressed his lips to Shane's temple in a kiss that was both thanks and absolution for any perceived imperfection.

"It is perfect," Ilya murmured, for his ears alone.

Shane leaned into him, the last coil of anxious tension unraveling. He looked at the scene, his parents, their friends, their chosen family, all woven together in the warm, noisy, beautifully imperfect tapestry of their home. The research had provided the framework, but the life filling it was theirs. It wasn't a flawless execution of a plan. It was something better. It was real, it was theirs, and for the first time, it felt like the true beginning of a forever that stretched out as bright and sure as the star on top of their tree.

The fire had burned down to a bed of glowing embers, painting the faces of the gathered friends in warm, flickering light. Laughter from a story JJ was telling echoed from inside when Ilya volunteered to get more wood.

Rose had followed him out, ostensibly to grab another log. She stood facing him, her arms crossed, the moonlight doing nothing to soften the challenge in her eyes.

"You're on your best behavior," she said, her voice low enough not to carry. "It's almost convincing."

Ilya met her gaze, his own expression neutral, the mask he wore for everyone but Shane firmly in place. "Is not an act. Shane needs his friends so that means I will accept that."

"For him," Rose stated.

"For him," Ilya confirmed. There was no point in lying to her. She had heard the worst of him, even if she didn't know the full depth of it.

She took a step closer, invading the bubble of his personal space. It was a test. "And what's the requirement for me? To pretend I don't remember what you did? To forget how scared he was?"

A familiar, dark heat prickled at the base of Ilya's skull. The alpha instinct to dominate the space, to make this small, fierce threat back down, surged. His shoulders tensed minutely. He could almost feel the old, violent script writing itself: a step forward, a lowered voice, a promise of consequences she couldn't imagine.

His eyes started to narrow, his weight shifting to the balls of his feet.

Then, movement in his periphery. Through the sliding glass door, Shane stood at the kitchen sink. He wasn't looking at the laughing group on the deck. He was looking directly at them, his brow faintly furrowed, his body angled toward their shadowy standoff. The bond, which had been a quiet hum of contentment, thrummed with a spike of nervous anticipation.

Ilya's breath left him in a soft, controlled exhale. The aggressive tension drained from his posture, replaced by a weary resolve. He broke eye contact with Rose to glance at Shane, and gave a small, almost imperceptible shake of his head. It's okay.

He looked back at Rose, the fight gone from his eyes. "The requirement for you," he said, his voice gravelly but calm, "is to love him. As you always have. That is all I ask."

He saw the surprise flicker in her expression. She'd been braced for a threat, not this.

"I don't trust you," she whispered, the words less fiery now, more a statement of fact.

"I do not expect you to. Trust takes time. And evidence." He paused, choosing his next words as a strategic retreat, a white flag offered for the sake of the man watching them from the window. "But we can have a truce. For him. No subtle threats. No... tests. You love him your way. I will love him mine. And we will not make him choose between us. That is a choice he should never have to make."

Rose studied him for a long moment, her gaze searching for the trap, the manipulation. She saw only a stark, exhausted sincerity. She uncrossed her arms, her own defensive posture easing. "A truce," she repeated, testing the word. "For him."

"Da. For him."

She gave a single, sharp nod. "Okay. Truce."

Without another word, she bent down, picked up a medium-sized log from the pile, and turned back toward the fire and the laughter. Ilya watched her go for a second before his eyes found Shane again at the window. Shane's worried frown had softened into a look of quiet relief. He offered a tiny, tentative smile.

Ilya's lips curved in response, a real, if weary, smile. He turned from the shadows and followed Rose back into the circle of light, the temporary peace secured, not through force, but through a shared, fragile dedication to the man they both, in their own ways, would burn the world to protect.

The final morning of the group's stay dawned bright and cold. After a chaotic breakfast, they gathered in the living room, the tree twinkling, for Secret Santa. The atmosphere was lighter, the edges of the previous days' tension softened by shared meals and the relentless, cheerful noise of the holiday.

Hayden, with a competitive glint in his eye, drew Ilya's name. He presented him with a meticulously wrapped box. Inside was a high-end, tactical-style multi-tool, the kind used by

survivalists and firefighters. It was heavy, serious, and undeniably useful. “You look like someone who’d hire help so maybe you need to learn to fix something yourself,” Hayden said, his tone neutral but his gaze sharp. “Or whatever.”

Ilya turned the tool over in his hands, appreciating its weight and precision. He gave a slow, respectful nod. “Spasibo. Is a good tool, will come in handy. Maybe you quit hockey and be a personal shopper. You will do better at that.”

When it was Ilya’s turn, he handed Hayden a flat, rectangular package. Inside was a framed, blown-up photograph collage showing Hayden either tripping, falling, or otherwise looking very clumsy on his skates.

“You’re greatest moments on the ice,” Ilya said quietly, meeting Hayden’s startled gaze.

The chirping didn’t end with that but Shane and Jackie kept them under control, much to the amusement of the others in the room.

The rest of the exchange was filled with laughter and bad sweaters. As evening fell, they piled onto the couches for a marathon of terrible, beloved Christmas movies. Ilya sat on the floor, leaning back against Shane’s legs, just as he had months before during that first, tense group visit. This time, Shane’s hand in his hair wasn’t a tentative test, but an absent, comfortable habit. Ilya leaned into it, his eyes on the screen, but his entire being focused on the point of contact. He was learning the shape of this, too: belonging to a circle, not dominating it.

One by one, the couples drifted off to bed, Scott and Kip to relieve the baby monitor, Jackie yawning dramatically, Hayden giving a final, measured look around the room before following JJ. Finally, it was just the two of them in the silent, glittering living room.

“They’re gone soon,” Shane said softly, his fingers still carding through Ilya’s hair.

“I know,” Ilya replied. He turned his head, pressing a kiss to Shane’s knee. “Then it is just us.”

Two days later, the last car disappeared down the drive, taking the wonderful, exhausting chaos with it. The cottage felt enormous and quiet, but it was a peaceful quiet, a space reclaiming its rightful owners. It was Christmas Eve.

They spent the day in a lazy, shared rhythm. Ilya split firewood with the methodical intensity he once reserved for training, stacking it neatly by the door. Shane baked, filling the kitchen with the scent of ginger and molasses. There were no schedules, no performances, no fragile dynamics to navigate.

As twilight tinged the sky purple, they sat before the roaring fire, the tree lights their only other illumination. They exchanged their private gifts, simple, profound things. A few first editions of some books that Shane loved, some jewelry, a pair of special edition headphones. For Ilya, a carefully restored vintage photograph of a Moscow courtyard in winter, a race

track experience and tickets to a Bad Bunny concert in Puerto Rico with the whole VIP package.

Later, after a simple dinner, Ilya stood at the sink washing their two plates. Shane came up behind him, wrapping his arms around his waist and resting his cheek against his back. He felt Ilya's breathing, deep and steady.

"It's perfect," Shane murmured.

Ilya turned off the water, dried his hands, and turned in the circle of Shane's arms. He didn't speak. He simply looked at him, his eyes reflecting the firelight and the tree lights and a depth of feeling that had no name. He leaned down and kissed him, slow and sweet, a silent communion. They stayed like that for a long time, in the heart of the quiet they had built, surrounded by the evidence of their chosen family.

The restless energy had been building in Shane all evening, a familiar, gathering static beneath his skin that made the quiet peace of the post-Christmas cottage feel suddenly too vast, too empty. He paced, he fidgeted, he couldn't settle against Ilya on the couch. The bond hummed with a new, gathering frequency, not anxiety, but a deep, magnetic pull.

Ilya felt it the moment the shift began. He watched Shane for a long, silent minute, then picked up his phone.

Hollanders- We will need to be alone for the next 3-4 days. Thank you for understanding.

The reply was almost immediate, a simple thumbs-up from David. No questions. They knew.

Ilya's focus narrowed to a single, primal point: Shane, and the space around them. He was thankful, viscerally so, for the mountains of leftovers, for the easy meals that required no thought. The world beyond the doors ceased to exist.

The next morning, it began in earnest. The scent, sweet, sharp, utterly consuming wrapped around Ilya the moment he awoke, a siren call that bypassed all higher thought and ignited his blood. His own rut, a responsive echo he'd learned to manage with medication and discipline, surged to meet it, not as a separate force, but as the complementary lock to Shane's key. There was no fighting it. There was only convergence.

The heat was as intense as the first, a biological inferno. They built a nest in the center of their bed, a frantic, collaborative effort of every blanket, pillow, and piece of clothing that smelled right. They left it only for fleeting, functional moments, to shovel food into their mouths standing at the kitchen counter, to guzzle water, to take quick, necessary showers that did little to wash away the essential scent of need that clung to them.

It was during one of these brief, fog-brained respites that Ilya saw it. In the small wastepaper basket by the bathroom sink, atop a tangle of tissue, lay the empty, spent syringe of Shane's birth control injection.

A cold, black clarity sliced through the hormonal haze. He had asked. Shane had begged for time to plan. And yet, the evidence was here, discarded. The action itself wasn't a betrayal, it

was a logical, responsible choice for an athlete in his prime. But the sight of it, the tangible proof of a decision made without him, in the midst of the most vulnerable joining they could share, sparked something old and dark.

When he returned to the nest, his touch shifted. The worshipful care fractured, replaced by a possessiveness that had sharp, desperate edges. His hands gripped harder, his kisses bordered on bruising, his movements took on a relentless, claiming depth that was less about mutual pleasure and more about imprinting, erasing any doubt of where Shane belonged. He was rougher than he'd intended, driven by a visceral need to reclaim what felt, in that illogical, rut-clouded moment, like a silent separation.

Shane, lost in the throes of his heat, responded not with fear, but with a wild, matching intensity, meeting force with surrender, the bond screaming with a chaotic mix of ecstasy and a faint, discordant note of conflict.

After, as the peak began to slowly recede into a spent, trembling exhaustion, Ilya gathered Shane, pliant, sweat-slicked, and marked against his chest. He nuzzled into his hair, inhaling the potent, mixed scent of them, and his eyes went to the bathroom door.

The rational part of his mind, the part that went to therapy and took his pills, knew this was a conversation for later. When the heat had passed, when his rut had cooled, when they were both clothed and in their right minds. He would have to ask. They would have to talk.

But for now, in the deep, animal quiet of the nest, he simply held on, the ghost of the syringe in the trash a silent, thorny promise of a discussion yet to come.

The air in the arena was a physical thing, a deafening, pressurized wave of sound and emotion that seemed to make the very ice vibrate. Game Seven. Overtime. The scoreboard glowed with a tie that felt like it had lasted for centuries.

Shane Hollander saw the play unfold not as a blur, but in a series of crystalline, slow-motion decisions. A Boston turnover at their own blue line, forced by a relentless Montreal forecheck. The puck turned loose. Shane, reading the trajectory a half-second before anyone else, exploded forward. He collected it on his backhand, cut sharply inside the last desperate defenseman, a move Ilya had teased him about perfecting, and pulled the puck to his forehand. The Boston goaltender, a wall all series, committed low. Shane went high, shelf, just inside the far post.

The red light ignited. The horn blared. The world dissolved into a screaming, cascading roar.

The Montreal bench emptied in a tidal wave of red, white, and blue, swarming Shane in the corner. He was buried under a pile of ecstatic bodies, the weight of them, the smell of sweat and triumph, overwhelming. The Stanley Cup was being wheeled onto the ice.

Across the rink, Ilya Rozanov stood motionless at the Boston bench. His stick lay forgotten at his feet. The loss was a cold, hollow pit in his stomach, but it was clean. It was hockey. Marly had a firm, restraining hand on his arm, not because Ilya looked like he would charge, but as a precaution, a reminder. Let them have their moment.

Ilya's eyes found Shane just as Shane emerged from the scrum, his helmet off, hair plastered to his forehead, face alight with a joy so pure it was almost painful to witness. Their gazes locked across sixty feet of scarred ice, through the chaos of flashing cameras and falling confetti. Ilya knew the smile reached Shane's eyes before he saw it, stretched taut with competitive adrenaline all game, now thrummed with a profound, shared understanding. Ilya felt no bitterness, only a fierce, aching pride that threatened to crack his sternum. He gave a slow, deliberate nod. Then, the corner of his mouth quirked up. He winked.

For you, the wink said. You earned this.

Shane's smile softened, his eyes shining. He gave a tiny, almost imperceptible nod back. I know.

Ilya turned to his shattered teammates, pulling them in, his voice a low, steady rumble in their ears. "Heads up. You played like warriors. This loss does not define you. Remember this feeling. Let it fuel your summer." He was their leader in defeat, solid and unwavering, a far cry from the man who would have shattered his stick and vanished.

The ceremony was a blur of silver and flashbulbs. Shane, named Conn Smythe Trophy winner as playoff MVP, gave a gracious, short speech, his voice hoarse. The traditional media scrum began on the ice. Reporters clustered around him, the gleaming Cup at his side.

Dallas Kent, his career ended months prior by the one sided fight after Ilya's check, was there as a guest analyst for a fringe sports network. He shoved his way to the front, his smile not reaching his cold eyes. "Shane! Huge win! A word for the fans?"

Before Shane could fully turn, Kent threw a heavy, comradely arm around his shoulders, pulling him close for the camera. It was too tight, too familiar. Shane stiffened, and then he felt it, a sharp, quick prick high on his arm, through his jersey and pads.

A strange, cold numbness shot through the limb, followed by a wave of dizzying faintness. His knees buckled slightly. Kent held him up, his grip now a vise. "Whoa there, champ! The moment getting to you?" Kent's voice was loud, performative. As Shane struggled to focus, his vision swimming, Kent's other hand came up, not to steady him, but to claw at the base of his neck under the collar of his jersey.

With a brutal, ripping motion, Kent tore the reinforced, transparent scent patch clean off Shane's skin.

For a split second, there was nothing. Then, the unique, complex fragrance of an unmasked, bonded omega in a state of extreme physical exertion and emotional peak, sweet, sharp, and unmistakably Shane Hollander, bloomed into the immediate airspace.

The change was instantaneous and electric. The nearby reporters, mostly betas and alphas, recoiled or leaned in, their expressions shifting from professional curiosity to stunned confusion. Cameras zoomed in unconsciously on the raw, slightly reddened patch of skin on Shane's neck, now fully exposed. The live broadcast feeds, broadcasting to millions, captured it all: the stumble, the violent rip, and then the dawning, catastrophic realization on the faces of the crowd.

Kent shoved a microphone in his face, his voice dripping with faux concern that couldn't hide his triumphant venom. "Looks like the pressure was really on, huh, omega? Got a secret you've been keeping from the league all these years?"

The word hung in the air, louder than the arena's horn. Shane, drugged and exposed, could only stare, the world tilting on its axis. The Cup, his team, his victory, all of it was swallowed by the terrifying, silent vacuum of the secret he had guarded his entire life, now laid bare for the world to see.

Across the ice, Ilya sensed it before he saw it. The bond screamed with a shockwave of violation and panic that was not his own. His head snapped around. He saw Shane swaying, saw the torn patch in Kent's hand, saw the grotesque smirk on Kent's face. The cold, controlled leader of a moment before vanished.

Every lesson, every pill, every hard-won ounce of restraint evaporated. A sound ripped from Ilya's throat that was not human. He threw off Marly's grip like it was nothing and launched himself across the ice, not towards the celebration, but towards the nightmare unfolding at center ice, his skates throwing up a spray of ice as he moved with a single, devastating purpose: to reach his mate.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading!  Every comment, kudos, and bookmark genuinely makes my day.

Next chapter... well... let's just say I enjoyed the outline so that might not be so much. Whether that's a good thing or a terrible thing depends entirely on what my playlist decides while I'm writing. If the toxic songs come on, I make no promises. 

Until next time... be nice to Shane, baby boy is gonna go through it.

...Actually, no promises on that either. 

Chapter 36: Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

I don't have much to say about this chapter except: buckle up. Please mind the tags, take care of yourselves, and I'll see you on the other side.

Mind the trigger warning divider towards the end if you don't darker reading.

Theidkqueen10, hope I did you justice

Chapter Notes

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

The ceremony was a blur of chrome and flash. Shane, holding the Conn Smythe Trophy, felt like he was floating outside his own body. The adulation was a wave he rode on instinct, his answers gracious and short, his senses already beginning to overload. The scent patch on his neck, felt suddenly like the most fragile thing in the world.

Then Dallas Kent was there. He was so different then he was in school. Granted, they might have spoken at most for 30 seconds before he was expelled. Professionally they had not had any further contact then a handshake after a game and during the last time when he checked Shane.

The man's face, prematurely aged by bitterness and forced retirement, was a blot in Shane's swimming vision. He didn't get the details, but Ilya had hurt him enough to end his career and while he was worried that there might have been repercussions for Ilya, nothing came of it and he put it out of his mind. But now, with his greasy smile, he forced himself not to recoil while in public with everyone's focus on him.

Everything was overwhelming. It was too bright, too loud, the scent of everyone and everything invading his senses. He needed to look over at Ilya. He wanted to see if his mate was proud of him even though it was at the cost of his own victory. Suddenly, an arm thrown around his shoulders, too heavy, too proprietary. Shane's polite smile froze as he felt the sharp, invasive prick high on his bicep, a sensation like a wasp sting through the fabric of his jersey.

A chemical cold, swift and sinister, shot up his arm and into his chest. The roar of the arena warped, stretching and thinning into a tinny whine. The brilliant lights smeared into streaks. His knees liquefied. Kent's grip was the only thing holding him upright, and it was no longer comradely; it was like a cage.

"Whoa there, champ! The moment getting to you?" Kent's voice was a distorted boom in his ear.

Shane's brain fired desperate signals: *Pull away. Shove him. Call for Ilya, for Hayden.* His muscles refused to obey. He was a prisoner inside his own failing nervous system. Then he felt Kent's other hand at the nape of his neck, fingers scrabbling, not in assistance, but in search. There was a brutal, wrenching rip.

The sensation was not of pain, but of profound, existential violation. The reinforced patch was torn free. For one second, there was a vacuum. Then, the air around Shane Hollander changed.

The complex, layered scent that bloomed forth was unmistakable. It was the sweet-sharp signature of an omega, yes, but uniquely his, carrying the top notes of adrenaline and exhaustion, the deeper, warmer base of his natural chemistry, and now, laced through it, the bright, terrified tang of panic. It was the scent he had spent a lifetime, a career, militantly containing. It flooded the immediate space, cutting through the smells of ice, sweat, and arena food. He became acutely aware that he was surrounded by alphas.

A nearby reporter, an alpha from a Montreal paper, jerked back as if slapped, his microphone dropping to his side. Another, a beta woman, leaned in, her eyes wide with confusion before dawning horror. The camera lenses, already focused on the MVP, seemed to zoom in with a collective, robotic hunger on the exposed skin of his throat, now visibly red and vulnerable.

Kent shoved the microphone forward, his own scent a sour mix of malice and triumph. "Looks like the pressure's really on, huh, omega? Got a secret you've been keeping from the league all these years?"

The word 'omega' echoed in the sudden pocket of silence around them. It was a key turned in a lock, a diagnosis announced. Shane's world didn't tilt; it shattered. The Cup, the trophy in his hand, the smiling faces of his teammates, they all receded into a distant, silent film. The

only reality was the cold air on his bared gland and the millions of eyes seeing him, truly seeing him, for the first time.

Across the ice, Ilya was trying to boost the spirits for the last time of his team when the bond changed.

One moment, the connection was there, thrumming with Shane's overstimulated exhaustion in the background of his mind, a manageable, familiar buzz. The next, it was flooded with a tsunami of wrongness: a spike of chemical fear, a bolt of pure violation, and then a dizzying, nauseating plunge.

And then... silence.

Not quiet. Not stillness.

Silence.

Ilya's head snapped around, his heart seizing in a vice of pure, animal terror. He saw the scene in a series of freeze-frames: Shane swaying, his eyes glassy and unseeing. Kent's arm clamped around him. The small, discarded patch on the ice. The look on Kent's face-not concern, but grotesque, performative curiosity.

The cold knot of defeat in Ilya's gut vaporized, replaced by a white-hot supernova. Every lesson from his therapy sessions, every mindful breath, every pill that helped him modulate the world, was incinerated in the heat of that primal fuel. The world narrowed, simple, and absolute: Mate. Hurt. Threat.

He moved.

He was over the boards before his conscious mind issued the command, his skates biting the ice with a shriek that cut through the ambient noise. He was aware of Hayden and JJ converging on Shane's collapsing form, their bodies a wall of protective intent. He registered the trainers running. This was good. They were help. But they were not the solution.

His gaze lifted and locked onto Dallas Kent.

Kent was standing. Breathing. He was looking down at the torn patch in his hand with a furrowed brow, a man trying to solve a minor puzzle. He was unharmed. The dissonance was catastrophic. Shane was on the ground, the bond was a silent scream in Ilya's skull, and the source of the violation was upright. Unmarked.

"Rozanov!" Hayden's shout was a distant, irrelevant sound.

Hayden and JJ were first to Shane's side, their large bodies already curving over him, forming a living barricade against the staring world. Trainers in red jackets were sprinting from the tunnel, black medical kits swinging. *Good. Help is coming.* The thought was a cold, clinical flicker in a mind rapidly burning down to a single, white-hot directive.

His gaze lifted. It tracked over the scrum of concerned teammates, over the glint of the abandoned Cup, and landed on Dallas Kent.

Kent was standing. He was breathing. He was looking down at the small, translucent square of the torn scent patch held between his thumb and forefinger with an expression of theatrical, grotesque bewilderment. He then looked at the utterly still form of Shane Hollander, the league's MVP, at his feet. A faint, confused smile played on his bloody lips, not the smile of a man who understood the catastrophe he'd engineered, but of a man who thought he'd played a shocking, edgy prank for his network. He was unharmed. He was unafraid. He was standing.

And in Ilya Rozanov, the meticulously constructed dam of his new self-control, built brick by brick with therapy, medication, and Shane's unwavering faith, shattered.

The calculation was instantaneous and absolute, written in the primal script of the bond. Shane is unconscious. Kent is not. Shane is silent. Kent is breathing. The cause and effect were one and the same.

He moved.

This was not the choreographed, gloves-off dance of a hockey fight. There was no ceremony, no challenge roared, no chest-thumping. It was the silent, efficient, and horrifying acceleration of a force of nature. His skates drove him forward with a power that seemed to warp the air around him.

“ILYA!” Hayden’s bellow was a distant, irrelevant sound, swallowed by the roaring in Ilya’s own ears.

Kent, his hockey instincts misfiring, automatically dropped into a fighter’s stance, gloves off, fists raised. Ilya didn’t acknowledge the posture. He didn’t alter his course. He simply took. One hand clamped onto the lapel of Kent’s expensive analyst’s suit, the other fisted in the fabric at his shoulder. Using his own terrifying momentum, he used Kent’s body as a pivot and slammed him backward into the solid fiberglass of the dasher boards. The impact was a sickening, hollow BOOM that resonated through the frame and cut through the arena’s murmuring shock.

It was methodical. Terrible. This wasn’t rage. It was eradication. Officials’ whistles shrieked a continuous, panicked chorus. Players from both teams, their celebration and despair forgotten, swarmed the spot, a tangle of sweaty jerseys and grasping hands. They hung on his arms, his back, trying to drag him off. It was like trying to hold back a collapsing cliff face. His focus was absolute, a singularity of purpose. In the chaotic scrum, as hands pulled at his jersey, the collar tore. The bright, unforgiving glare of the arena lights and the hungry eyes of a hundred broadcast cameras captured what was revealed: the stark, silvery, fully healed scar of a mating bite on the side of his neck. It was not a subtle mark. It was a claim.

A low, guttural phrase spilled from Ilya’s lips, seared into the minute space between their faces, a curse not for the crowd but for the man beneath him. “*Bastard.*” The word was colder than the ice.

Then Marly was there. He didn't shout pleas. He didn't try to reason. He came in from behind, a linemate knowing the only way to stop a runaway force is to match its mass and direction. He wrapped both arms around Ilya's torso in a full tackle, using all his weight and strength to wrench him backward, away from Kent's now-limp form. He hooked his chin over Ilya's shoulder and shouted, his voice raw and cracking, directly into his ear: "ILYA! LOOK AT HIM! FOR GOD'S SAKE, LOOK AT *SHANE*!"

The name was the only key, the only spell that could break the trance.

Ilya froze. The relentless engine of his violence seized. He ceased resisting the bodies pulling him, and instead used their momentum to shove himself around, his head whipping toward the center ice.

There, the medical team worked with quiet, urgent efficiency. They had stabilized Shane's neck with a brace. His jersey had been cut away, the red, white, and blue fabric parted like a curtain. And there, on the pale, vulnerable column of his throat, was its counterpart: another perfect, silvery mating scar. Exposed. Unhidden. A secret made forever public by the man now gasping on the ice.

Everything else, the whistles, the groans of the crowd, the weight of his teammates, the bloody ruin of Kent's face, dissolved into meaningless static.

Ilya surged forward, shrugging off the clinging hands. He slid the last few feet on his knees, his skates scraping, coming to rest beside the stretcher. His own hand, knuckles split and bleeding, reached out, fingers seeking the cold, limp ones of his mate. He didn't speak; a wounded, frantic sound was trapped in his throat.

"Sir, you need to step back! Now!" A medic bodily inserted himself between Ilya and the stretcher.

A league official in a dark suit, face pale, moved in. "Rozanov, that's enough! This is over!"

Security personnel, large and grim, closed ranks, forming a human wall.

Ilya didn't hear them. The void where the bond had been was now filling with a howling tempest. His muscles coiled again, not for Kent, but for this new obstruction between him

and Shane. The dam was about to break for a second time, and this time it would sweep away anyone in its path.

Marly planted himself in front of Ilya again. He didn't grab him. He placed both hands on Ilya's shoulders, forcing his wild, unseeing eyes to focus. His voice dropped, not to a whisper, but to a tone of absolute, compelling clarity. "Listen to me. Shane is going to wake up. He is going to be scared, and in pain, and confused. And the first thing he will do, the only thing he will want, is to see *you*. Don't be here fighting, be there."

The transformation was instantaneous. The feral light in Ilya's eyes didn't dim, but it changed. It channeled, redirected. The purpose shifted from destruction to guardianship. He threw one last, agonized look at Shane's pale, still face inside the brace, then turned to the ring of officials. His voice, when it came, was ragged, scraped raw, but it was a command, not a plea. "I am going with him. Now. Try to stop me."

The finality in his tone was absolute. It left no room for argument.

On the ice, Kent was being helped to his feet by two trainers. His nose was a ruined mess, blood streaming down his chin and staining his ruined suit. He spat a crimson glob onto the pristine ice of the championship rink, his eyes bleary with pain and dawning fear. He glared at Ilya's retreating back, his voice a mangled, indignant whine. "What the hell is wrong with him?! The guy fainted! It was just a stupid bit! An omega in the league... it's a story!"

Hayden, who had remained kneeling by Shane's side until the stretcher began to move, slowly rose to his feet. He looked across at Kent, and all the usual stoic calm was gone from his face, replaced by a cold, profound, and terrifying comprehension. He had seen the twin bites. He had seen the void in Ilya's eyes when the bond broke. He understood the totality of the reaction in a way Kent's small, cruel mind never could.

He didn't yell. He didn't snarl. He simply said, the words quiet yet carrying in the sudden, chilling silence that had fallen over the ice, "You have no idea what you just did."

Then he turned his back on Kent, on the Cup, on the spectacle, and fell into step beside the stretcher as it was wheeled toward the mouth of the tunnel. Ilya was a step ahead, his hand now resting on the stretcher's rail, his entire being focused on the figure upon it.

The game was over. The season was over. The secret was over. In the echoing arena, under the blinding lights, all that remained was the silent, glaring truth of the mating scars, and the long, dark tunnel ahead where a new, more brutal reality was just beginning.

Ilya refused to be parted from Shane when they pulled in front of the ambulance. Have vaguely heard Yuna and David from a few feet away but couldn't care about that right now.

Ilya climbed into the ambulance without another word, folding his large frame onto the small bench beside the stretcher. He had to release the rail to sit, but as soon as he was seated, his hand found Shane's again, lacing their fingers together over the blanket. His thumb began to move, stroking back and forth across Shane's knuckles in a small, frantic rhythm, a tactile prayer. Usually, when they held hands, Shane would squeeze randomly, would fiddle with his fingers, run his thumbnail over his palm...something. Now he was too still.

His hand was clamped around the cold steel rail of the stretcher, his knuckles white, his split skin smearing a faint, rust-colored streak on the metal. When a medic reached to adjust an IV line, his hand brushed Ilya's. Ilya didn't snarl. He didn't even look at the man. He simply shifted his grip, his body angling subtly, impossibly, to stay connected to the moving gurney without impeding its progress.

"Sir, you need to release the stretcher. For safety," an EMT said, her voice firm but edged with the tension of the situation.

"No." The word was flat, final. It held the same absolute quality as his declaration on the ice. He kept his eyes on Shane's face, pale and still within the cervical collar, on the slow, mechanical rise and fall of his chest under the thin hospital blanket.

Ilya's head turned slowly. The void where the bond had been was a howling desert, and this man was a stone in his path to the only oasis.

The doors slammed. The siren whooped once, then settled into a wail as they pulled into the night.

Inside, the world was a vibrating capsule of artificial light and beeping monitors. Ilya stared at the lines on the screen, willing them to mean something, to tell him Shane was still in there.

“His vitals are stable,” the attending EMT said, watching him. “He’s breathing on his own. That’s a very good sign. Um, is there a possibility that he’s pregnant?”

Ilya bristled at the question, but he had to admit that they were trying to help. He shook his head and they proceeded to examine him, taking off the pads of his uniform. His entire universe was the cool, limp hand in his, the faint flutter of a pulse under his thumb. This was the price, it was his fault for not being able to curb his temper. This was the cost of every tracker, every hired investigator, every moment of obsessive control. He had wanted to erase all threats, to build a perfect, impenetrable world around Shane. And yet, the threat had come from within the game itself, from a small, jealous man with a needle and a camera, and Ilya had been powerless to stop it until it was too late. It seemed he would never be enough for his mate.

The ambulance swayed. Ilya’s head dropped forward, his forehead nearly touching the side of the stretcher. He didn’t cry. He just breathed, in and out, matching the shallow breathing, pouring every ounce of his will through the point of contact between their hands.

Come back to me. Come back. I am here. I am not letting go.

At the hospital, the dance repeated in the chaotic brightness of the ER intake. A nurse tried to guide him to a waiting area. A resident asked him to please wait outside the curtain. Each time, Ilya became a silent, immovable statue, his grip on Shane a fixed point in the swirling thunderstorm of scents, people and too bright lights.

He was about to toss the the next doctor that tried to pull him away when he heard Yuna near by. “That’s his mate, you separate them now, and you’ll have a different kind of medical emergency on your hands. Let him stay.”

Finally, in a private examination room, as nurses hooked Shane up to more permanent monitors, an older doctor with tired eyes assessed Ilya. He saw the blood on his hands, the wildness barely leashed in his gaze, the absolute focus on the man in the bed.

“You can stay,” the doctor said quietly. “But you sit in that chair. You do not interfere. You let us work. If you cannot do that, security will remove you. Do you understand?”

Ilya’s eyes flickered to the doctor for the first time. He gave one short, sharp nod. He released Shane’s hand only long enough to drag the hard plastic chair so close to the bedside that the metal legs screeched in protest. Then he reclaimed his hold. He wished he could shed some of his gear. At some point he lost his skates and helmet. But if Shane was uncomfortable, he would be too. Suddenly he remembered the syringe that the Voyageur player had given him and dug into the crease of his stocking. “Here. he was injected with this right before.”

He sat. He did not interfere. He became a vigil. His eyes tracked every movement of the medical staff, every change in the monitor’s drone. The world beyond this room, the headlines being written, the videos going viral, the league’s impending fury, Kent’s pathetic attempt, meant nothing. There was only this room, this silence, and the faint, growing hope that the bond’s severance was not permanent, but a temporary disconnect.

He would sit there, holding on, for as long as it took. He had made a promise, long ago, in the ashes of his own making, to build a different kind of love. Tonight, in the sterile quiet, that love had only one job: to be an anchor. And Ilya Rozanov, for all his flaws, knew how to hold on.

The hushed, mechanical rhythm of the hospital room was broken by the soft swish of the door. Ilya didn’t look up. His entire being was a conduit between his hand and Shane’s, a desperate antenna trying to pick up a signal from the silent void where their connection had been.

“Ilya.”

Yuna's voice was quiet, stripped of all its former sharpness. It held only a mother's exhausted fear. He finally lifted his gaze. She stood just inside the room, two familiar duffel bags in her hands. One was Shane's team issue, the logo a garish contrast to the sterile white. The other was his own, the one Marly must have retrieved from the chaos of the Boston locker room.

"The doctors are analyzing the syringe they recovered," she said, setting the bags down with a soft thump. "They think it was a fast-acting sedative mixed with a potent pheromone trigger. Designed to... unmask him." Her voice faltered on the last word. She looked at her son, so still and pale, and her composure cracked for a second before she reformed it into practical action. "We need to get him out of that jersey and pads. He hates being sweaty after games." She paused, coming closer. "It's... it's all over the news."

Ilya nodded, the motion stiff. Releasing Shane's hand felt like peeling back his own skin, but it was necessary. He stood, his muscles protesting after hours of rigid stillness, and moved to the bags.

Working together with a wordless, grim synergy, they carefully lifted Shane just enough to slide the ruined jersey from his shoulders. Ilya handled him with a forced gentleness, his large hands cradling his head, supporting his neck with a focus that blocked out everything else. Yuna bunched up the fabric, her lips pressed into a thin line as she saw the full extent of the mating bite now openly displayed.

From his own bag, Ilya pulled out a soft, well-worn black t-shirt. It carried the faint, clean scent of his detergent and him. Without discussion, he carefully guided Shane's arms into the sleeves and pulled the fabric down over his chest. The shirt was comically large on Shane, swallowing his frame, but the gesture was unmistakable. Shane had loved wearing his clothes over the summer. A wrapping of his scent around his vulnerable mate, the only protection he could offer against a world that had just torn everything else away.

"His phone," Yuna said, nodding to Shane's bag. "It hasn't stopped. Media, the league, the team... everyone. I've started running interference with David. We'll handle it." She took a steadying breath and looked at Ilya. "Yours is probably the same. Let me... let me do that for you, too. Just for now. If you want, that is."

The offer was monumental. The part of Ilya that had once hired entire security teams to control information balked at handing over his current primary link to the world. But now he

saw that he had an ally, and he had to admit that Yuna Hollander was a brilliant strategist for media matters. He handed his

After a beat of hesitation, he nodded. He dug into his bag, his fingers closing around his phone. It was a brick of ceaseless vibration, a physical manifestation of the erupting scandal. He didn't look at the screen. He simply powered it off and placed it in her waiting palm.

"Thank you, code is 2481." he said, the words rough.

With the external noise dealt with, or at least contained, he turned to the immediate physical reality. The stink of the game, dried sweat, arena ice, blood that was not his own, clung to his gear. He couldn't sit vigil smelling of that. He stripped off his game jersey and pads with efficient, unselfconscious movements, revealing the powerful, bruised map of his torso. He stripped down to his underwear, thankful that Yuna turned her back to give him a sense of privacy. He pulled on a fresh pair of sweatpants and a simple grey long-sleeve from his bag, the clean fabric a small relief.

Finally, he dragged the chair back to its exact previous position, the legs screeching their familiar protest. He sat, reclaimed Shane's hand, and resumed his watch. The room was quieter now, the only sounds the beep of the monitor and the shared, fearful breathing of two people united in their devotion to the man lying between them. The storm raged outside, but in this room, there was only the wait, the hope, and the silent, steadfast grip of a love that had already burned down one world and was prepared to do it again.

The doctor's return was a soft knock against the tension. He was an older man, he hadn't been in there room before. His was face a map of long nights and difficult news. His eyes went first to Ilya, then to Shane, a silent acknowledgment of the hierarchy in the room. He gave a small, permitting nod to Yuna. "You can stay, Mrs. Hollander, if Mr. Rozanov agrees."

The unspoken words hung in the antiseptic air: He's the one who decides what to do. The technicalities, the older generational understanding that Shane, by bond and bite, now fell

under Ilya's primary jurisdiction, that was a conversation for another day. Ilya felt the ghost of his own past words to Yuna in her kitchen '*I have every right*' echo in the silence.

"We analyzed the syringe," the doctor began, his voice clinical, which only made the horror worse. "The liquid was a cocktail. A fast-acting numbing agent, likely to make him unconscious. Mixed with it was a significant dose of Disotrostol."

Yuna's sharp intake of breath was the only sound.

"It's a black-market drug," the doctor continued, his gaze steady on Ilya, who had gone very still. "Used by omegas in... desperate circumstances, to terminate pregnancies. One of its documented, off-label effects is that it can cause severe inflammation and temporary dysfunction in the glandular tissue around a mating bond. For a bonded omega, it's..." He searched for a word. "An attack on the Alpha/Omega connection itself."

The void in Ilya's chest seemed to grow colder, deeper. This wasn't just an unmasking. This was an attempted annihilation. Kent hadn't just wanted to expose Shane; he'd wanted to scorch the earth between them.

"Shane is strong," the doctor said, shifting his focus back to the monitors. "His system is processing it. The IV is helping flush it out. We expect him to wake soon as the sedative wears off." He paused, choosing his next words with care. "The bond is a psychosomatic link, but it has a physical anchor. In cases of traumatic disruption... sometimes a reaffirmation of that anchor can help stabilize the patient. It can... call the connection back."

Yuna understood instantly. Her eyes flew to Ilya's face, then to the scar on her son's throat. A complex wave of emotions passed over her features, revulsion at the necessity, a mother's anguish, and a grim, resigned acceptance. She had seen the monster in Ilya, and she had seen the protector. To beta's the whole act of the biting customs were usually seen as barbaric. Now her son would have to go through that again.

"I'll... give you some privacy," she said, her voice thick. She didn't look at Ilya as she stood, following the doctor out of the room. The door clicked shut, leaving them in the humming silence.

Alone, Ilya looked at Shane. The fragility of him in the large hospital bed, swimming in Ilya's t-shirt, was a pain sharper than any punch. The doctor's suggestion was a return to the primal act that had once been about obsession.

He stood, the chair scraping back. He leaned over the bed, one hand gently cradling the side of Shane's face, his thumb stroking his cheekbone. With the other, he carefully brushed the loose collar of the shirt aside, fully exposing the silvery scar of his first claim. The scar from the cottage, from the heat, from the choice.

"Dusha moya," he whispered, his voice breaking. "I am here. Come home to me."

He bent his head. He did not hesitate. His teeth found the exact seam of the old wound. This time, there was no feverish heat, no desperate passion driving him. There was only a profound, focused will, a single-pointed intention to rebuild the bond that had been shattered.

He bit down.

It was not the savage, claiming burst of the first time. It was a deliberate, sustained pressure, breaking the skin anew, letting his own essence spill into the wound. The coppery taste of blood filled his mouth, a sacred, terrible wine. He held there, pouring every ounce of his being, his fear, his devotion, his unwavering promise into the act.

And then, he felt it.

Not the full, roaring return of the bond. But a flicker. A faint, distant pulse in the vast silent emptiness, like a single star winking to life in a black sky. A weak, thready sensation of *presence* where before there had been only void. It was agonizingly faint, but it was there. A thread of gold spun across the abyss.

He released the bite, lavaging the wound gently with his tongue before pressing a soft, reverent kiss to it. He rested his forehead against Shane's, his breath coming in ragged gasps, his own tears finally escaping to fall onto the sterile sheets.

The door opened softly sometime later. Yuna stepped back in, her eyes going immediately to the fresh, glistening mark on her son's neck. She said nothing. She simply returned to her seat, picking up her own vigil where she had left off.

Ilya sank back into his chair, reclaiming Shane's hand. The faint, new pulse in his chest was the most precious thing in the world. But this wasn't over. The world was still outside, waiting to crash in. But he would sit, and he would guard that flickering light with everything he had, until Shane opened his eyes and saw him waiting.

The beep of the monitor was the first thing Shane heard. Then, the low, hum of the hospital room. A dull, throbbing ache radiated from his neck, sharp and specific. Not the old scar. A new, raw layer of pain sat atop it.

He blinked, his vision swimming into focus on the tile ceiling. A wave of nausea rolled through him. The last clear memory was the prick in his arm, Kent's grinning face, and then the terrifying, public rip at his neck. The exposure. The secret, torn away and broadcast to the world. A choked sob escaped his throat before he could stop it.

"I am here. Zayka. Look at me."

Ilya's voice was right beside him, closer than the machines. Shane turned his head, a fresh tear tracking into his hairline. Ilya was there, his face drawn and pale, his blue eyes burning with an intensity that had nothing to do with anger. One of his hands was wrapped firmly around Shane's, the other came up to cradle his cheek, his thumb wiping the tear away.

"It's... everyone saw," Shane whispered, his voice raspy. "The bite. Everything."

"Let them see," Ilya said, his voice low and absolute. "That is the least of what they will see. You do not worry about this. You do not worry about anything. That is my job now. You only think about feeling better so we can get out of here and start our summer again."

Shane shook his head weakly against the pillow. The guilt was a lead weight in his gut, worse than the drug's aftermath. "I'm sorry," he breathed.

Ilya's brow furrowed. "Sorry? For what? For being attacked? For being who you are?" His thumb stroked Shane's smattering of freckles. "There is nothing for you to be sorry for."

"Not for that," Shane said, closing his eyes as another wave of shame hit him. He forced them open. "I went to school with him. Kent. It was only for a few weeks, my first term, his last. Before he was expelled."

Ilya went very still. The air in the room seemed to get colder.

"He... he raped an omega. A freshman. It was hushed up, money changed hands from what we heard, he was just gone. We barely spoke. Maybe five words total." Shane's gaze was distant, looking back at a ghost from a life he'd sealed away. "But I must have done something. Looked at him wrong. Been too quiet. Something. I was just trying to be invisible, but omegas... we can't be, not really. We had some masking aids for while I was in school but maybe he still knew. He must have remembered me. All these years, he must have remembered the quiet omega who was hiding, and he... he just waited."

The pieces clicked into place with a sickening finality in Ilya's mind. This wasn't just about hockey or exposure. It was a grudge. A predator seeing a victim who had, in his twisted view, escaped consequence. Shane's entire career, his hidden identity, had been a silent rebuke to men like Kent. And tonight, Kent had finally found a way to violate him in the most public way possible, to tear down everything Shane had built.

A terrible, serene calm settled over Ilya. The frantic energy from the arena, the wild fear in the ambulance, was gone. This was the cold, plotting focus that had hired investigators and placed trackers. But now, it had a pure target.

He leaned down, pressing his lips to the fresh bite on Shane's neck, not to hurt, but to seal the claim anew. He inhaled the scent of his blood, his distress, making it a part of himself. "You did nothing wrong," he murmured against his skin, his voice vibrating with conviction. "We will figure this out together. I promised you that if we wanted to keep playing hockey, that I

would find a way. You just won the fucking Stanley Cup, sweetheart. In a couple days, you'll be on that stupid parade and doing all the fun things." He pulled back, his hand returning to Shane's face. "Listen to me. He is nothing. He is already dead in this world. You are alive. You are mine. And I will erase him."

He didn't say how. He didn't need to. The promise was in the calm of his voice, in the ruthless clarity of his eyes. This was a vow, cold and precise.

Shane looked up at him, seeing not the unhinged rival or the obsessive lover, but his mate. His protector. The one person whose darkness was now a shelter. The connection they shared, weak and frayed, pulsed with a new current, not fear, but a transfer of that grim resolve. He let out a shuddering breath and nodded, surrendering the weight of it.

Ilya kissed his forehead. "Sleep. I will handle everything."

As Shane's eyes drifted shut, exhausted by the confession and the drugs, Ilya straightened up. He pulled the blanket higher, ensuring the fresh mark was covered for now. He settled back into the chair, his vigil unchanged in posture but transformed in purpose.

The game was far from over. It had just moved to a different arena. And Ilya Rozanov knew exactly how to win a war of eradication.

The doctor returned as the grey light of dawn bled into the room. Shane had drifted into a shallow, drug-facilitated sleep, his hand still locked in Ilya's. The examination was brief, professional. Vitals stable. Toxicity levels dropping. The doctor agreed discharge was possible by late afternoon, a precautionary window for observation. The unspoken diagnosis hung heavier than any medical one- severe psychological trauma due to public exposure, and a bond that had been chemically assaulted.

The quiet was shattered not long after by the soft knock and subsequent arrival of their people. Hayden and JJ entered first, a wall of silent, grim solidarity. Hayden's eyes went immediately to the fresh bandage at Shane's neck, his jaw tightening. JJ, uncharacteristically quiet, just nodded and placed a massive hand on Shane's blanketed foot, giving it a gentle squeeze.

Rose followed, her eyes red-rimmed but fierce. She marched straight to the bedside, ignoring Ilya entirely, and bent to press a kiss to Shane's forehead. "You look like shit, superstar," she whispered, her voice thick. "The lemon squares are in the car for when you bust out of this joint."

Svetlana arrived with Marly and two of the Voyageurs' steady veterans. Her sharp gaze swept the room, landing on her Ilya. She gave him a single, assessing nod, an acknowledgment of the crisis and his place in it. The players offered quiet, awkward congratulations on the Cup win that now felt like it had happened in another lifetime, their eyes darting to Shane with a new, uncertain awe.

Shane, propped up on pillows, managed wan smiles and quiet thanks. The bond, slowly knitting itself back together from the raw, re-bitten wound, hummed with his exhaustion and a fragile gratitude for their presence. He was surrounded, protected by the family they had built.

Seeing him momentarily anchored, Yuna caught Ilya's eye and tilted her head toward the door. He extricated his hand from Shane's, a reluctant separation that made Shane's fingers twitch even as he focused on Rose and JJ's conversation, and followed her into the hushed, bright hallway.

The moment the door clicked shut, her composure, so steady in the room, showed fractures. "It's starting," she said, her voice low and urgent. "The team owner has called six times. His office is 'demanding' a conference call with Shane to discuss 'the situation and its impact on the franchise brand.'" She spat the corporate jargon like poison. "And Roger Crowell," she said, naming the league commissioner, "has called personally. He 'requires' a word with Shane at his earliest convenience. The press office is being overrun. It's not just a story anymore, Ilya. It's a crisis. For the league."

Ilya listened, his back against the cold wall, his arms crossed. The frantic, protective rage was gone. In its place was the cold, hyper-focused calm that had once plotted surveillance routes

and calculated threats. He saw the board clearly: the media was the noise. The team and the league were the real powers. They would see Shane not as a victim, but as a liability, a scandal, a problem to be managed or eliminated.

“They will want him silent. They will want him to disappear,” Ilya said, his voice devoid of emotion.

“Or *WE* try to spin it,” Yuna countered, the publicist in her rising. “Turn it into a story of ‘courage’ or ‘overcoming.’”

“They will try to own the narrative,” Ilya corrected. “To control him. Again.” He pushed off the wall, his blue eyes glacial. “You will tell them this: Shane Hollander is recovering from a physical assault and a chemical attack. He will speak when his doctors and his therapist clear him to do so. Not before. Any attempt to pressure him will be considered harassment and will be met with legal action. From us.”

He said ‘us’ with absolute finality. Yuna stared at him, seeing not the obsessive rival from her kitchen, nor the feral beast from the ice, but a ruthless strategist. She understood now, viscerally, what the reference files only hinted at, this was the man who had burned a threat from the earth. Now, he was applying that same lethal focus to a battle of statements and lawyers.

“And the commissioner?” she asked.

A ghost of a smile, devoid of warmth, touched Ilya’s lips. “Tell his office I will be happy to speak to Mr. Crowell on my mate’s behalf. Today. I have some thoughts on league security and the consequences for players who bring unauthorized pharmaceuticals onto the ice.”

Yuna felt a chill that had nothing to do with the hospital air. He wasn’t just playing defense. He was preparing to go on the offensive, to shift the blame squarely onto the league for failing to prevent Kent’s act. He was using the league’s own rules as a weapon.

“Ilya...” she started, a mother’s fear cutting through the strategist.

“They operate with rules, Yuna,” he interrupted, his gaze drifting back to the closed hospital room door. “I understand that and when Shane and I got together at first, I read every single page of the league rules. It took me months but I can say that Shane broke no rules. They discourage omegas. Forbid them from playing if they’re pregnant. They do not want to start a war with me and I don’t see how they can kick their most popular player.”

He turned and went back into the room, leaving her in the hallway. As he resumed his seat and reclaimed Shane’s hand, the bond pulsed, a weak but growing thread. Shane squeezed his hand, his eyes fluttering to find Ilya’s face. He didn’t speak, but his fingers tightened.

Outside, the storm of the world gathered its forces. Inside, Ilya mapped the coming war, one he would fight in boardrooms and press releases, so the man in the bed would only ever have to fight his way back to peace.

The soft rumble of low laughter filled the room, a stark, precious sound against the steady beep of the monitors. Marly was in the middle of a story about a rookie’s disastrous attempt to cook team dinner, embellishing details to make Shane’s lips twitch upward. JJ leaned against the wall, adding dry commentary. Hayden had perched himself carefully at the foot of the bed, a solid, comforting weight. Ilya’s gaze fixed on the point of contact, Hayden’s hip against Shane’s blanketed leg. A possessive heat flickered in his chest, the instinct to remove the other alpha immediate and violent. But he saw the ease in Shane’s tired face, the way the bond hummed with a fragile sense of safety surrounded by his pack. For Shane, he held his tongue, letting the moment be what his mate needed.

Svetlana moved to his side, her presence a cool, familiar pressure. She spoke in low, rapid Russian. “How are you holding up?”

“Fine.” He shrugged. “The doctor said it was a poison for bonds.” Ilya replied in kind, his voice a flat monotone. He kept his eyes on Shane. “He went to school with the svoloch. This was a grudge.”

Svetlana was silent for a full minute, her sharp eyes studying her best friend's profile, the rigid control, the absolute focus. She saw not the boy from Moscow, nor the feral star, but the man Shane had shaped: one whose ruthlessness was now sheathed in a terrifying, purposeful calm. She finally turned her head to look at the bed, at Shane smiling weakly at something Rose said.

"He has been good for you," she stated, not a question. "You are less... chaotic. You can control that danger you've always had in the right ways." She glanced back at Ilya. "I can see it. How you love him. It is not a small thing."

Ilya gave a single, slight nod, acknowledging the truth in her words.

Svetlana leaned closer, her final whisper meant for him alone. "Whatever you are planning to do about this... make sure you get the Church's absolution first. You will need it." She squeezed his arm once, a gesture of both warning and solidarity, then stepped away to offer Shane a few kind words in accented English before heading out, kissing his cheek softly before leaving. The others started heading out too since it was past visiting hours.

Shane's parents were the last to leave. To his surprise, both Yuna and David hugged him before leaving, Yuna offering his cell phone back.

The room settled again. Shane's eyes found Ilya's, the forced cheer melting away into exhaustion. His hand lifted, fingers brushing unconsciously over the fresh bandage at his neck, feeling the ache of the new bite beneath.

"She loves you already," Ilya corrected, moving back to his chair. He reclaimed Shane's hand, his thumb stroking the inside of his wrist where the pulse beat, a steady rhythm he loved. There connection hummed with fatigue and a deep-seated fear, but also with a profound, anchoring love.

Shane smiled. "I was so nervous about meeting her at Christmas."

"Nervous about Sveta? Why, lapochka? I told you she'd love you before I'd let you bring her around the others."

“She’s your family, Ilya. I wanted to impress her.” Ilya bent to kiss him softly, his eyes were tired again, his blinks slowing and he was almost purring.

“They’re going to want answers,” Shane mumbled, trying to fight sleep.

“They will get them,” Ilya said. His voice was quiet, but it carried the weight of granite. “On our terms. You rest. Let the drugs leave your body. Let me worry about everything.” He brought Shane’s hand to his lips, pressing a kiss to his knuckles. “I am not letting anything else touch you.”

He carded his fingers through Shane’s hair, watching him fall asleep. He waited for a while before, then stepped away and took out his cell phone. When it powered on, he had to shut off the social media notifications and waited for the notifications for his texts to stop.

He walked to the other corner of the room before dialing the number he didn’t think he’d need again.

The call connected on the second ring. A voice, gravelly and calm, answered in Russian. “Mr. Rozanov.”

“Anatoly.”

There was a pause, filled with the silent understanding of men who had dealt in shadows. “I heard about the game. And the after-party. Is he secure?”

“He is secure.” Ilya’s voice was low, his back to the bed, his eyes on the darkening city through the hospital window. “I need information. On the man who touched him. Dallas Kent. Everything. His history before the expulsion. His finances now. His vices. His friends. His fears. I want to know what he eats for breakfast and which god he thinks he prays to.”

“Understood. This is for... context?” Anatoly’s meaning was clear. Was this for leverage, or for something more permanent?

“For now, context,” Ilya confirmed, his gaze drifting back to Shane’s sleeping form. The fresh bite on his neck was a dark promise under the bandage. “He hurt my mate. I want to know every pressure point. Where he is weak. Where he is proud. I want to know what he has left to lose.”

“It will be done.” No further questions were necessary. The line went dead.

Ilya stood by the window, the phone cool in his hand. The plan was not a single act, he had to be more strategic about this one. There had been too many eyes in the stadium, he had too much to lose now. Revenge was a blunt instrument. What he needed was a surgical dismantling.

Kent’s life was already a ruin, a failed career ended by Ilya’s own hit, a pathetic media gig. But men like him clung to shreds: reputation, money, the illusion of respect. Ilya would take those.

But that was only the immediate threat. The larger battlefield was the league itself.

He turned the problem over in his mind. *Omega*. The word was a key that unlocked a different set of rules. No, they were not technically barred from playing. But the unspoken barriers were made of granite and tradition. And the one absolute, inviolable rule was the pregnancy ban. An omega, by the league’s and every other employer in the planet’s own archaic bylaws, would be immediately, automatically dismissed for the duration of a pregnancy from any and every job. It was their ultimate control mechanism, a biological veto.

Shane’s secret was out. They could not put it back. So the play was not to hide it, but to weaponize it. To force the league’s hand into making a choice so publicly vile it would break under the weight of its own hypocrisy.

He would have to become the shield and the sword. The charming, reformed social media star who expressed “grave concern” for his mate’s well-being. And the ruthless, connected alpha who would quietly inform the commissioner’s office that if Shane Hollander faced one

iota of professional discrimination, if his contract was challenged, if his place on the ice was questioned, the ensuing legal and public relations war would not just be about Shane. It would expose every backroom deal, every silenced grievance, every outdated bylaw. They would burn the league down around their ears before they let Shane be shunted aside.

He walked back to the bed. Shane was stirring, a soft groan escaping his lips. Ilya sat, reclaiming his hand. The bond hummed, a thread still fragile but unmistakably *there*, strengthened by the re-bite, by his presence, by the silent vow thrumming through his blood.

“Ilya?” Shane’s voice was slurred with sleep and drugs.

“I am here.” He leaned forward, pressing his lips to Shane’s forehead. “Go back to sleep sweetheart.”

“You’re thinking too loud,” Shane mumbled, his eyes still closed. “It’s buzzing.”

“Good buzzing or bad buzzing?”

“...loud buzzing.”

A faint, real smile touched Ilya’s lips. He carded his fingers through Shane’s hair. “Then sleep. I will think more quietly.”

As Shane’s breathing evened out again, Ilya’s mind continued its cold, precise calculations. Anatoly would get the information. The league was next.

Kent had tried to erase Shane’s secret to destroy him. Ilya would use the exposed truth to fortify him. He would build a citadel of legal, financial, and public pressure so impregnable that no one would ever dare touch him again.

The game had changed. It was no longer played on ice. It was played in boardrooms and media cycles and the dark, quiet places where real power lived. And Ilya Rozanov, for the first time, had everything he loved fighting for, and nothing left to lose. He settled in for the long vigil, the fingers of one hand laced with Shane's, the other already moving the first pieces on a much larger, much darker board.

Ilya stared at Shane's sleeping face, the stark white bandage on his neck a glaring testament to the violation. The old, familiar pathways in his mind, the ones that demanded immediate, physical retaliation, were still lit up like fuse lines.

Revenge was a luxury. Control was a necessity. His phone was still in his hand from the call to Anatoly. He unlocked it, remember the quick email from his agent that he'd read. His thumb hovered over the Instagram icon.

He opened the app. The notifications were a blur of concern, shock, and curiosity. He ignored them. He went to his story, to the private archive of their life: the two coffee mugs, the fishing poles, the book and glasses. Then he opened a new text box.

His fingers moved quickly, typing in Russian and using the translator, the language of the league that had failed them.

For a long time, the world saw a rivalry. That was a narrative the league pushed, and one we let them tell. The truth is simpler, and harder. @shanehollander24 is my mate. He is an omega. We hid it because the world, and our sport, is not kind to an omega. What happened tonight wasn't an exposé. It was an assault. A coward used a needle and a camera to attack what we built in private. The 'secret' is out. Good. Now you see us. Now you see what you're really protecting, or failing to protect.

You all have seen the pictures I've posted of our quiet moments. Many of you guessed there was someone with me. You were right.

The person in those pictures is Shane Hollander. The league prefers the story of rivals. It is easier to market. We understood the prejudice, the automatic assumptions about weakness, about biology being destiny. We wanted to protect what we had from that noise.

I am telling you this now because I will not let anyone else define us. Not the league, not the media, and certainly not a man like Dallas Kent.

Shane Hollander is the strongest person I know. He is my mate. He is everything.

We would appreciate privacy as he recovers.

He didn't post it. Not yet. He saved it as a draft. To post it contradicted what the rumored position of the NHL was going to take. It was a declaration of war, and its timing would be everything. He would need Yuna and the lawyers to see it first. It was the opening salvo in the narrative battle, framing them not as deceivers, but as victims of a prejudiced system, with Kent as the violent symptom of that sickness.

He looked up. Yuna had slipped back into the room, her phone pressed to her ear, her expression strained. She met his eyes, covered the microphone, and whispered, "Crowell's office again. They're insisting."

"Tell them I will have a statement for them within the hour," Ilya said, his voice low. "One that will make their 'crisis management' much clearer."

Yuna's eyes widened slightly, but she relayed the message with a newfound steel in her voice.

Shane stirred again, a soft moan escaping him as consciousness returned, bringing with it the full, aching awareness of his body and the situation. His free hand flew to the bandage.

"Easy, sweetheart," Ilya murmured, instantly back at his side, his presence a tangible anchor.

“It hurts,” Shane whispered, but he was leaning into Ilya’s touch, not pulling away.

“I know. I am sorry. It was necessary.” He brushed the hair from Shane’s forehead.

Shane’s tired eyes searched his. He saw the cold, focused calm, not the frenzied rage from the ice.

Ilya gave him a quick kiss, then pressed their foreheads together. “Do you trust me?” He asked. It took a few seconds before Shane nodded. “I have a plan, your mother and the lawyers need to review a statement that I want to put out. We do not hide anymore. We make them answer for why we had to.”

He helped Shane sip some water, his movements gentle, in stark contrast to the ruthless calculus going on behind his eyes. Yuna finished her call and approached, her gaze shifting between them.

“Ilya has a draft statement,” she said to Shane, her tone leaving no room for argument. “We will run it by legal. It’s... direct.”

“It is the truth,” Ilya said, simply. “The only thing left to use.”

Shane looked from his mother’s worried, determined face to his mate’s implacable one. The split he’d once feared, between the people who’d protected him and the man he loved, wasn’t happening. They were aligning, a unified front against the coming storm. The fear was still a cold stone in his gut, but it was being steadily surrounded by a fortress of fierce, unwavering love.

He let his head fall back against the pillow, his fingers tightening around Ilya’s. “Okay,” he breathed, surrendering to the strategy, to the care, to the fight. “Show me.”

The room was silent except for the rhythmic beep of the heart monitor and the soft, even sound of Shane's breathing. Ilya watched him sleep, his face pale against the white pillow, the stark white bandage at his throat a glaring reminder of the renewed mark.

His mind, which had been churning with plans of legal status and private investigations, suddenly stilled. Anatoly was gathering ammunition. Lawyers were being mobilized. They would fight if needed but he hoped for an easy alternative.

The silence in the back of the tinted SUV was heavier than the hospital quiet. Shane stared out the window at the blurring city, his fingers tracing the edge of the fresh bandage on his neck. Discharge felt less like freedom and more like being pushed onto a new, more exposed battlefield. His parents' high-rise apartment offered security gates and a doorman, a fortress of sorts, but it couldn't keep out the thoughts.

For the first hour, he moved through the spacious rooms like a ghost. He accepted the tea Yuna made. He nodded as David pointed out the extra-strong locks on the doors. He stood on the balcony, the wind biting at his cheeks, and felt nothing but a hollow, ringing dread.

The call from Hayden came just after dusk.

Shane took it in the guest room, closing the door for a semblance of privacy. Ilya, positioned in the living room with a sightline to the hallway, watched the line of his shoulders through the cracked door.

"Hey," Shane's voice was thin. A pause. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm... okay. Tired." Another, longer pause. Ilya saw his free hand come up, press against his forehead. "What did they say?"

The silence that followed was different. It was a listening silence that began to curdle. Shane's posture stiffened, then seemed to fold in on itself slightly. He sank onto the edge of the bed.

"All of them?" he whispered. "Even Luc? And, and Petey?" His voice broke on the rookie's name. He listened, his head bowing until his hair fell forward, shielding his face. "No, I... I get it. It's a shock. It changes the... the dynamic. The locker room..." He was trying to

rationalize it, to be the understanding captain, but the words were ash in his mouth. “Thanks for telling me, Hayd.”

He ended the call and let the phone drop onto the duvet. For a moment, he was perfectly still. Then, a tremor started in his hands. It traveled up his arms, seized his shoulders. His breathing hitched, a sharp, ugly sound in the quiet room.

In the living room, Ilya was already on his feet. Yuna looked from her son’s hunched form to Ilya’s face. Her own composure, shattered. “Ilya,” she breathed, her voice strangled with a mother’s helpless terror. “He’s... he’s not breathing right. He’s going to spiral. He can’t, after everything, he can’t break now. Please.”

She wasn’t asking him to comfort. She was begging him to *act*. To do the thing she had once feared most.

Ilya’s jaw tightened. The old, dark instinct to dominate, to control, uncoiled in his gut. He had promised himself, promised Shane, he would not resort to this. That Shane’s autonomy was sacred. But this wasn’t about autonomy anymore. This was about survival. Watching Shane shatter into a million silent pieces was something he could not permit.

“Stay here,” he told Yuna, his voice low and devoid of emotion.

He crossed the space and pushed the bedroom door fully open. Shane was curled forward, arms wrapped around his stomach, his breaths coming in short, desperate gasps that weren’t pulling in any air. The bond between them was a wild, static shriek of panic.

Ilya didn’t ask if he was okay. He didn’t offer platitudes. He walked to the bed, his presence large and inevitable in the small room. He didn’t touch him yet.

“Shane.” His voice was not loud, but it was absolute. It was the voice from the kitchen months ago, the one that could cut through chaos. “Look at me.”

Shane flinched, his head shaking a frantic ‘no’ against his knees.

Ilya reached out. He didn’t grab, but his hands were firm as he uncoupled Shane’s arms from his torso and forced him to sit up. Shane resisted, a weak, terrified struggle, but Ilya’s strength was implacable. He cupped Shane’s face, his thumbs on his cheekbones, and forced his head up. Tears streaked Shane’s face, his eyes wide and unseeing with panic.

“Breathe,” Ilya commanded, his gaze locking onto Shane’s. “In. Through your nose. Now.”

It was not a suggestion. It was an order delivered with the full, focused weight of his alpha presence, not to intimidate, but to anchor. To override the crashing waves of panic with a single, immutable directive.

Shane’s chest jerked. A ragged, wet inhale.

“Hold it,” Ilya said, his voice a steady drumbeat. “And out. Slow.”

He guided him through it, breath by breath, his hands holding Shane’s face, his eyes refusing to release him. Slowly, the worst of the hyperventilation subsided, leaving behind awful, shuddering sobs. The blind panic in Shane’s eyes receded, replaced by a devastated, conscious agony.

“They don’t want me,” he choked out. “My own team. I’m a problem. I have nowhere to go.”

“You have me,” Ilya stated, the words leaving no room for argument. He pulled Shane against him, tucking his head under his chin, wrapping him in a hold that was both a prison and the only safe harbor left in the world. Shane collapsed into it, his body going limp with an exhaustion deeper than sleep.

Ilya looked over Shane’s head, meeting Yuna’s horrified, grateful eyes in the doorway. On his own, there was no triumph, only a cold, grim resignation. He had done it. He had taken the

choice, the struggle, away. He had silenced the spiral by the sheer force of his will. It was what Shane needed at that moment. It was also the very thing he had sworn to avoid.

He hated it. He would do it again in a heartbeat.

Rocking Shane gently, he whispered into his hair, not commands now, but promises. “It is handled. You are safe. The team, the league, Kent... all of it. It is mine to handle now. You rest. Just rest.”

And Shane, buried in the scent and the safety and the utter certainty of his mate, finally did. The tension bled from his muscles, leaving behind the profound limpness of surrender. Ilya held him, staring at the wall, mapping the cold, precise steps of the war he now had to win. Not just for their love, but for his partner’s very right to exist in his own world. The cost of peace was rising, and he was prepared to pay it in any currency required.

The silence in the high-rise was no longer peaceful; it was oppressive. A full week had bled away since the hospital, each day a slow, grinding erosion of Shane’s spirit. He moved through the rooms like a phantom, picking at meals, staring at walls, his once-analytical mind replaced by a static hum of dread. The bond between them, still tender from the chemical assault and the re-biting, had become a conduit for this bleak despair. Ilya felt it like a constant, cold drizzle on his own psyche, a shared melancholy that was harder to fight than any singular rage.

He worked relentlessly in the quiet. Yuna and David handled the barrage of calls. Anatoly’s preliminary reports on Kent began to arrive, outlining a life of debt, petty vices, and dwindling relevance. And Ilya, for hours each day, disappeared into the digital landscape of public opinion. The news cycles were brutal, but the comments sections, the fan forums, the grassroots hashtags, #StandWithShane, #HollanderIsHome, told a different story. The people, for the most part, were on their side. The narrative of a vicious assault on a beloved player was cutting through the prejudice. It was a weapon, and Ilya learned every inch of its handle.

When the formal request for a joint meeting arrived, Commissioner Crowell, the Voyageurs’ ownership, the coaching staff, Ilya didn’t hesitate. He replied within the hour, his conditions clear: the meeting would be in New Jersey, at a neutral venue of his lawyer’s choosing, within 72 hours. No negotiation.

New Jersey was not random. Its laws were among the most comprehensive in the nation regarding discrimination based on secondary gender and mate status. It was also a state where Ilya's social media charm offensive had landed particularly well; he was popular here. He was choosing the battlefield, right down to the jurisdiction.

He found Shane on the balcony, wrapped in a blanket despite the mild afternoon, staring at the distant ribbon of the river.

"They want a meeting," Ilya said, leaning against the glass door. "The league and the team."

Shane didn't turn. "To fire me."

"To talk. To see which way the wind blows. We are meeting them. In New Jersey. In two days."

This time, Shane turned. The hollows under his eyes seemed deeper. "New Jersey? Why would I... I can't..."

"You can. You will." Ilya kept his voice low, matter-of-fact. "We are not going to beg. We are going to present terms."

Shane's face paled further. He shook his head, a frantic, denying motion. "I can't sit in a room with them while they decide if I'm a person or a problem. Ilya, I can't," His breath hitched, the precursor to the spiral Ilya had forcibly halted days before.

But this time, the panic took a different, more physical route. Shane's hand flew to his mouth. He stumbled past Ilya, through the living room, and into the guest bathroom. Ilya followed, a step behind. He heard the retches, the painful, dry heaves followed by the sour splash of the meager lunch Yuna had coaxed into him hitting the water.

Ilya didn't flinch. He wet a cloth under the cool tap. When the spasms subsided, Shane was slumped against the vanity, trembling and clammy. Ilya knelt, his large frame filling the small space. He wiped Shane's mouth, then his brow, the motions clinical yet unbearably tender.

“I know,” Ilya murmured, discarding the cloth. He didn’t say *it’s okay*. It wasn’t. He framed Shane’s face with his hands, forcing the glazed, tear-bright eyes to focus on him. The bond thrummed with shared sickness, shared fear. “I feel it, too. This disgust. This terror. You are not alone in it. You give it to me, and I hold it. That is the deal.”

He pulled Shane up, guiding him to brush his teeth, to sip water. He led him back to the bed, not the balcony, and pressed him down onto the pillows. Shane went bonelessly, all resistance spent.

“You do not have to speak in that room,” Ilya said, sitting on the edge of the mattress. He stroked Shane’s damp hair back from his forehead. “You do not have to convince them of your humanity. You only have to be there. Let them look at you. Let them see what their inaction, their silent rules, have done. My job is to make them too afraid of the alternative.”

Shane stared up at him, seeing the man who had once hidden trackers in his car now mapping legal statutes and public sentiment. The obsession was still there, the hyper-focus, but its target had transformed. It was no longer about possessing Shane, but about fortifying him. It was the difference between a cage and a citadel.

“What’s the alternative?” Shane whispered, his voice raw.

Ilya’s thumb traced the line of his cheekbone. “A very expensive, very public war that they will lose. We have the truth and we have the sympathy of fans on our side. And now,” he said, a cold, purposeful light in his blue eyes, “I have a plan.”

He saw the understanding dawn, fragile but real. Shane was a strategist by nature. He could see the move on the board. His body had rebelled against the sheer vulnerability of it, but his mind, now clearing slightly, could follow the logic. He was handing Ilya the play. Again. Letting him be the shield, the weapon, the negotiator.

Shane’s hand found Ilya’s wrist, his grip weak but intentional. He gave a single, shallow nod before closing his eyes, turning his face into Ilya’s palm. The bond still carried the echoes of nausea and dread, but beneath it, for the first time in days, Ilya felt a thread of something else: not hope, but a grim, vested trust.

Ilya stayed there until Shane's breathing evened out into exhausted sleep. Then he withdrew, closing the bedroom door softly behind him. In the living room, he opened his laptop, the draft of the Instagram statement still waiting. He looked at it, then at the notes on New Jersey law. The pieces were aligning. The quiet in the apartment was no longer just the sound of despair, but the quiet of the arena before the puck dropped, tense, charged, and full of lethal potential.

The quiet in the high-rise had become a living thing, thick with Shane's silent despair. He'd barely touched the dinner Yuna prepared, pushing the food around his plate until it grew cold. The shadows under his eyes were bruises. The bond, that fragile, re-knitted thread, hummed with a toxic frequency of exhaustion and dread so profound it felt like a physical weight in Ilya's own chest.

Yuna met Ilya's gaze across the room, her own face etched with helpless fear. Wordlessly, she slipped a single, sealed capsule into his palm. A powerful, non-habit-forming sleep aid, prescribed for extreme anxiety. "He needs to shut off," she whispered, the confession agonized. "Just for a few hours. Or he'll break."

Ilya looked at the capsule, then at Shane, who was staring blankly at the darkened television screen. The part of him that had vowed never to manipulate, never to control without consent, recoiled. But the larger part, the protector who had burned a man alive and would do it again, saw only a critical system failure that needed immediate, decisive intervention. This was not about dominance. It was about triage.

He moved to the kitchen. He boiled water, steeped the chamomile tea Shane liked, and as he poured it, he used the edge of a spoon to crush the white powder from the capsule into the steaming liquid. It dissolved without a trace. His hands were steady. The action felt both monstrous and merciful.

"Dorogoy," he said, his voice soft as he approached. "Drink this. It will help settle your stomach."

Shane looked at the mug, then up at Ilya with eyes that were too weary for suspicion. He trusted him. That was the knife-twist. He took the mug in both hands, the warmth seeming to ground him for a moment, and drank it down.

Ilya sat beside him, one arm around his shoulders, and talked about nothing, the strange pattern of the city lights, a documentary about birds he'd half-watched. He felt the exact moment the drug began to pull Shane under. The tense line of his shoulders slackened. His head grew heavy against Ilya's shoulder. His breathing deepened from anxious hitches to long, slow drags.

"Just sleep," Ilya murmured, guiding him down to lie on the sofa, pulling a blanket over him. "I am here."

Once Shane was deeply under, his face finally relaxed in a way it hadn't been for days, Ilya made two calls.

The first was to JJ. "I need you and Hayden. Now. Do not let anyone near him. Do not let him wake up alone."

There were no questions. Just a grunt of assent. Twenty minutes later, the two large men filled the foyer. Hayden's eyes went immediately to Shane's sleeping form, his jaw tightening. JJ gave Ilya a slow, assessing look.

"A few hours," Ilya said, pulling on his leather jacket. "He is drugged. He will not wake. You are here in case the world tries to break in."

"Where are you going?" Hayden asked, his voice low.

"I have to do something important," Ilya said, and left before any more could be said.

The drive was an hour into the night, through sprawling suburbs that eventually gave way to darker, wooded lots. The Russian Orthodox church was a small, onion-domed structure of weathered wood, a piece of the old country tucked into the suburbs. It was dark, but some candlelight burned in the rectory window.

Ilya knocked. The priest who answered was elderly, with a beard like frosted iron and eyes that had seen countless confessions. He took in Ilya's face, his tension, and wordlessly gestured him inside to a small, book-lined study that smelled of beeswax and incense.

"I have sinned, Father," Ilya began in Russian, the language of his childhood, of his first prayers. The words came not as a rehearsed speech, but as a raw, stark inventory. He confessed to the planned annihilation of Dallas Kent.

"He hurt my mate," Ilya said, the word a sacred and brutal thing in the quiet room. "He attacked the bond itself. He seeks to destroy the life we have built. My soul is ready to burn for what I must do to stop him. I am not asking for permission. I am asking... for understanding. For absolution, if it can be given."

The priest was silent for a long time, his gnarled fingers tracing the edge of a well-worn Bible. "The Church understands the mate bond," he said finally, his voice like dry leaves. "It is a covenant before God. To defend it is a holy duty. But to poison trust, even with medicine, is a corruption of your role as protector. To nurture vengeance in your heart is to invite a demon to share your hearth." He looked at Ilya, his gaze piercing. "You confess the sin of the method, not the sin of the intent. God sees the heart that would burn the world for one soul. He also sees the soul that is worth the burning. Your penance is to carry the weight of the choices you make. To ensure the love you defend is not suffocated by the hands that guard it. Now, go. Do what you must. May God have mercy on you, and on your enemy."

It was not forgiveness. It was a blessing for a soldier going to a dirty war. Ilya bowed his head, crossed himself, kissed the patriarch's ring and left.

When he returned to the high-rise, the sky was beginning to lighten to a dirty grey. JJ was asleep in an armchair, a sentinel at rest. Hayden stood by the balcony door, staring out. He turned as Ilya entered.

"He stirred once. Called your name. Went back under when I told him you were coming back," Hayden said, his voice unreadable.

"Spasibo," Ilya said, dismissing them both with a nod.

Alone again, he stripped off the jacket smelling of night and incense. He washed his face, brushed his teeth, trying to remove the scent of the confession. Then he slid into the bed beside Shane, who was still deeply asleep, his body lax and heavy.

Carefully, Ilya gathered him in, pulling Shane's back against his chest, wrapping him in the circle of his arms. He buried his nose in Shane's hair, inhaling the simple, clean scent of him, trying to drown out the lingering echoes of the priest's words and the cold plans in his own mind. The bond hummed, muted by sleep and drugs, but present.

He held on, his body a shield against the coming day. As the first true light of dawn touched the windows, Ilya Rozanov closed his eyes, not to sleep, but to fortify himself for the battle he had just been blessed to fight.

He had to follow the plan though. He wouldn't leave Shane like this, and he had to worry about his mate before going for revenge. The league and their managers were going crazy trying to reach them for a meeting. But now at least he had a plan, it was risky but with luck it would work.

The private jet was a cocoon of muted noise and dimmed lights to help Shane relax. Shane sat by the window, strapped in, his gaze fixed on the endless carpet of clouds below. He wasn't seeing them. His face was a carefully composed mask, all the color and life bleached out, leaving behind the stark, beautiful lines of a statue. He'd dressed in a simple, dark suit at Ilya's suggestion, looking every inch the professional athlete, but inside, he had folded in on himself. Their connection was like a thin, chilled wire, humming with a numb static that was worse than any panic Ilya had felt from him before.

Ilya worked. He reviewed files on his tablet, memorizing clauses of New Jersey's one party consent law. He went on social media, answering a few fan comments and reading over the planned statement. Yuna had texted him a list of journalists who wanted to have the first exclusive interview and she'd highlighted her recommendations after seeing what was being said to news sources. He ignored the hollow ache in his own chest that mirrored Shane's shutdown. There would be time to feel later. Now, there was only the plan.

As the town car glided from the private terminal towards the arena, Ilya made his final move. Shane was still staring blankly out the window, lost in some internal void where fear had finally burned itself into ash.

Ilya opened Instagram. He navigated to his story, to the draft he'd prepared. He typed a final line, then posted it.

We are on our way to meet with the people who have a say in our future. They have a choice: to protect a player who was assaulted on their ice, or to fold to old fears. We believe they will listen to reason. But if anyone wants to show @shanehollander24 what he means to this sport, we will be at the Prudential Center service entrance in 30 minutes. If the crowd is calm and respectful, we will stay after to say thank you. No promises or pressure, but we both could use the support.

He tagged the location. He used the hashtags #StandWithShane and #HollanderIsHome that he had seen trending. Then he powered his phone down completely and slipped it into the inner pocket of his suit jacket.

In the same motion, he pulled out a second, smaller phone, a burner with exceptional audio quality. He opened the voice recorder app, set it to record, and placed it screen-down on the seat between them. The league would speak for the record today, whether they knew it or not.

The car turned a corner, and the hulking form of the arena came into view.

Shane finally stirred, his eyes focusing on the scene outside. A faint, confused line appeared between his brows. "What...?"

The car pulled into the secure, underground lot, leaving the crowd behind the gates. The engine cut off, leaving a ringing silence.

Ilya turned to him. He reached out, his hands framing Shane's face, one hand gently wrapping around his lower jaw and throat, forcing those distant, glassy eyes to meet his. The touch was firm, like an anchor in a storm-tossed sea.

“Listen to me,” Ilya said, his voice low and absolute, a vibration in the quiet car. “You do not have to speak in there. You do not have to perform. You only have to be there. Let them look at you. Let them see the consequence of their inaction.”

He searched Shane’s face for any sign of the man he knew. He saw only exhaustion and a terrifying vacancy. “This is the last hard thing,” Ilya vowed, his thumbs stroking Shane’s cheekbones. “You trusted me when it was hardest. Trust me now. Let me handle this. Give me control for a few minutes, and I will give you back your future. Just nod.”

For a long moment, Shane simply stared, as if translating the words from a foreign language. Then, slowly, the barest hint of focus returned to his eyes. It wasn’t strength. It was surrender. He gave a single, shallow nod.

Ilya leaned in and pressed a hard, fleeting kiss to his lips, a seal, a promise, a transfer of will. He tucked the recording phone into his pocket, its red light hidden but active. He slipped his own, powered-off phone into Shane’s hand. “Hold this.”

Then he opened the car door. The cool, concrete-scented air of the parking garage washed in. He stepped out, then leaned back in, offering his hand.

Shane looked at it, then placed his cold fingers in Ilya’s palm. Ilya pulled him gently from the car, keeping hold of his hand, lacing their fingers together in a grip that was both solidarity and a tether. He could feel the fine tremor running through Shane’s arm.

Together, they turned towards the private elevator that would take them up to the suite where their fate would be negotiated. Behind them, the distant, muffled sound of the waiting crowd was a quiet drumbeat. Ahead, the silence of the corridor was a gauntlet.

Ilya squeezed Shane’s hand once, a pulse of certainty through the cold wire of the bond. Then he led him forward, into the fight.

The air in the plush, soundproofed conference room was thick with the scent of expensive coffee, polished wood, and barely-contained hostility. Ilya and Shane sat side-by-side on one side of the vast mahogany table. Across from them sat Commissioner Roger Crowell, the owners of the Montreal and Boston teams, and a flank of lawyers whose expressions ranged from stern to calculating.

Ilya had been a blade. For forty-five minutes, he'd dissected their arguments with a cold, surgical precision that left sweat beading on more than one brow. He cited the NHL statutes on discrimination and mate-status protection. He referenced league bylaws on player safety and medical privacy, highlighting their catastrophic failure in both. He spoke of civil discovery, of depositions, of the court of public opinion where, he noted calmly, the narrative was already firmly on their side. He was winning. He could see it in the shifting eyes of the owners, in the way Crowell's jaw worked.

Then Crowell, a man used to wielding ultimate authority, leaned forward. He ignored Ilya, turning his gaze directly to Shane, who had sat silent and pale throughout.

"Shane," Crowell said, his voice a practiced blend of paternal concern and steely resolve. "Let's speak plainly, man to man. This... situation... creates an untenable dynamic. The locker room, the media circus, the... biological complications." He paused, letting the euphemism hang. "The league has a responsibility to the sport, to the other players. Sometimes, a player has to make a choice for the greater good. Your career, the legacy you've built... and have so many years to continue to build, or the personal life you've chosen. You can't have both. Not like this. The game demands sacrifice. You need to decide what you're willing to sacrifice."

"Shane, son. This is a terrible situation. But at its heart, it's a simple one. This sport, at this level, has certain... realities. A bond, the public nature of it, the distraction of it... it's incompatible with the focus required. You have a choice to make. You're our most dedicated player and I'd hate to see all your talent go to waste." Coach said, trying to act more paternal.

There it was. The threat, laid bare. Not couched in legalise, but in the old, brutal language of exclusion.

Ilya didn't move, but a slow, knowing smirk touched his lips. *Checkmate.*

For the first time since entering the room, Shane stirred. He lifted his head, and the vacant, hollow look was gone. In its place was a clarity so sharp it seemed to cut the air. The bond, which had been a thread of numb dread, suddenly hummed with a resonant, furious energy.

"I've already decided," Shane said, his voice quiet but carrying to every corner of the silent room. It wasn't the usual calm, steady voice, it was something rawer, truer. "I pick him. I pick Ilya. Over everything."

He stood up, not with drama, but with a finality that made the lawyers flinch.

"You want to talk about sacrifice?" Shane continued, his voice gaining strength, the analytical mind that had once hidden him now weaponizing every injustice. "I sacrificed my entire identity. I lived in a cage of my own making so I could play your game. I gave you my health, my privacy, all the years training to be perfect. And for what? So you could tell me that the love I found, the peace I built after everything, is a 'complication'? That my mate is a problem to be managed?"

He took a step toward the table, his eyes blazing. "You don't get to demand my soul and then tell me it's the wrong shape. The 'greater good' of your sport looks an awful lot like protecting the man who drugged me and outed me on live television. Your 'responsibility' seems to start and end with your bottom line. Do you really think I don't know how much money Ilya and I bring to this sport? I've seen how much our jersey's and merch sells for. I know that there's about a 40% drop in ticket sells when either one of us are out for some games."

As Shane spoke, Ilya casually pushed back his chair and walked to the far wall of floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked a secondary service plaza. He'd been waiting for this.

Below, the plaza was a sea of people. Hundreds. Maybe thousands. They crowded behind barriers, a mosaic of team jerseys united under handmade signs that gleamed in the sun: STAND WITH SHANE. HOLLANDER IS HOME. LOVE > HATE. MY CAPTAIN. The

crowd was a silent, powerful testament, the physical embodiment of the digital wave he'd summoned.

Ilya turned from the breathtaking view back to the room. Shane's fabulous, righteous rant was winding down, leaving a stunned silence in its wake.

"I believe my mate has made his position clear," Ilya said, his voice conversational, as if commenting on the weather. He gestured idly toward the window. "And it seems he is not alone in it."

Every head at the table turned. Crowell's face lost its color as he took in the scale of the peaceful demonstration.

"So, here is the new plan," Ilya said, returning to stand behind Shane, a hand coming to rest on his shoulder, a united front. "If you force him out, over this, I walk with him. My contract, my media presence, my 'reformed' personality you've all been so eager to monetize... it all goes. We leave together. And we will tell that crowd, and every camera waiting outside, exactly why."

He let the image sink in: the league's two biggest stars, one an omega martyr, the other his ferocious defender, walking away and taking the public's heart with them.

"Given the evident... enthusiasm... of the public sentiment," Ilya concluded, his blue eyes icy as they locked on Crowell, as the others moved to look out the windows. "I do not believe your job would survive the fallout. The choice is no longer his. It is yours. Do you want a sport that belongs to everyone? Or do you want a scandal that ends your tenure? And trust me, if you force us out, I will make it my mission to ruin you."

The silence in the room was absolute, broken only by the distant, muffled sound of the crowd outside. The power had not just shifted; it had shattered the table and now lay gleaming at their feet. The bond between them sang, a triumphant, defiant chord. They had come into the lion's den, and they had tamed it. Together.

“The meeting is over,” Ilya announced. “You have our answer. We’ll be outside with the people who actually value us. You have twenty-four hours to issue a public statement affirming Shane Hollander’s full and unconditional place in this league. Any other response will be considered a declaration of you severing Shane’s contract.”

He didn’t wait for a reply. He turned, and with Shane’s hand firmly in his, he walked out of the room, leaving a stunned, shattered silence in their wake. As promised, they stayed for over two hours signing shirts, pictures, jerseys, anything put in front of them. The crowd was surprisingly respectful and when Ilya noticed that Shane was becoming too overwhelmed, he apologized and said they needed to go home.

The two weeks had passed in a fragile, new rhythm. The league’s statement, a terse, legalistic affirmation of Shane Hollander’s “right to participate free from discrimination”, had been issued. The public tide had solidified in their favor. But inside the high-rise, the victory felt hollow. Shane was functioning, not thriving. He met with his therapists, forced down meals, and stared at his reflection in the mirror as if re-learning his own face. He had pleaded illness when asked if he wanted to participate in the celebratory parade and his friends were starting to worry.

Planning the trip to the cottage was Shane’s idea, a lifeline back to their only real peace. “You should go to Boston first,” Shane said one morning over coffee, his voice still too quiet. “Get fresh clothes. Your things. I’ll stay here, meet with Mom and the brand people. Ellie agreed to fly in this weekend to go over everything.”

It was sensible. Plus it gave him the time to go and finish what he needed to do. Ilya agreed immediately.

The moment Shane left for his first meeting with Yuna and a cluster of cautiously supportive sponsors, Ilya’s stillness dissolved into purposeful motion. He first called Anatoly. The conversation was brief.

“The location,” Ilya said.

A pause, then an address in Queens, followed by a schedule of habits. “He frequents a bar called The Penalty Box. I think it’s ironic. He goes most evenings, alone.”

“Spasibo.”

Next, he waited for the sound of the shower. When the water began to run, he took the burner phone, the one that had recorded the league meeting, and dialed the number Anatoly had provided.

It rang four times before a wary, roughened voice answered. “Yeah?”

“Kent. It’s Ilya Rozanov.”

A long, stunned silence was broken by a nervous, grating laugh. “What, you calling to threaten me again? My lawyer said, ”

“I am calling to apologize,” Ilya interrupted, his voice flat, perfectly calibrated to sound weary, defeated. “The things I said. What I did. It was... excessive. The league is breathing down my neck. My lawyers are breathing down my neck. I dont need any of that. I need to thank you because I was letting an omega get the best of me for years, thinking that he had any say in how things should be.”

He could almost hear Kent’s brain working through the static, the ego wrestling with suspicion. The idea of Ilya Rozanov, humbled and forced to apologize, was too sweet a prize to resist.

“A public bar,” Kent said, trying to sound commanding. “In New York. I pick the place.”

“Fine. Name it.”

“The Penalty Box. Tomorrow. Eight PM.” It was the bar from Anatoly’s report. Kent was trying to assert control on his own turf.

“I will be there,” Ilya said, and ended the call.

He heard the shower shut off. By the time Shane emerged, damp and wrapped in a towel around his waste, Ilya was packing his Boston duffel with methodical calm.

“Everything okay?” Shane asked, a faint line of concern between his brows. The bond, still tender, hummed with a low-grade anxiety.

“Everything is fine,” Ilya said, crossing the room to pull him into his arms. He kissed his damp hair, inhaling the clean scent. “Just thinking of what to pack. I will see you at the cottage in two days. You and Ellie will have the strategy settled by then. Your mother said that most of the brands still want you though.”

He kissed him goodbye the next morning, a slow, deep press of lips that tried to convey everything the connection still struggled with. Shane leaned into it, a hand on Ilya’s chest.

“Drive safe,” he murmured.

“Always,” Ilya lied.

He did not drive to Boston. He pointed his rental car toward New York, the cold, purposeful focus that had once built a surveillance net now narrowing to a single point on a map. The apology was thematic. The meeting was a necessity. What happened after would be the true reckoning, hopefully this would be the last one. He was ready to move on from the violence and just wanted to start his life with Shane properly. The cottage awaited, a promise of peace.

The Penalty Box was exactly the kind of place Ilya expected: dim, sticky-floored, and smelling of stale beer and cheaper disinfectant. Neon signs for domestic beers cast a sickly glow over a handful of patrons. Dallas Kent sat in a corner booth, a half-empty pint in front of him, his face still bearing the yellowing bruises from their last meeting. He looked up as Ilya approached, his expression a mix of wariness and smug triumph.

“You actually came,” Kent said, not bothering to stand.

Ilya slid into the booth opposite him, forcing his body language into a semblance of weary concession. “I said I would.”

He ordered a whiskey, neat, when the waitress came. He took a sip, the burn a grounding point against the revulsion churning in his gut. Kent launched into a rambling, self-justifying monologue, the media spin, the “overreaction,” the “career-ending” hit Ilya had laid on him months ago.

Ilya listened, nodding at intervals. When Kent paused to drain his glass, Ilya saw his opening.

“The hit was clean,” Ilya said, his voice low. “But the aftermath... you are not wrong about the complications.” He leaned forward slightly, lowering his voice as if sharing a confidence. “Omegas... they are difficult. Emotional. Unpredictable. Very weak. Before, he had his secrets, his own life. Now?” Ilya gave a slow, deliberate shrug, his lips twisting in a parody of a knowing smile. “Now everyone knows what he is. His options are gone. His... resistance is lower. He is more... manageable.” The words tasted like acid on his tongue.

Kent’s eyes lit up with a vile kind of understanding. He’d wanted a groveling apology, but this was better: comradery in contempt. “See? That’s what I’ve been saying. The league’s gone soft, protecting that. It’s unnatural.”

“It is a reality that must be managed,” Ilya agreed, his tone flat. “You... accelerated the process. In a way, I owe you a debt. The hiding was exhausting.”

He signaled for another round. When the drinks came, he made a show of checking his phone. “I need to use the restroom. Order us another. I will be right back.”

In the grimy bathroom, he locked himself in a stall. From his inner pocket, he retrieved a small, clear vial Anatoly had provided alongside the address. A fast-acting, untraceable sedative mixed with a potent muscle relaxant. Odorless, colorless. He measured a dose into the cap, his hands rock steady.

Back at the booth, he slid in just as the fresh pints arrived. As Kent leaned forward to continue his rant, Ilya's hand dipped. A quick, practiced motion. The contents of the cap dissolved into the golden beer without a trace.

"To clarity," Ilya said, raising his own glass.

Kent clinked his against it with a smirk. "To knowing your place."

Ilya sipped his whiskey, watching as Kent drank deeply from the tainted pint. He let the conversation drift, agreeing with Kent's increasingly slurred prejudices, each affirmation feeling like a self-inflicted wound. He timed it in his head. Twenty minutes. The drug would be binding to his system, the early effects subtle, a slight heaviness in the limbs, a blurring at the edges of his vision.

At the fifteen-minute mark, Ilya made a show of checking his phone again, his expression shifting to one of irritated possession. He sighed, a sound of long-suffering authority.

"I need to go. He gets difficult if left alone too long."

Kent blinked, his eyes struggling to focus. "Who?"

"Shane." Ilya stood, pulling cash from his wallet and tossing it on the table. "I told you. More manageable. But still, he has a mouth on him. I left him... restrained. To think about his tone. If I am late untying him, he will be insufferable."

A dark, understanding leer spread over Kent's face. The lie fit perfectly into the worldview Ilya had just validated. "Right. Yeah. Can't let them get uppity."

"Exactly." Ilya turned to leave. "Get home safe."

“Hey, wait, ” Kent stumbled as he stood, grabbing the edge of the table. The drug was pulling at his coordination. “I’m... I’m heading out too. Walk you to your car?”

Perfect.

“If you wish.”

Kent weaved beside him through the bar and out into the cool night air. The parking lot was poorly lit. An anonymous black sedan, arranged by Anatoly, idled near the entrance, its driver a shadow behind the wheel.

“This is me,” Ilya said, stopping by the rear door.

“Fancy,” Kent mumbled, peering at the car. He was listing slightly.

Ilya opened the door. “Get in. I will give you a ride.”

“Good man,” Kent slurred, attempting to stand. He swayed, catching the table. “Need a... need air.”

“Here, I will help you,” Ilya said, his voice all false concern. He slid an arm around Kent’s waist, taking most of his weight. To anyone watching, it looked like one former player helping a drunk, injured colleague out the door.

The cold night air hit them. A black SUV, nondescript and clean, idled at the curb exactly where Anatoly said it would be. The rear door opened as they approached. Ilya bundled the now-limp, semiconscious form of Dallas Kent into the back seat and slid in beside him.

The driver, a silent figure in a dark cap, met Ilya’s eyes in the rearview mirror. Ilya gave a single nod.

Too disoriented to question it, too pleased with the night's perceived victory, Kent ducked and collapsed onto the back seat. Ilya slid in beside him and pulled the door shut. The car pulled away smoothly.

Kent slumped against the window, his breathing already deepening into a stupor. "Tied up... huh?" he slurred, a final, grotesque chuckle escaping him.

Ilya didn't answer. He stared straight ahead, his profile carved from ice in the passing streetlights. The bond thrummed with a dark, protective fury that was no longer an act. The sedan moved through the night, leaving the city behind, heading for the quiet, industrial outskirts of the next town over, where an abandoned warehouse waited in the silence. The debt was coming due.

The car pulled smoothly into traffic, leaving the dim glow of The Penalty Box behind. Kent's head lolled against the window, a line of drool tracing down the glass. Ilya stared straight ahead, his hands resting on his knees, his mind already in the abandoned warehouse in the next town over. The sickness from the lies was still there, a bitter residue. But beneath it was the cold, clear flow of purpose. The debt was not owed to Kent. It was owed to Shane. And payment, tonight, would be absolute.

!!!!!!TRIGGER WARNING!!!!!!

The world returned to Dallas Kent in a nauseating rush of sensation: the gritty, concrete floor beneath him, the biting cold of the air, the acrid smells of mildew, rust, and his own fear. A pounding, drugged headache throbbed behind his eyes. He tried to move, and the restraints bit into his wrists and ankles. He was tied to a heavy, metal-framed chair, the coarse rope burning with every weak struggle.

The space was a derelict industrial shell. High, grime-coated windows let in slants of pale moonlight, illuminating floating dust motes and pools of deep shadow. A single, battery-powered lantern sat on a stained worktable, casting a stark, unforgiving circle of light.

In that light stood Ilya Rozanov.

He was rolling down the sleeves of his shirt, fastening the cuffs with deliberate, calm motions. His expression was not one of rage, but of detached, analytical focus. Two other men flanked the edges of the lit area, silent and still as statues. They were not thugs; they were professionals, their postures relaxed but ready, their faces impassive.

“You are awake,” Ilya said. His voice was flat, echoing slightly in the vast, empty space. He picked up a long, narrow-bladed knife from the table. It wasn’t a weapon of brute force; it was a tool, its edge catching the lantern light with a wicked gleam. “Good. We can talk.”

Kent’s breath hitched, a wet, panicked sound. “Rozanov... what the fuck... you said... you apologized...”

“I lied,” Ilya stated, stepping into the light. He held the knife loosely at his side. “The apology was for the camera’s all over the bar. This,” he gestured vaguely with the blade, “is payback for what you tried to do to my mate.”

He moved with a predator’s quiet grace, circling the chair. “You knew. Before the finals. You knew he was an omega. How?”

“I didn’t! It was a guess! A hunch!” Kent babbled, straining against the ropes.

Ilya stopped behind him. Kent could hear the soft rustle of his clothing, feel his presence like a cold draft. “A hunch does not justify procuring a black-market pheromone trigger and a sedative. A hunch does not target a specific gland. You had confirmation. I want the source.”

The knife’s point came to rest lightly, *so* lightly, on the tendon behind Kent’s right ear. A precise, terrifying pressure. “You will tell me. The only variables are how much you suffer first, and how much of you remains recognizable when I am done.”

“It was a rumor!” Kent screamed, the fear shredding his voice. “Just a stupid rumor from school!”

Ilya's hand didn't waver. "Elaborate."

"There was... there was a kid. In my year. An omega. He got... he got pregnant. It wasn't my fault, I wanted to just talk to Hollander and they looked so much alike..There was a whole thing, trying to find out who the alpha was. People talked. It didn't mean anything! It was just gossip!"

The knife point pressed infinitesimally harder. A sharp sting, then the warm trickle of blood down Kent's neck. "So your victim was meant to be Shane? The omega you raped, did you mean that for someone else?"

"No! I mean I only wanted to talk to him, I swear! But the rumor... it stuck with me. About Hollander. Every time I saw him after, on TV, so fucking perfect and untouchable... I remembered. I wondered."

Ilya processed this, his face a mask of cold contempt. He removed the knife and walked back to the table. Kent sagged in relief, which was immediately severed by terror as Ilya set the knife down and picked up a plastic gallon jug and a thin cloth.

"You acted on a decade-old rumor," Ilya said, his tone conversational as he saturated the cloth. "You assaulted a man on international television based on a childhood suspicion. You poisoned him. You violated our bond." He approached, the wet cloth dripping. "That is a profound lack of evidence. A profound disrespect."

Before Kent could plead, one of the other men stepped forward and clamped a hand on his forehead, yanking his head back. Ilya laid the soaked cloth over Kent's nose and mouth.

The world dissolved into pure, primal panic. Kent bucked, but the chair was solid and the hands holding him were iron. Ilya began to pour water from the jug in a steady, measured stream onto the cloth.

It was like drowning in open air. The water saturated the cloth, sealing it to his skin, flooding his nostrils and mouth no matter how he twisted. His lungs screamed for air that wasn't there, burning with carbon dioxide. The sensation of suffocation was absolute, a white-hot terror

that obliterated all thought. Just as his consciousness began to fray at the edges, the water stopped. The cloth was ripped away.

Kent gasped, choking, vomiting a mix of water and bile onto his own chest, heaving in huge, ragged sobs of air.

Ilya waited, his expression unchanged. “The rumor. Who else did you tell? Who helped you?”

“No one!” Kent wept, the words broken by coughs. “I didn’t need help! I just... I bought the stuff online! I wanted to see... I wanted to be the one to prove it!”

Ilya studied him for a long moment, then glanced at one of the men, who gave a slight, confirming nod. Kent was telling the pathetic truth. He was a lone, bitter actor, not part of a larger conspiracy.

The waterboarding that followed was longer, more measured. Ilya was an artist of agony now. He poured just enough to flood the senses, to convince the body it was dying, then pulled the cloth away at the very brink of blackout. He did it three times. By the third, Kent was a broken animal, voiding his bladder, his spirit crushed under the relentless, intimate terror of controlled drowning.

A profound, icy stillness settled over Ilya. This man had nearly shattered Shane’s world, had damaged their bond, for *this*. For a petty, decade-old grudge and the desire to be right.

He picked up the knife again. Kent flinched, a fresh wave of sobs shaking him. Ilya didn’t approach him. Instead, he walked to the table and carefully cleaned the blade with a rag, then slid it into a sheath.

“You are a small man who committed a large crime,” Ilya said, his voice quiet. “The law would deal with you for the assault. The league would ban you for life. But that is not enough.” He leaned down, putting his face close to Kent’s, his blue eyes like chips of Arctic ice.

Kent could only manage a jerky, terrified nod, his body wracked with tremors.

The confession hung in the cold air of the warehouse, pathetic and insufficient. A life nearly destroyed over schoolyard gossip. The truth did nothing to quench the cold fire in Ilya's veins. Legal consequences were abstract, a future punishment. They did not answer the immediate, visceral equation: this man had caused Shane pain, had violated their bond. The debt was not yet paid.

Ilya looked at the two silent men, then back at the sniveling, broken figure in the chair. "Wait outside," he said, his voice devoid of inflection. "For a while."

The men exchanged a glance, then wordlessly retreated through the rusted metal door, sealing Ilya and Kent in the cavernous, lantern-lit space.

Kent's bloodshot eyes tracked Ilya's movement to the worktable with fresh terror. Ilya ignored him, opening a small, heavy-duty case. Inside, nestled in foam, were several chemical bottles, a glass beaker, and protective gear. He pulled on thick rubber gloves with a snap.

"You understand the principle of an acid, da?" Ilya asked conversationally, as he carefully poured a clear liquid from one bottle into the beaker. It had a sharp, pungent odor that cut through the warehouse smells. "It does not cut. It does not crush. It eats away at things. It breaks down what it touches into something else. All rather fascinating."

He picked up the beaker and a long-handled brush. He approached the chair. Kent began to thrash against his bonds, raw, animal sounds tearing from his throat.

"The rumor," Ilya continued, his voice a low monotone. "It was a seed. You chose to water it. You chose to weaponize it. You chose to put your hands on what is mine." He stopped just out of kicking range. "These are the consequences of your choices. Not the court's. Not the league's. Mine."

With terrifying precision, Ilya dipped the brush into the beaker. He didn't fling it. He didn't rage. He painted.

The first stroke was a thin line across the back of Kent's left hand, where it was bound to the chair arm. Then he poured it over the bound man's chest and face.

The reaction was not instantaneous. A second of nothing. Then a hissing, sizzling sound, like meat on a grill. Kent's scream escalated from panic to a shriek of pure, unmediated agony. The skin where the liquid touched bubbled, turned white, then a furious, blistering red, collapsing in on itself as the tissue necrotized. The smell changed, from chemical to a sickeningly sweet, burnt-pork stench.

Ilya watched, his face a study in detached observation. Inside, the old, black part of him, the part that had burned Chris alive, observed the justice with cold satisfaction. The newer part, the part that went to therapy and took his pills, recoiled. He felt the ghost of Shane's horror, a phantom limb of conscience.

He painted another line, parallel to the first. Another scream, ragged and wet. Kent's body convulsed against the restraints, his head whipping side to side. "Please! God, please stop! I'm sorry! I'M SORRY!"

"Your sorry is worthless," Ilya stated. "It changes nothing." He moved the brush, this time applying a single drop to the knuckle of Kent's index finger. The focused intensity of the pain made Kent's eyes roll back in his head, a guttural choke replacing the scream.

Ilya stepped back, setting the beaker and brush aside. The clinical part of his mind noted the extent of the chemical burns, the state of shock. He looked at Kent, whose breaths were now shallow, wheezing things, his consciousness fading in and out on waves of unbearable pain. This was the man who had wanted to see Shane unmasked, humiliated, reduced. Ilya had simply granted him a more intimate, permanent version of his own desire. He grabbed the other beaker, this one a heavy, green glass.

He moved to stand directly in front of Kent. He did not look angry. He looked resolved, as a man might look before administering a lethal, merciful injection to a rabid animal.

“You know what I’m going to do after I get out of here?” Ilya said. “Shane and I will lock ourselves in his summer house and fuck until he’s pregnant with our baby. We will be happy, we will have a big family and he will still be playing hockey while the scraps that are left of you will be rotting in some mud pile.”

He did not pour it. He tipped the container with a precise, deliberate motion, directing a thin, steady stream.

It struck Kent’s chest, soaking through the torn fabric of his shirt. The reaction was immediate and horrific. A violent, hissing sizzle erupted, far louder and more consuming than before. Kent’s back arched against the ropes, a scream tearing from his throat that was less human sound and more the shriek of matter being unmade. The fabric dissolved, then the skin beneath bubbled, blackened, and collapsed. The smell was abominable, a mix of sharp chemical burn and the deeply wrong, sweet-putrid odor of cooking viscera.

Ilya watched, his face a mask of grim, unwavering focus. He poured until the stream ate through to the sternum, the sizzle deepening to a wet, awful gurgle as it encountered bone and deeper tissue.

Kent’s screams had stopped, replaced by choked, guttural sounds. His body spasmed violently, then the spasms grew weaker, twitching against the relentless, consuming chemistry. His head lolled forward, then slumped to the side, his eyes open and glassy, fixed on the horror blooming on his own torso.

Ilya stopped. He recapped the container. The silence that fell was heavier than before, now permanent.

He stood for a long moment, looking at the lifeless form in the chair. The rage was gone. The cold purpose was spent. All that remained was a vast, hollow quiet and the weight of the cross in his hand. He had done it.

He walked to the door and opened it. The two men were waiting, their expressions unchanged. “It is done. Clean it up, please. The materials, the body. Make it disappear.”

One of the men nodded. “Anatoly has the cover story ready. A man matching his description is causing a very loud, very public disturbance at a bar across town right now. Drunk and belligerent. Many witnesses. He will vanish from there. This,” he gestured into the warehouse, “never happened.”

“Spasibo,” Ilya said, the thanks genuine. He stripped off the gloves, turned them inside out, and handed them over. He didn’t look back.

In the rented car, the silence was absolute. He sat for a long moment, gripping the steering wheel, waiting to feel something, triumph, guilt, relief. A necessary space, carved out to do a necessary thing.

!!!!!!TRIGGER WARNING ENDS!!!!

He started the engine and pointed the car north, toward Boston. Toward home. He had packing to do. Movers to arrange. A life in one city to box up, and a future in a cottage by a lake to build. The war raging inside him was over. Now, he could go back to the only thing that mattered: his mate, and convincing him that no matter what happens, he’d always be there.

The movers had left, their truck a dark silhouette against the fading Boston twilight. The house was an echo chamber of bare floors and blank walls, just a shell of a life he’d never really lived there. The duffel by the door held everything that mattered now. As he locked the door for the last time, a sound drifted through the city haze: the deep, resonant toll of a bell.

He knew that sound. The call to evening mass at the small Russian Orthodox church a few blocks over. He’d walked the path over to it for years, a piece of a homeland he’d long since felt disconnected from. But tonight, the sound didn’t feel like an accusation. It felt like a pull.

On a whim, he turned toward it. He was still in his dark trousers and a simple sweater, clothes meant for driving and packing. He felt the dried salt of sweat on his skin, the ghost of

chemical smells in his hair. He was far from clean. But he was dressed, and the doors were open.

He slipped into a back pew as the service began. The incense was a familiar, comforting ache. The chant of the Slavonic liturgy was a river of sound he could float on without needing to understand every word. He didn't pray for forgiveness for what he'd done in the warehouse; that was between him, the cross at his throat, and the God who understood the price of protection. Instead, he simply let the ritual wash over him, the candlelight, the icons with their solemn, knowing eyes, the rise and fall of the priest's voice.

For an hour, the plans receded. The image of Shane's tired face, the cold calculus of the coming league battle, even the phantom sizzle and scream in the dark warehouse, it all softened at the edges, held in the ancient, golden light. He found not absolution, but a moment of profound, startling peace. A stillness in the center of the storm he had created. When he crossed himself and filed out with the small congregation into the crisp night air, the weight in his chest felt different. Not lighter, but more securely anchored.

Back in the rental car, the peace folded itself neatly away, replaced by the familiar, sharp focus. He had one more piece of business before he could point the car north, toward the cottage and Shane.

He powered on his secure phone. A text from Anatoly waited: Delivery confirmed. Narrative holding. The drunk double made the news.

Good. The loose end was tied, publicly and permanently.

Next, he dialed a number from memory. It was answered on the first ring by Roger Crowell's executive assistant.

"This is Ilya Rozanov. Tell the Commissioner I am ready to discuss the terms of our continued participation. The meeting will be remote. Tomorrow, 10 AM. He will have the appropriate parties on the line."

There was a flustered pause. "Mr. Rozanov, the Commissioner's schedule, "

“Is now clear,” Ilya finished, his voice leaving no room for negotiation. “The agenda is simple: reaffirmation of Shane Hollander’s contract with no modifications, a public league statement condemning the attack and affirming a zero-tolerance policy for discrimination based on secondary gender or mate status, and the formation of a player-led committee to review outdated bylaws. These are not opening positions. They are the conditions for our silence and our continued play.”

He could hear the stunned silence on the other end. He knew what they were thinking, ‘He’s dictating terms.’

He was. He had the leverage. The public was a roaring wind at his back. The recording of Crowell’s ultimatum was a knife on the table. And now, after the stillness of the church, his resolve was tempered steel.

“I will wait for video conference link,” he said, and ended the call.

He started the car. The headlights cut through the dark, pointing the way out of the city. The final battle would be fought from the quiet of the cottage, with Shane beside him. The violence was done. The strategy was set. Now, he was going home.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter marks the last time Ilya truly lets that darker part of himself take over. Everything that comes after this isn't about revenge or obsession anymore.

Next chapter: the cottage part 2. y'all can guess what happens there!

See you next update. 

Chapter 37: Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

Hi y'all! 

First, thank you for being so patient while I wrestled this chapter into submission. It took a little longer than expected because I really wanted to give these two the time and space they deserved after everything they've been through.

As always, a massive thank you to all of my incredible reviewers. Y'all had me giggling and blushing like crazy.

An extra special thank you to Tony, B, Lisa, and Anna, for all of your amazing help, brainstorming, encouragement, and for letting me bounce entirely too many ideas off of you. Every one of you helped shape this chapter in ways big and small, and I'm so grateful. 

I hope you enjoy this one. Grab a snack, settle in, and I'll see you on the other side!

Chapter Notes

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

The first quiet moment Ilya found was in the back of the town car on the way to the airport. The city lights blurred past the window in streaks of gold and white as he finally pulled out his phone. The ringing seemed to last forever.

“Hey.” Shane’s voice was soft, a little frayed at the edges. The taut connection between them, stretched painfully tight for days, immediately softened at the sound, warmth flowing back through it alongside relief, exhaustion, and a low hum of anxiety that wasn't entirely Shane's own.

“I’ll be back home to you soon. I’m at the airport already,” Ilya said, his voice rougher than he intended. He cleared his throat. “I miss you.”

There was a pause. Ilya could picture him, in the quiet of his parents’ study perhaps, wrapped in a sweater, turning something over in his mind.

“Maybe...” Shane began, hesitant. “Maybe we should just go straight to the cottage. Tonight. Start it early. I don’t... I don’t really want to be in the city anymore.”

His mate sounded stressed and it bothered Ilya that he wasn't there. He should have left earlier and paid someone to pack his house. The cottage was their sanctuary, the only place where the world's rules had never fully applied. It was where they had learned to be *them*, before everything broke and where they had learned to be themselves before the world had shattered around them.

“Of course,” Ilya said instantly. “We can leave as soon as I get there. I will drive.” Then, the protector in him, finely tuned to every nuance in Shane’s tone, sharpened. “Lyubimyy, are you feeling alright? You sound...”

Another pause, longer this time, he heard Shane’s quiet breath. “I’m okay. Just... tired. My emotions are all over the place. I think... I forgot to take my suppressants last night. With everything. I just forgot.”

The words landed in Ilya’s chest with a quiet, profound thud. Forgotten suppressants, Shane never forgot anything, especially his medication. If he had forgotten last night’s dose, then they only had about a day to get settled at the cottage. Shane’s biology, long held in rigid, disciplined check, was now a live wire, reacting to the emotional pressure of the past couple of weeks. One thing that he wouldn’t say out loud was that he knew Shane didn’t have any birth control. They had been together all the time and Ilya had looked through Shane’s things here and there while they used each other’s things. No birth control pills, no injections.

All thoughts of league meetings, of what he’d done to Kent were irradiated. A new, more ancient priority took absolute command.

“Do not move,” Ilya said, his voice dropping into a low, alpha-calibrated register that was both a command and a promise. “I am coming to you. Pack only what you need for the cottage. I will handle everything else. Do you understand?”

He heard the faint, shivering inhale on the other end, the one that meant Shane was slipping into that calm, delicious, submissive space where he let Ilya carry the weight. “Yes.”

“Good. We’re boarding now, I’ll see you soon sweetheart.”

As the car accelerated, Ilya’s mind was already at the cottage. They’d need to stop for supplies - food, water, the specific electrolytes Shane preferred. The cleaners had been called last week to prepare the house for their visit. A heat, especially one triggered by stress and trauma, was not a gentle thing, or so he read. He was looking forward to Shane depending on him again like their first heat and he wanted nothing to interrupt their time together.

He looked down at his hands, resting on his knees as he waited for the valet to bring his car out of storage. They were clean. They bore no visible mark of what he had done hours before. But he felt the memory in the tendons, a phantom vibration of the violence he had enacted to make this quiet drive, this hopefully was the last time that he would need to protect his mate this way.

He pulled up to the Hollanders family home. Ilya was out before fully turning the car off, not expecting them to be here for more than a few minutes. His pulse a steady, purposeful drumbeat, eager to see Shane and get out of the city.

When Ilya opened with the spare key they’d made for him, Shane was already there, waiting in the foyer. He had a single bag at his feet. He looked pale, shadows like bruises under his eyes, but his gaze was clear. He was holding himself together, but just barely. The first, faint, sweet-sharp hint of pre-heat scent was just beginning to bleed through his usual scent, a siren call that went straight to Ilya’s core.

Wordlessly, Ilya crossed to him. He didn’t kiss him. He framed Shane’s face with his hands, his thumbs stroking over the high cheekbones, and looked into his eyes, searching for any sign of the panic that had gripped him before. He saw fatigue, and a deep-seated worry, but also a profound, trusting surrender.

“Hi, Sweetheart,” Ilya murmured, his forehead coming to rest against Shane’s.

“I’ve missed you,” Shane whispered back, leaning up slightly to bury his nose into Ilya’s neck.

A ghost of a smile touched Ilya’s lips. Shane wasn’t so forward in front of people and he knew his parents had to have been close by. He picked up Shane’s bag, slung it next to his own, and took his hand. “Then we go. Now. Let’s get home.”

He led Shane outside and down the driveway, back to the car. As they sped through down the highway, leaving the glittering, watchful city behind for the dark, embracing woods, Ilya felt the last of his the chill in his soul begin to thaw. Here, with Shane's head resting against his shoulder and the trees slowly swallowing the last lights of the city, Ilya allowed himself to believe they might finally outrun the noise. Whatever waited for them beyond the summer could wait. For now, there was only the road ahead, the cottage at its end, and the quiet promise that, for a little while at least, home would be enough.

The tires crunched to a halt on the familiar gravel. For a long moment, Shane didn’t move, just stared through the windshield at the dark silhouette of the cottage against the star-dusted sky. They had stopped at a local grocery store on the way and while they were obviously recognized, no one bothered them or gave any lingering looks. Even at the store, Shane wasn’t his usual self. He practically clung to Ilya’s side, refusing to go a few steps away to grab anything from a shelf. Ilya had to hold his smile back, if this was what future heats would look like, he couldn’t wait.

He tried to grab things that Shane would need but when he started to notice that Shane was not paying any attention at all, he grabbed meat and produce to get them through a few days, knowing that they’d either have to go out again or get more food delivered. In the car, Shane moved as close as he could and his head moved to Ilya’s shoulder, the world whittled down to the hum of the engine and the accelerating drumbeat of his own blood.

Ilya killed the engine. The profound quiet of the north woods rushed in to fill the space, a living silence broken only by the distant lap of water and the sigh of pines.

Shane opened his door. The cold night air was a shock, scented with damp earth and impending frost. He stepped out, his boots sinking into the gravel, and just stood, breathing. Then he walked, not to the trunk for bags, but toward the porch. The smooth wood planks groaned their welcome under his weight. He unlocked the door with the keypad and disabled the security alarm.

The smell hit him first, a physical wave that made his knees go weak. Cedar, aged and sweet. The faint, clean tang of lake water lingering in the air. Lemon polish from the cleaners, it was the smell of last summer, of the best time in his entire life.

He stood on the threshold, one hand braced against the doorframe, and breathed it in. Deep, shuddering pulls that reached the very bottom of his lungs. He felt it happen, viscerally: the unraveling. The coiled-wire tension that had held his spine rigid since the moment he'd fallen on the ice began to soften, to dissolve in the face of this ancient, knowing quiet. A long, slow exhale left his body, a breath he felt he'd been holding for weeks. All the challenges that they had faced recently receded, muted by the whispering dark of the lake.

Ilya came up behind him, a warm, silent presence. He didn't speak, didn't rush him. He simply waited, his own duffel at his feet, allowing Shane these few moments.

Finally, Shane stepped inside. He didn't turn on the overhead light. Moonlight filtered through the big windows, painting the familiar furniture in shades of silver and deep blue. He walked slowly through the main room, his fingers trailing over the back of the couch, the cool surface of the dining table. His body, which had been tense with held-together pieces, began to acknowledge its own exhaustion. The careful posture slackened. The perpetual slight frown between his brows smoothed away.

He stopped in the center of the room, looking at the stone fireplace, the stacked logs, the blanket they'd left folded over the armchair last time was still there, now folded neatly. Ilya moved to stand beside him, close enough that their arms brushed. Shane didn't look at him. He just leaned, infinitesimally, until his shoulder pressed fully against Ilya's bicep. The contact was like the completion of a circuit. Like the final lock sliding home.

Wordlessly, then, Shane turned and walked down the hall to their bedroom.

Ilya followed, pausing in the doorway.

Shane had turned on the small bedside lamp, casting a pool of warm light. He was already moving with a quiet, focused purpose, the pre-heat energy manifesting not as anxiety, but as a deep, instinctual drive. He pulled the duvet and top sheet from the bed, letting them pool on the floor. From the bags that Ilya still carried, he gathered armfuls of their clothes, Ilya's soft, worn henleys, his own faded hoodies, the flannel pajama bottoms they fought over. He brought the pillows from the living room couch, the oversized knit blanket from the reading chair.

He built the nest in the center of the mattress, his movements methodical, almost ritualistic. He layered the softest fabrics against the mattress, creating a padded basin. He arranged the pillows repeatedly, in a way that only made sense for himself, building up the sides. He buried his face briefly in a sweater of Ilya's, inhaling, before placing it with deliberate care at what would be the head of the little indentation that he had prepared. Every piece was chosen for scent, for texture, for memory. This was part of Shane's baser self, of anticipated vulnerability. Ilya so rarely saw it that he was just fascinated at his mate's actions.

Ilya watched, leaning against the doorframe, his heart a vast, aching thing in his chest. He noticed that Shane was making the space in the middle of the mattress more compact-as if he wanted them to be practically on top of each other while sleeping. This was trust in its purest, most physical form. Shane, who had been violated in the most public way, was now preparing to surrender completely to the one person he believed would keep him safe. There was no self-consciousness, no hesitation. It was biology and love fused into a single, sacred act.

The nest complete, Shane knelt beside the bed for a moment, his head bowed, his hands resting on the edge of the mattress. His shoulders rose and fell with a deep, steadying breath. In the lamplight, the line of his neck, the set of his shoulders, seemed both profoundly strong and utterly defenseless.

Ilya pushed off from the doorframe. He didn't go to him yet. He simply let the sight anchor him, replacing the cold, violent images seared into his mind from Kent with this one: his mate, home, building the place where they would weather the coming storm together. The protectiveness that rose in him was a clean, fierce flame, burning away the last residues of guilt and darkness. This was his purpose. This, right here.

Shane finally turned his head, his eyes finding Ilya's in the shadowed room. He didn't smile. His expression was one of deep, weary readiness. The first true, concentrated wave of his heat-scent, sweet and heavy as honey, began to permeate the cedar-and-lake air of the room, a promise and a summons.

The sight of Shane, kneeling by the nest with a tremor of frustration running through his shoulders, sent a bolt of pure, possessive heat straight to Ilya's core. A faint, telltale flush was creeping up the back of Shane's neck, painting his skin a delicate, feverish pink.

'Good,' Ilya thought, the word a dark, fervent prayer in the silence of his mind. *Let it come. Let it take him completely.* His own blood was beginning to sing in response, a rising chord of alpha need that was both instinct and a cold, deliberate strategy. The image was crystalline, unavoidable- Shane, swollen with his child. Shane, bound to him not just by bite and bond, but by blood, never being able to be apart from him. It was the ultimate fortress, the final, unbreachable wall against a world that kept trying to take him away. He would make him so sex-drunk, so blissfully saturated with pleasure and seed, that his body would have no choice but to accept it. The thought was a vow.

He moved then, crossing the room in two silent strides. He didn't speak. His hands simply found Shane's shoulders, his touch firm and grounding, and pulled him up and back, into the solid wall of his chest. Shane melted instantly, a soft, broken sound escaping him as the tension seeped from his muscles. He turned his face, nuzzling desperately into the hollow of Ilya's throat, his breath hot and damp against his skin. Ilya held him, one arm banded across his chest, the other hand cradling the back of his head, fingers spearing into his soft hair. He breathed him in, that intoxicating scent, and felt the frantic pace of Shane's heart begin to slow against his own.

"Shh, lyubimyy," Ilya murmured, his lips moving against Shane's temple. "The nest is perfect. You did such a good job for us." He felt the sweet purr from Shane, a lazy smile growing from his face but his eyes were still unfocused. "But you are working too hard. Let me take care of you." He pressed a kiss to his hair. "Let's run a bath. The water will help you relax. Soften your muscles for what is coming."

He felt Shane nod weakly against his neck. When Ilya began to ease his hold, Shane made a small, needy sound of protest, his hands clutching at Ilya's arms. Ilya gently pried himself loose just enough to look down at his face.

Shane's eyes were glazed, pupils blown wide and dark, swallowing the chocolate brown. They were fixed somewhere on Ilya's chest, seeing and unseeing, lost in the inner storm of his own rising need. That lack of focus, that vulnerable disconnect, sent another sharp thrill through Ilya. He needed him *here*. Present in this surrender.

With a firm but tender grip, Ilya caged Shane's jaw in his hand, his thumb pressing into the hinge, his fingers splayed along his cheek. He applied just enough pressure to force Shane's head up, to drag that dazed, beautiful gaze up to meet his own.

For a suspended second, they simply looked at each other. Ilya saw the heat, the fear, the trust, the raw, unvarnished want. He let his own expression convey everything: the hunger, the absolute certainty, the promise of care woven through the promise of possession.

Then he leaned down and captured Shane's mouth.

It was not a gentle kiss. A silent command to focus. To feel. Ilya's lips were demanding, his tongue sweeping in to taste the unique flavor of Shane's need. He poured his intention into it, the devotion, the desperate love, the dark, fertile hope growing like a seed in the pit of his soul. He held the kiss until the frustration finally dissolved, coaxing Shane's mouth into soft, pliant surrender. A broken moan vibrated between them as Shane's hands loosened at last, sliding up to clutch the front of Ilya's shirt.

When Ilya finally broke the kiss, they were both breathing heavily. Shane's eyes were still dark, but they were locked on Ilya's now, seeing only him.

"Come," Ilya said, his voice a rough caress. He slid his hand from Shane's jaw down to take his hand, lacing their fingers together. "The bath is waiting. And then," he promised, his thumb stroking over Shane's knuckles, "I will take you to your perfect nest and worship you there until you can think of nothing but my name."

The bathroom was growing hazy with steam, fragrant with the scent of eucalyptus and lavender salts Ilya had poured under the hot tap. He had led Shane inside, the tile warming underfoot from the heated floor. Shane stood docilely, his gaze still soft and distant, as Ilya undressed him. Each article of clothing was removed with a slow, ritualistic care, the t-shirt

peeled up and over his head, the slacks unbuttoned and slid down his hips. Ilya knelt to help him step out of them, his hands skimming up Shane's calves, a silent promise in the touch.

He quickly removed his own clothes, and then guided Shane down into the deep, clawfoot tub. The water was almost too hot, a penetrating heat that made Shane gasp softly as he sank into it, the tension in his muscles visibly unspooling. Ilya climbed in behind him, settling against the sloped back, and pulled Shane to rest between his legs, his back to Ilya's chest. The water rose around them, a silken, weightless embrace.

For a while, there was only the quiet lap of water and the sound of their breathing. Ilya reached for a sponge and bottle of liquid, unscented soap. He began to wash Shane, starting with his shoulders. The motions were slow, circular, and deeply methodical. He lathered the soap, working it into a rich foam, and spread it over Shane's skin, following the contours of his collarbones, the slope of his shoulders. His touch was not sexual, yet it was profoundly intimate. It was an act of claiming through caretaking, of mapping territory through service.

As he washed, he also scented. He bent his head, his nose brushing the wet skin of Shane's neck, just beside the bonding bite. He inhaled deeply, with that same deliberate, meditative focus. Here, in the steam, Shane's scent was amplified, rising from his pores: the sweet, unmistakable signature of omega, layered with the unique note that was purely Shane, honeysuckle and clean fresh mountain air, now edged with the sharp, tantalizing spice of his oncoming heat. Ilya breathed it in, letting it flood his senses, imprinting it past the point of memory and into instinct. *Mine*.

He felt the exact moment Shane's relaxation tipped over into neediness. It was a subtle shift. The pliant lean became a slight, restless press back against his chest. A soft, almost inaudible whine escaped Shane's throat. His hands, which had been floating limply in the water, came up to grip Ilya's thighs on either side of him, fingers digging in just slightly.

Ilya loved it. A surge of pure, alpha satisfaction warmed him from within, sharper than the bathwater. His own blood was beginning to beat a heavier, hotter rhythm, the first stirrings of his rut answering the call of Shane's heat. He could feel it gathering in his gut, a coiling, possessive urgency that wanted to flip Shane over and take him right here, to push him under the water and drink the gasp from his mouth. The force of it made his hands still for a moment, his breath catching.

But no. Not yet. Strategy warred with instinct, and won. Shane needed to be soft, open, *ready*, not just physically, but in his soul. Ilya needed him so relaxed he was nothing but feeling, so trusting he would welcome the storm. The rut could wait. The rut would be stronger for the waiting.

He dropped the sponge and used his bare hands instead. He slid them over Shane's soap-slick chest, tracing the lines of his pecs, his thumbs brushing over his nipples, which were peaked and sensitive in the warm water. Shane shuddered, his head lolling back against Ilya's shoulder.

"Ilya..." His name was a sigh, a plea.

"I know, lapochka," Ilya murmured against his ear, his voice gravelly with restraint. "I feel it. Let me take care of you first. All of you."

His hands drifted lower, over the quivering plane of Shane's stomach. He soaped him everywhere, his touch thorough and unhurried, a worshipful cleansing. He washed his arms, each finger, then urged him forward gently to wash his back, kneeling up in the water to sweep the sponge down the elegant line of his spine. Each pass of the cloth, each stroke of his hand, was designed to unravel Shane further, to replace anxiety with sensation, fear with anticipation.

By the time he was finished, Shane was practically boneless against him, trembling with a need that had passed beyond frustration into a hazy, all-consuming ache. His scent was now a potent cloud in the steam, delicious and devastating. Ilya's own control was a thin, fraying wire. His need was a heavy pressure at the base of his spine, and every one of Shane's soft sounds was a lick of flame along that wire.

He pulled the plug, letting the water begin to drain with a low gurgle. The cooler air raised goosebumps on their skin. Ilya reached for a large, fluffy towel warmed on the rack and wrapped Shane in it, hauling him up and out of the tub as if he weighed nothing. He dried him with the same meticulous care, patting and rubbing every inch of him, before roughly toweling himself off.

Shane stood swaying, enveloped in a terrycloth robe, his eyes dark pools of want. The glazed look was back, but now it was focused entirely on Ilya. The nest was waiting. The heat was a

cresting wave. And Ilya's rut, held so fiercely in check, now thrummed through him with a predatory patience. The bath had done its work. Shane was relaxed, pliant, swimming in need. Now, Ilya would lead him to the bed, lay him down in the fortress of softness he'd built, and finally, *finally*, begin the long, deep work of making him so utterly, completely his, that the world could never threaten them again. He scooped Shane into his arms, carrying him the short distance to the bedroom, to the nest that smelled of them, and to the night that belonged to no one else.

Ilya carried him to the edge of the bed and put him down, gathering the robe and pulling it off so they were both nude. But as Ilya set Shane on his feet, a tremor went through him. Shane blinked, his brow furrowing slightly. He shook his head, a quick, tight motion as if trying to dislodge a thought, to clear the fog of need and remember something sharp and cold waiting in the edges of the room. It was the ghost of the outside world, a last, fleeting attempt to intrude.

Ilya didn't allow it.

He was on him in an instant, one hand cupping the back of his neck, the other framing his jaw, and his mouth covered Shane's in a deep, consuming kiss. It was not gentle. He poured every ounce of his focus, his alpha will, the dark, fertile promise thrumming in his blood, into that connection. His tongue swept in, claiming, and he breathed his own scent into Shane's mouth, cedar, leather and air, *mine*- overwriting the panic, flooding his senses until there was no room for anything else.

He felt the exact moment Shane broke. The resistance in his jaw melted. The confusion in his eyes dissolved back into that beautiful, hazy surrender, the pupils swallowing all the hazel, leaving only dark, wanting pools fixed solely on Ilya. A soft, desperate sound vibrated from his throat into Ilya's mouth.

Only then did Ilya guide him down, laying him back into the deep, pillowed basin of the nest. He followed him down, covering his body with his own, pinning him not with brutality, but with an absolute, inescapable weight. Ilya caged him completely, his larger frame settling over Shane's, one leg sliding between his, his arms bracketing his head. He was the sky and the earth, and Shane was the only thing in between.

And then, he simply kissed him.

He kissed him like it was the only language left in the world. He started slow, teasing the seam of his lips until they parted on a sigh, then delving deep, a slow, rhythmic conquest that had Shane arching up against him. He kissed the corner of his mouth, the soft skin of his cheek, the flutter of his closed eyelids. He trailed his lips down to his throat, but not to the bonding bite, not yet. That was for later, and he was working his way there with devout patience. He nuzzled the hollow of his throat, inhaling the scent blooming there, that intoxicating sweetness of heat, and let out a low, approving growl that made Shane shudder beneath him.

He returned to Shane's mouth, the kiss deepening, turning filthy and wet. Ilya explored him with a leisurely, devastating thoroughness. He mapped the roof of his mouth, sucked on his tongue, learned the taste of every soft, gasping breath. His hips began a slow, grinding roll against Shane's, the friction of their bodies a sweet, torturous promise. He was hard, aching, his own rut a drumbeat in his veins, but this was the priority. To drown Shane in sensation until thought was impossible.

Shane was unraveling beautifully. His hands, which had gripped Ilya's shoulders, now slid weakly to the sheets, fingers twisting in the fabric of their clothes. His legs fell open, inviting the press of Ilya's thigh higher, seeking more pressure. Broken, hungry sounds spilled from his lips into Ilya's mouth with every breath. He was floating on the tide Ilya was orchestrating, his entire world reduced to the weight above him, the mouth on his, the delicious, building friction between his legs.

Ilya shifted, slotting their bodies together more perfectly. He deepened the kiss, swallowing Shane's moans, as he ground down in a firm, relentless rhythm. He could feel the frantic beat of Shane's heart against his own chest, could smell the scent of his slick saturating the air, thick and heady.

He broke the kiss just enough to whisper against his slick, swollen lips, his voice a dark, ragged rumble. "That's it, my love. Just feel. Let it go. Give it to me."

And Shane did. His back arched off the nest in a sudden, taut bow. A sharp, choked cry was torn from his throat, not loud, but right from his soul. His body seized, trembling violently under Ilya's as the climax ripped through him, untouched, a direct result of the relentless, possessive attention, the overwhelming security of being pinned and devoured. Ilya felt the hot spill against his own abdomen, and a triumphant, savage pride roared through him.

He held him through it, kissing him softly now, swallowing his gasps, until the tremors subsided and Shane went completely boneless beneath him, spent and pliant, his eyes closed, his lips parted and kiss-bruised. The hazy look was one of pure, sex-drunk saturation.

Ilya nuzzled his cheek, breathing in the potent, satisfied scent of his release mixed with the promise of heat. He pressed a final, soft kiss to his forehead.

The first wave had crested. Shane was relaxed, open, and utterly his. Now, with the night stretching before them and the heat ready to truly descend, Ilya could begin the long, deep work of his devotion. He settled beside him in the nest, pulling Shane close, and began to trace idle, possessive patterns on his skin, waiting for the fire to build again, ready to meet it and shape it into their future.

Shane's breathing had evened out into the deep, slow rhythm of true sleep, his body a warm, pliant weight in the center of the nest. The frantic, clutching need of the heat's peak had passed, leaving behind a spent, vulnerable calm. Ilya lay on his side, propped on an elbow, and watched him.

The urge was a physical pulse, a low, insistent drumbeat in his blood that synced with the quiet purr rumbling in Shane's chest. His rut, held at bay through sheer will during the long hours of careful worship, now pressed against the gates of his control. It whispered to flip Shane onto his stomach, to push into his still-relaxed, slick heat, to knot him deep and seal them together. The image was so vivid he could feel the phantom clench around him, could almost smell the richer, fertile scent his body was screaming to create.

He closed his eyes, breathing through it. He forced himself into a calmer mindset. The predator could wait. The guardian, the proper mate, came first.

His gaze traced the landscape of sleep-softened features. The faint flush of the upcoming heat still high on Shane's cheekbones. The dark, delicate fans of his lashes against his skin. The prettiest smattering of freckles across his cheeks and nose. The parted lips, slightly swollen from kisses. He was so profoundly beautiful it carved a hollow ache of devotion in Ilya's chest, sharper than any rut-driven hunger.

His hand moved of its own volition, drawn to the heat and proof of life. He didn't grab, didn't demand. He let the back of his knuckles drift down the plane of Shane's stomach, until his fingers curled loosely around the soft, spent weight of his cock. It was warm, utterly relaxed in his sleep. Ilya's thumb swept over the head in a feather-light, circular caress, a touch so gentle it was less about arousal and more about possession of this most vulnerable state.

A deeper, contented purr vibrated through Shane's chest, a sleepy, unconscious answer to the touch. His hips shifted infinitesimally, pushing into the loose cradle of Ilya's hand. The response, so trusting and automatic, sent a jolt of pure, alpha satisfaction straight through Ilya. His own length throbbed, heavy and insistent, but he ignored it. This was the prize- this absolute, unguarded surrender. Shane, safe enough to sleep through his touch. Shane, whose body recognized his alpha even in dreams.

He continued the idle, tender petting, paying attention to every sigh and shift. He watched the subtle changes, the twitch of a muscle in Shane's thigh, the soft sigh that escaped his lips, the way his purr stuttered and deepened when Ilya's thumb pressed just so. He was learning the map of his mate's repose, claiming this quiet part of his mate too. The scent in the nest was theirs. Ilya breathed it in, letting it fortify him, letting it soothe the jagged edges of his own need. This peace was what he had fought for, killed for. This was the core of all his wants and hopes.

Shane's eyelids fluttered. A soft, confused sound escaped him as consciousness began to gently return. His brown eyes opened, blurred with sleep, and found Ilya's immediately. There was no startlement, only a slow, dawning recognition that melted into a warmth so deep it made Ilya's breath catch.

Ilya's hands never faltered, their gentle rhythm as steady as his breathing. He met Shane's gaze without looking away, his blue eyes softened by profound affection even as something darker and far more instinctive flickered in their depths. A slow, possessive smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.

"Hello," he murmured, his voice a low rasp in the quiet room. "Did you sleep well?"

Shane's answer was a wordless, sleepy stretch that pushed him more firmly into Ilya's hand, his own hips giving a lazy, reflexive roll. The purr intensified. His eyes drifted shut again for a second, a smile playing on his own lips. "Mmm. You're here."

“I am always here,” Ilya vowed, the promise settling between them, as real and tangible as the touch that connected them. The rut still hummed in his veins, a promise of what was to come. But for this suspended moment, watching his mate wake, feeling the trust in every languid shift of his body, this was everything.

Shane was a live wire of need, his skin flushed a deep, feverish pink, his movements growing more frantic as the heat surged back with a vengeance after his brief nap. He clawed weakly at the sheets, then at Ilya’s arm, trying to pull him down, his hips canting up in a silent, desperate plea. His scent was overwhelming, a cloud of honeysuckle and the lavender from their bath made the air thick and hard to think in.

“Ilya... please, now, need you...” The words were slurred, dripping with a primal ache.

Every cell in Ilya’s body roared in agreement. His rut, a caged beast behind his ribs, demanded he give in, to cover Shane and take and take until they were both mindless. But he needed to prove to both of them that he could really be the provider when Shane wasn’t capable of taking care of himself. He needed to prove that he’d always put Shane’s needs before his own. True protection wasn’t just about claiming in this moment; it was about sustaining. Shane hadn’t eaten properly in days, and had been vomiting from stress. A heat, especially one this intense, was a marathon.

With a gentleness that cost him dearly, he caught Shane’s wandering hands and pressed them back to the mattress. “Soon, lyubimyy. Very soon. First, you need strength.” He extricated himself from the nest, ignoring Shane’s sharp, bereft whine that cut through the purring.

He moved quickly to the kitchen, his own body protesting every step away from the heady scented filled bedroom. He grabbed a large glass, filled it with ice and cold water, and snatched a high-protein bar from the pantry, one of the ones Shane used for long game days. He needed the mundane action to calm himself and make sure he wouldn’t really hurt Shane once his rut was fully taking over.

When he returned, Shane was nearly in tears of frustration. “No, no snack... want you. Come *back*.”

Ilya sat on the edge of the nest, faking a calmness that he really did not feel when seeing his mate, that needy, that submissive towards him. "I am right here. And you will eat this for me." His tone left no room for argument, that same low, alpha-calibrated frequency that could cut through Shane's panic.

Shane shook his head, his hand darting out not for the bar, but for the prominent bulge in Ilya's boxers. Ilya intercepted his wrist easily, his grip firm but not painful. He brought Shane's hand to his mouth instead, pressing a hot, open-mouthed kiss to his palm before placing it back on his own stomach.

"The snack, Shane," he murmured, unwrapping the bar. "Open for me."

Tears of sheer want spilled over Shane's lashes, but he obeyed, parting his lips. Ilya broke off a small piece and placed it on his tongue. "Chew. Good. Swallow." He followed it with a sip of the cold water, his hand cradling the back of Shane's head to help him drink. The process was slow, maddeningly so for both of them. Each time Shane tried to rush, to turn his head seeking a kiss instead, Ilya held him steady, his gaze unwavering.

"So good for me," Ilya praised, his voice a rough caress as Shane finally swallowed the last bite and drained half the glass. "My strong, perfect mate. Letting me take care of you." The words, the simple act of being fed, seemed to spark a different kind of submission in Shane's glazed eyes. The frantic edge softened into a dazed, pliant exhaustion. The need was still there, a banked fire, but it was no longer a wildfire threatening to consume them both.

Ilya set the empty glass aside and finally, *finally* lowered himself back into the nest. He gathered Shane close, skin to sticky skin, and Shane melted into him with a shuddering sigh, nuzzling into his throat, scenting the alpha, his earlier resistance gone.

"See?" Ilya whispered into his hair, his own control fraying at the edges as he felt Shane's renewed heat sear into him. "I will always give you what you need. Even when you do not know to ask for it." He rolled them, settling Shane beneath him once more, the weight a promise. "And now," he said, his lips brushing the shell of Shane's ear, "I will give you what we both want."

The praise, the care, the simple act of being fed - had transformed Shane's need from a frantic wildfire into a deep, smoldering river. He lay pliant and heavy-lidded in their little cocoon,

his legs opened wide in invitation, his body still singing with heat, but his mind now floating in a haze of trust. Ilya hovered above him, the last vestiges of his own restraint a thin, fraying cord. The strategic part of him was satisfied; Shane was nourished, hydrated, psychologically softened into utter submission. Now, the predator could claim its due.

He began not with force, but with a devastating, leisurely precision. He kissed his way down Shane's body, worshipping every inch with his mouth, but pointedly avoiding where Shane needed him most. He lavished attention on his inner thighs, biting the sensitive skin just hard enough to make Shane jolt and whimper, soothing the mark with his tongue. He traced the lines of his hips, his stomach, his ribs, with a feather-light touch that was more maddening than any direct caress.

"Ilya... please," Shane begged, his voice a broken thread of sound. His hands tangled in Ilya's hair, not to guide, but to cling.

"Shh," Ilya murmured against his hip bone, his breath hot. "I am taking care of you. Let me."

He finally took Shane's aching length into his hand, but his strokes were slow, languid, a torturous parody of relief. He used his thumb to smear the slick leaking out of him on the tip, spreading it with idle circles that made Shane's back arch off the nest. Just as Shane's breathing hitched, his muscles coiling tight, Ilya would stop. He'd release him entirely, turning his attention to lave at a nipple, or to bite gently at the junction of his neck and shoulder, inhaling the potent, concentrated scent of his distress and desire.

He brought Shane to the edge again and again, each time pulling him back with a soft command or a distracting, painful-pleasure bite. Tears of sheer frustration welled in Shane's eyes, spilling over to track through the flush on his temples. His pleas became incoherent, a litany of "alpha" and "please" and "I can't."

"You can," Ilya growled, his own control splintering, the sound vibrating against Shane's skin. "You will take what I give you, when I give it to you. You are mine to play with. Mine to break and remake." The words were harsh, but the bond between them thrummed with a ferocious, possessive love that gave them a darker truth.

Finally, when Shane was trembling uncontrollably, his body glistening with sweat and tears, his cries reduced to soft, shattered sobs, Ilya decided he was ready.

He flipped Shane onto his stomach with a single, powerful motion. A startled gasp was muffled by the pillows. Ilya's hands gripped his hips, lifting them, holding him in place. There was no more gentleness, no more teasing questions. He positioned himself and pushed forward in one deep, brutal stroke, sheathing himself fully in Shane's slick, clutching heat.

A scream, half-relief, half-shock, tore from Shane's throat. Ilya didn't pause. He set a punishing, relentless rhythm, each thrust driving Shane forward into the nest, the force of it stealing the breath from both of them. The slapping of skin, Shane's choked cries, Ilya's own guttural groans, they were the only sounds in their world. This was more than making love. This was conquering. It was Ilya imprinting himself on every nerve ending.

The knot began to swell at the base of his length, an inevitable, biological lock. Ilya felt it catch, a thick, insistent pressure, and with one final, deep drive, he forced it inside, seating himself fully, irrevocably tied to his mate. The sensation of being stretched, filled beyond capacity, wrenched a final, raw sound from Shane. At the same time, the overwhelming, total possession triggered his own climax, a seizing, silent convulsion that milked Ilya's knot as he emptied himself deep inside, pulse after pulse of hot release.

For a long, suspended moment, there was only the shock of completion, the overwhelming fullness, and the ragged symphony of their breathing. Ilya collapsed over Shane's back, his body a heavy, sweating weight, his face buried in the sweat-damp hair at the nape of Shane's neck. The knot held them fast, a perfect, brutal seal.

As the aftershocks faded, the roughness bled away, leaving only the profound, trembling connection. Ilya shifted his weight to the side, carefully pulling Shane with him, still locked together. He gathered him close, his arms wrapping around Shane's chest, holding him as they lay on their sides in the wreckage of the nest.

He nuzzled the fresh bonding bite on Shane's neck, his lips moving against the tender skin. "*Mine*," he whispered, the word a vow, a prayer, a settled fact. "Always. You take me so perfectly, solnyshko. My perfect, beautiful mate." His hand splayed possessively over Shane's lower abdomen, as if already guarding the potential life he had poured into him.

Shane, utterly spent, could only manage a weak, shuddering sigh, pushing back minutely into the solid heat of Ilya's chest. The tears had dried, replaced by a deep, satiated exhaustion. The

bond, stretched and tested, now hummed with a new, profound frequency, not just of love, but of a permanent, biological fusion. In the quiet dark of the cottage, with the knot binding them and the scent of their union thick in the air, the outside world and all its threats finally, completely, ceased to exist. There was only this: the fortress of their bodies, the peace of the claim, and the silent, waiting future they had just begun to create.

A deep, satiated quiet had settled over the cottage, the kind that follows a storm. They slept tangled in the wreckage of the nest, Shane sprawled bonelessly across Ilya's chest, his breathing a soft, steady rhythm against Ilya's skin. Ilya drifted in a contented haze, the fierce urgency of his rut momentarily sated, replaced by a profound, possessive calm.

He was pulled not to wakefulness, but to a low, throbbing awareness by a soft, insistent pressure. A warm, sleepy nuzzling against the junction of his thigh and hip. Then, the wet, seeking heat of a mouth.

Ilya's eyes flew open. In the dim grey light, Shane was half-awake, moving on pure, heat-drenched instinct. His face was buried against Ilya's groin, his lips and tongue working clumsily, desperately, over his growing length, trying to rouse him again. A soft, needy sound vibrated against Ilya's skin.

The sensation was a lightning strike. Pleasure, shock, and a surge of raw, alpha pride. His hand flew to Shane's hair, not to pull him away, but to sink into the soft longer strands, holding him there as his body responded with startling, immediate speed.

"Lapochka... greedy thing," Ilya rasped, his voice thick with sleep and desire.

Shane didn't reply with words. He took the hardening length deeper into his mouth, his technique was still messy and unpracticed but utterly sincere, fueled by a natural imperative that had erased all hesitation. Ilya's head fell back against the pillow, a guttural groan tearing from his throat. He let it happen, let Shane explore and learn, his hips giving tiny, involuntary lifts. The sight, the feel- his proud, capable mate reduced to this single-minded, worshipful need, was more intoxicating than any skilled touch.

But as the pressure built, a coil tightening low in his gut, the image from the references surfaced in his mind: the need for a different kind of connection, one where he could see,

could *watch*. This was bliss, but it was a surrender to Shane's hunger. Ilya needed to be the architect again.

With a ragged breath, he tightened his grip in Shane's hair and gently, firmly, pulled him off. Shane made a sound of pure, bereft protest, his lips swollen and wet, his eyes glazed and confused.

"Shhh," Ilya soothed, moving them both with a powerful, fluid motion. In an instant, he was sitting back against the piled pillows, and Shane was straddling his lap, pliant and bewildered. "Here. Like this. I want to see you."

Understanding dawned in Shane's hazy eyes. He braced his hands on Ilya's shoulders, his body trembling with renewed anticipation. Ilya guided himself, notching at his entrance, and with a slow, relentless pressure, lifted Shane by the hips and lowered him down, sheathing himself completely in one smooth, deep stroke.

Shane cried out, a sharp, beautiful sound of fullness, his head falling back. Ilya's hands settled on his hips, his thumbs digging into the sharp crests, holding him steady. "Move," he commanded, his voice a dark rumble. "Take what you need. Show me."

And Shane did. Tentatively at first, then with growing confidence, he began to ride him, finding a rolling, grinding rhythm that had them both gasping. Ilya watched, mesmerized. He watched the play of muscle in Shane's abdomen, the flush spreading across his chest, the utterly vulnerable concentration on his face. He watched his own length disappear into Shane's body, a visual proof of their union that sent primal satisfaction roaring through him.

This was the communion he craved. Eye contact, deep and unbreaking. The shared rhythm. The silent conversation of gasps and clenched fingers. He met every rise and fall, his own hips driving up to meet Shane's descent, deepening the angle, chasing the exquisite friction. The world narrowed to the slick, hot clutch of Shane's body, the scent of their joining saturating the air, and the perfect, desperate connection in Shane's eyes.

Ilya felt the knot begin to swell, that insistent, primal lock. His movements became shorter, deeper, more urgent. "Now," he gritted out, his hands clamping like vices on Shane's hips, holding him down as he thrust up one final, devastating time.

The knot seated itself, thick and irrevocable. Shane's body clenched around him in a silent, seizing climax, his mouth open in a soundless cry as Ilya pulsed deep inside, his own release a white-hot flood of possession. The force of it tipped them sideways, Ilya twisting at the last second to take the impact, cradling Shane against him as they landed in the nest, still fused together.

The aftermath was a breathless, trembling silence. Ilya's arms wrapped around Shane, holding him close as the knot held them fast. He turned his face, his nose finding the sweat-damp skin of Shane's throat. He inhaled, deeply, deliberately.

The scent he drew in was the final, perfect synthesis. No trace of fear, no memory of violation. Just heat, and satisfaction, and *them*- the storm and the sanctuary, the claim and the peace, woven into a single, indelible fragrance. It was the scent of home, of a future secured in the most primal way possible. He breathed it in, again and again, as their hearts slowed against each other, in the perfect, weighted silence of their sealed world.

The second day dawned a sunrise, filling their little piece of paradise with bright light. The heat had settled into Shane's bones, a constant, low-grade fever that made the world feel soft-edged and hyper-real. He woke, as he had the first morning, to the sensation of being known. Ilya was curled around him, his face a persistent, warm pressure against the back of his neck. But this was beyond the meditative scenting from before. Now, every breath Ilya drew was a possessive inventory, a low, continuous growl of satisfaction vibrating through his chest and into Shane's spine as he absorbed their mingled scent, the potent, undeniable proof of their union that now permeated the very walls of the cottage.

"Mine," Ilya murmured against his skin, the word less a statement than a fundamental truth being reinforced with each pass of his lips. "All day. Every way. Forever."

He began in the bed, in the heart of the nest that now smelled less of fabric and more of them. He turned Shane onto his back with a lazy, confident strength. The morning light was gentle, filtering through the trees to dapple their skin. Ilya's touch was not frantic, but endlessly patient, like a master exploring his favorite instrument. He relearned Shane's body in its heightened state, his hands and mouth charting a landscape of slick heat and trembling sensitivity. He worshipped the softness of his inner thighs, the delicate folds that were swollen and wet with need, before taking the length of his cock into the devastating heat of his mouth, swallowing him down until Shane sobbed, his fingers scrabbling at the sheets. Ilya didn't let him finish. He pulled off with a wet pop, smirking at Shane's shattered cry, and

replaced his mouth with his fingers, working him open with slow, twisting thrusts before finally, finally, sinking into the tight, clutching heat of his cunt. The angle was different, deeper, and Shane's cry this time was one of shocked, overwhelming fullness. Ilya moved with a slow, rolling grind, his eyes locked on Shane's face, watching every flicker of pleasure, every tear that escaped, making love to him with a focused intensity that felt like being rebuilt from the inside out.

Later, as the sun climbed higher, the need turned less tender, more demanding. Ilya backed him against the cool, floor-to-ceiling window of the living room wall, the vast expanse of the lake a brilliant blue backdrop. The exposure was electric, a thrilling, terrifying contrast to their privacy. Ilya's hands were rough on his hips, his breath hot on his neck.

"Can you imagine if there were people just looking to enjoy the water and they happened to see you?" Ilya growled, a dark, possessive edge in his voice as he lifted Shane, pressing him against the unyielding surface. "We'd let the whole world see who you belong to. Can you imagine that?" He entered him in one sharp, perfect thrust, taking his cock this time, the stretch and burn a blinding counterpoint to the cool glass on Shane's back. Each drive forward pinned Shane harder against the window, each retreat a gasp of cold air. Ilya fucked him with a relentless, punishing rhythm, his teeth on Shane's bonding bite, his body a cage of muscle and intent. Shane could only cling to him, his vision blurring, the line between inside and outside dissolving under the dual assault of possession and exposure. Ilya's release was a hot flood inside him, his knot a thick, stretching promise that held them locked together, sweating and panting against the glass, a living portrait of claimed surrender.

By evening, the fierce energy had mellowed into a saturated, liquid exhaustion. Ilya drew a cool bath, this time filling the clawfoot tub with water to ease the feverish temperature of his mate. He sank into it first, then pulled Shane down to straddle his lap, facing him. The water buoyed them, a weightless, silent embrace. This was different again. Slow, intimate, profound. Shane settled onto him, taking him into the slick, welcoming heat of his cunt once more, the water easing the way to a seamless, aching join. They moved not in thrusts, but in gentle, rocking undulations, their foreheads pressed together, their breaths mingling with the steam. Ilya's hands drifted over Shane's ribs, his back, his hips, as if memorizing him by touch alone. He kissed him, deep and slow, a communion of tongues that mirrored the joining of their bodies below the water's shimmering surface.

Here, there was no urgency, only a slow, building swell. The orgasm that came was not a shattering one, but a warm, endless wave that pulsed through Shane, drawing a soft, broken sigh from his lips as Ilya followed him over, his knot swelling to lock them together in the water's silent, floating world. Ilya held him close, his lips moving against Shane's temple.

“Every part of you,” he whispered, his voice raw with a reverence that went beyond the physical. “In every place that is ours. I will have all of you, Mate. Until there is no secret, no corner, no version of you that does not know me. That does not belong to me, just like I belong to you.”

And as the water cooled around them and the stars began to pierce the darkening sky beyond the bathroom window, Shane believed him. In the bed, against the glass, in the water, he had been claimed, explored, and adored in every way possible. The heat was a fire, but Ilya was the architect of its path, and in his arms, even burning felt like coming home.

The third morning arrived quietly, a cloudy rainy day that was perfect to just stay in bed. The feverish urgency of Shane's heat had settled into something slower, deeper, leaving behind a bone-deep exhaustion that seemed to seep into every muscle. His body felt heavy, wonderfully so, cocooned in warmth and contentment.

Ilya woke to find Shane already awake, eyes half-lidded, watching him from inches away without a single thought visibly moving behind them. He was pliant, boneless, existing purely in the space Ilya curated for him. The obsessive protector, the strategic planner, all those facets of Ilya coalesced into a single, unwavering purpose- alpha.

“Good morning, love,” Ilya murmured, his voice the first sound in the quiet world. He didn't wait for a reply. He pressed a kiss to Shane's forehead, then began the day's rituals.

He rose and returned with a glass of water and a bowl of plain oatmeal sweetened with honey. He sat beside the nest, gathered Shane into his lap, and fed him. Each spoonful was offered with infinite patience. Shane would open his mouth obediently, swallow, then let his head loll back against Ilya's shoulder, his gaze distant. There was no resistance, no playful attempt to divert. Ilya praised him softly with every bite. “So good for me. Perfect. Keeping your strength for me.”

After, he ran a lukewarm bath, not for arousal, but for cleansing. He lifted Shane, carried him to the bathroom, and lowered him into the water. He washed him with tenderness, soaping his limbs, his back, the sweat from his hair. Shane submitted to it all, his body moving only as Ilya directed it, his purr a soft, continuous rumble of contentment. The heat scent was still there, rich and fertile, but it was layered now with the scent of Ilya's care, clean soap, warm skin, absolute control.

The submission was most absolute in the small things. As the day wore on in a slow blur of soft touches and murmured words, Ilya led him to the sink. He squeezed toothpaste onto a brush. “Open, solnyshko.”

Shane obeyed, his eyes sliding shut. Ilya brushed his teeth with the same meticulous care he’d used to wash him, guiding his head, checking his work. Shane stood perfectly still, his hands limp at his sides, trusting Ilya with the most basic act of self-care. It was an intimacy that dwarfed sex, this utter, unthinking surrender of autonomy. Ilya’s chest tightened with a ferocious, aching love. This was the trust he had nearly destroyed. This was what he had fought, killed, and schemed to protect.

The sex, when it came, was different. It was not a frenzied claiming, but a slow, deep affirmation. Ilya laid him on his back in the sun-dappled nest and entered him with a sigh that was almost reverent. Shane’s body didn’t accept him as easily, the slick helped but he was sore and swollen, but still open and ready, his reactions soft whimpers and clinging hands rather than desperate pleas. Ilya moved with a languid, rolling rhythm, his eyes never leaving Shane’s face, kissing the tears that seeped from the corners of his eyes, tears of overwhelm, of saturation, of perfect, helpless belonging.

He knotted him as the afternoon light turned golden, the swell a familiar, anchoring pressure. As they lay locked together, Ilya scented him again, his nose tracing the line of his jaw, his throat, his bonding mark. The scent was now a perfect trilogy: the omega’s heat, the alpha’s claim, and the new, quiet note of *peace*. They didn’t need to hide anymore, they could be out in the open with millions in support. Ilya would court Shane now, properly, with dates and be standing together at any function they’d attend.

As dusk bled into night, Ilya held him, wrapped in a blanket on the porch swing, watching the first stars over the lake. Shane was asleep, or close to it, his breathing even against Ilya’s neck. Ilya pressed his lips to his hair.

The creak of the porch swing was a slow, familiar metronome in the dark. The lake was a black mirror below, reflecting a scatter of stars. Shane had gone boneless against him, his breathing deepening into the soft, rhythmic pattern of sleep, one hand fisted loosely in Ilya’s shirt. The profound bliss of the third day had settled into this perfect stillness.

As he always did, Ilya's head dipped. His nose found its home in the soft hair at Shane's temple. He breathed in, grounding himself in their shared scent that permeated in Shane's very pores.

The first layer was as familiar as his own heartbeat: honeysuckle and clear, cold mountain air, Shane's essential self as always. Woven through it, the rich, sweet residue of his heat, and the dark, anchoring spice of his own alpha claim, of *them*. It was the scent of peace earned. He drew it in, a slow, satisfied breath.

But as he exhaled and drew in again, deeper, more deliberately, something... halted him.

It was there, beneath the known tapestry. Not a scent he knew, but a scent his blood *recognized*. Impossibly faint, a whisper against the symphony. Softer than anything he'd ever perceived from Shane. Warmer. It carried a subtle, milky-sweet note that made something deep in his hindbrain stir and lock into place with a silent, resonant click.

No. He was imagining it. He had to be. The intensity of the heat, the depth of his own longing, it was conjuring phantoms. He forced himself to be still, to not jolt and wake Shane. Carefully, he moved his nose, tracing a slow path down Shane's cheek to the pulse point on his neck. He inhaled there, where scent glands and bonding bite mingled.

The familiar notes were strong. But there, like the faintest harmonic under a primary chord, the softness persisted. A new, delicate thread in the weave.

His heart was a sudden, heavy drum against his ribs. A fierce, dizzying wave of possessive joy threatened to swamp him. *Mine. Ours*. The alpha in him wanted to roar it into the night, to mark the trees with it, to build a wall around the cottage a thousand feet high.

But the man beneath the instinct forced himself to stop. He had learned, painfully, what happened when certainty gave way to assumption. The fierce surge of triumph froze beneath a wave of cold restraint. What if he was wrong? What if this was nothing more than the lingering aftermath of Shane's heat, hormones still settling into place? To speak the thought aloud, to watch hope bloom in Shane's eyes only to tear it away days later, would be a wound Ilya refused to inflict. Some heartbreaks couldn't be fought with violence. They could only be prevented with patience.

With infinite care, he shifted his arm, letting his hand come to rest low on Shane's abdomen, over the soft cotton of his sleep pants. He bent his head, his lips brushing the fabric, and breathed in there.

The scent was unmistakable. Strongest here. That soft, warm, new note, intrinsically tied to Shane yet distinctly separate. It was the scent of potential. Of a deep change.

He remembered, distantly, reading it in one of the countless, dry medical articles he'd consumed: a bonded alpha, attuned to their mate's biochemical landscape, could sometimes detect the earliest shifts. He'd dismissed it as romantic pseudoscience. Now, his entire being was a testament to its truth.

The conflict raged in silence. Overwhelming pride pressed against the walls of his control. He wanted to wake Shane, to show him with touch and word what he believed his senses had found. The protectiveness that surged up was volcanic, all-consuming.

But layered over it all was the ghost of the syringe in the trash, the silent bond, the chemical stink of the warehouse. He had come so close to losing everything. This felt like a thread of spun glass offered by the universe, beautiful, miraculous, and terrifyingly easy to shatter.

He wouldn't speak. Not yet. He would be the silent sentinel for this secret too. He would let Shane sleep, let his body rest and stabilize. He would watch, and wait, and scent him again in the morning light to see if the delicate thread remained.

Gently, he pulled the blanket higher around Shane's shoulders. He resumed the slow rocking of the swing, his hand a warm, steady weight over that sacred space. The joy was a sunburst contained within his ribs, too bright to look at directly. The fear was a cold guardian at the gate. And beneath it all, thrumming in time with the lake's quiet sigh, was a hope so profound it felt like a new form of gravity, anchoring him to this moment, to this man in his arms, to a future that had quietly, in the dark, begun to bloom.

The first thing Ilya became aware of was the change in Shane's breathing. It was no longer the deep, heavy drag of heat-exhaustion, but something lighter, more present. The faint, pre-dawn glow from the window outlined the relaxed curve of his shoulder. Ilya waited, perfectly still.

Shane stirred. A soft, conscious sigh escaped him. He blinked, his eyes clearer, more focused than they'd been in days, finding Ilya's in the near-dark. A small, tired smile touched his lips. "Hey," he whispered, his voice raspy but recognizably his.

The sound was a gift. A return. "Hey, lapochka," Ilya murmured back, his chest tightening with a relief so profound it felt like pain.

Then, as naturally as breathing, he shifted closer. His face found the warm skin of Shane's throat, and he began. This was what he'd missed most during the storm of the heat: not the frantic claiming, but this deliberate, meditative togetherness that they shared. He nuzzled gently, then inhaled, a deep, drawing breath that filled his senses.

The tapestry was richer this morning. The sharp, sweet peak of the heat had mellowed into a warm, satisfied hum. Shane's usual soft scent of honeysuckle was reasserting itself. And there, woven through it, stronger now, undeniable, was the new thread. Softer than anything he'd ever smelled on Shane. A delicate, floral warmth, like the first bloom under spring sun, carrying that subtle, milky-sweet note that made his alpha instincts purr with primal certainty.

There. Stronger today. Real.

A fierce, silent joy lit him up from within. The possessive pride was a live wire in his veins. He wanted to catalog every shift, to track this new scent as it grew and changed. The thought of future heats: Shane, soft and pliant in his arms, this sacred scent deepening with each cycle, his belly growing large with their children, sent a thrill of anticipation through him that was both tender and fiercely possessive.

But alongside the joy, a quieter ache surfaced. He missed *this*- Shane, lucid and in his right frame of mind. He missed the easy back-and-forth, Shane's quirks, the shared silences that weren't drugged with need, the simple pleasure of watching him think. He longed to tell him about the call he'd scheduled with the league, to strategize, to see that clever mind work. He wanted to ask him what he felt, to hear his voice form whole sentences.

He couldn't. Not yet. To speak of the scent would be to make it a hope, and hopes could be crushed. His protectiveness, now a double-locked gate, demanded he guard this fragile secret a while longer. He would be the silent witness, the guardian of this possible future, just as he was the guardian of Shane's peace.

He pressed a soft kiss to the bonding mark. "How do you feel?" he asked, his voice a low rumble against Shane's skin.

"Tired," Shane admitted, leaning into the touch. "Sore. But... clear. It's over?"

"The peak is," Ilya said, gently correcting. He ran a hand down Shane's arm, feeling the residual warmth. "You will be tender for a day or two. Tired. Is normal." He made a decision. "Come. A shower. Then I will make you real food."

He helped Shane from the nest, supporting his weight, and led him to the bathroom. The shower was a quiet, practical affair. Ilya washed him with the same focused care as before, but now he took extra care of his mate, rinsing away the physical memory of the heat. Shane stood under the spray, his forehead resting against Ilya's collarbone, pliant and trusting.

Back in a fresh pair of soft pants and one of Ilya's sweaters, Shane sat at the sunlit kitchen table while Ilya scrambled eggs. He ate slowly, with more awareness, his gaze occasionally drifting to the lake outside. The normalcy of it was exquisite. Ilya watched him from the counter, his heart a vast, crowded thing, full of a roaring, secret joy, a ferocious protectiveness, a thread of longing for the easy partner he saw re-emerging, and beneath it all, a deep, settled excitement for the hidden journey they might have just begun.

For now, this was enough. The quiet morning, the food, the clear eyes. The secret, sweet scent in the air that belonged only to them. The talking could wait. The future would reveal itself. He had everything he needed right here.

The world came back to him in soft focus.

The first thing Shane noticed was the quiet. Not just the absence of sound, but a profound, deep-boned stillness that seemed to have settled into the very timbers of the cottage. For days, his reality had been a narrow, fever-bright tunnel of sensation. Ilya's hands, Ilya's mouth, the all-consuming need that left no room for anything else. Now, the tunnel walls had dissolved. He could hear the drip of residual rain from the pine boughs outside the window, the distant, hollow call of a loon on the lake, the soft rustle of the blanket as he shifted.

He felt... clean. Empty in the best way. The frantic, chemical drive was gone, leaving behind a body that was tender and pleasantly weary, and a mind that was startlingly, peacefully clear. He took a deep breath, and the air tasted of damp earth, cedar, and the faint, lingering woodsmoke from their last fire.

The second thing he noticed was Ilya.

Or rather, he noticed Ilya's hand. It was resting on the small of his back, a warm, solid weight through his t-shirt, as Ilya stood at the kitchen counter making coffee. It wasn't a possessive grip, just a point of contact, as if Ilya needed to be physically tethered to him even while performing a simple task. Shane smiled into his pillow.

It became a pattern, a new, gentle rhythm to their day. Every time Shane moved past him, Ilya's fingers would brush his hip, his shoulder, the back of his neck. When Shane sat at the table with a book, Ilya would reach over and absently smooth a stray piece of hair behind his ear, his touch lingering for a second before returning to his own laptop. If they walked the muddy trails around the lake, Ilya would tuck Shane firmly beneath his arm, his large hand splayed across his rib cage, holding him close against the chill that seeped from the damp forest.

"Getting clingy in your old age?" Shane teased softly as they picked their way over a gnarled root. He leaned into the hold, savoring it.

Ilya just hummed, noncommittal, and dipped his head to nuzzle briefly at Shane's temple, inhaling. He did that constantly now, a quiet, subconscious scenting at his neck, his hair, the curve of his shoulder. Shane assumed it was just relief. After the drama, the hospital, the

relentless stress, they were finally alone and safe. Ilya's instincts were probably just reassuring themselves that his mate was here, whole, and his.

Shane adored it. He had missed this version of Ilya almost as much as he'd missed the man himself during the isolating fog of the heat: the calm, hyper-observant partner whose attention was a tangible thing. Now, that attention was a soft, continuous blanket.

"You're cold," Ilya stated, stopping their walk. He was already shrugging out of his own thick, grey hoodie.

"I'm fine," Shane protested, but Ilya was bundling him into it anyway, the fabric swallowing him, warm from Ilya's body and saturated with his scent. Ilya then proceeded to fuss with the sleeves, rolling them up several times until Shane's hands were free, and tugged the hood up over his hair. "There."

It was utterly unnecessary. And perfect.

In the oversized hoodie, with Ilya's arm back around him, Shane finally saw the world again. He pointed out a red squirrel chattering indignantly at them from a hemlock branch. He stopped to watch a trio of deer pick their delicate way through the ferns farther down the slope, their coats dark and sleek from the rain. His mind, so long occupied with survival, strategy, and fear, was quiet enough to simply appreciate the damp green smell of the forest, the way the grey, cloud-diffused light softened every edge.

Every few minutes, Ilya's hand would leave his ribs just to adjust the hood that hadn't slipped, his fingers brushing Shane's jaw. Each touch whispered the same thing: *You are here. You are mine. I am here.*

Eventually, the path opened up to their narrow, weathered dock. The lake was a sheet of hammered lead, perfectly still, reflecting the moody sky. They sat at the end, shoulders pressed together, and let their legs dangle over the edge. The silence between them was a living thing, comfortable and deep.

It was Shane who spoke first, his voice quiet, blending with the lap of tiny waves against the pilings. “I don’t know what happens next.”

He felt Ilya’s attention sharpen, but his alpha remained still, waiting.

“With hockey,” Shane clarified. He wasn’t anxious. The realization was strange and peaceful. “The league... after Kent. I don’t know if they’ll suspend me. Or if they’ll find some clause to void my deal. Or if any other team would want...” He gestured vaguely, encompassing the media storm, the exposed secret, the chaos. “All of it.”

He leaned his head against Ilya’s shoulder. “A month ago, that thought would have felt like dying. Now it just feels like... a fact. It’s not the most important thing anymore.” He tilted his face to look up at Ilya. “What about you? Your contract’s up after next season. What then? Boston again? Free agency?”

He asked not with dread, but with genuine curiosity. The future was a blank page, not a prison.

Ilya was quiet for a long moment, his gaze on the distant shore. His thumb stroked over the back of Shane’s hand where it lay on the sun-bleached wood between them. “I do not know,” he said finally, his voice a low rumble. “I have some calls next week to see where I’ll be at the start of the season.”

Shane watched the water, a thought forming with such simple clarity it felt inevitable. “Wherever you go,” he said, the words casual, almost offhand, “if nobody wants me anymore... maybe I’d just go with you. Maybe I’d finally get to just be your partner for a while. If you want me to, I mean.”

The effect on Ilya was instantaneous and profound. Shane felt the sharp, ragged inhale that shuddered through the body beside him. The arm around his shoulders tightened almost convulsively, pulling him in so hard his breath hitched. Ilya buried his face in Shane’s hair, and for a long, suspended moment, he simply held on, his breathing uneven.

Shane waited, confused but accepting, stroking a hand over Ilya's thigh. He assumed it was the vulnerability of the admission, the offering of a future so completely intertwined.

When Ilya finally pulled back, his blue eyes were bright, his expression a complex map of emotions too deep to name. He didn't speak. Instead, he cradled Shane's face in his hands and kissed him, slow and deep and unbearably tender. It was a kiss that tasted of promise, and of a secret joy so immense it trembled on the edge of revelation.

He rested his forehead against Shane's, his eyes closed. "Moy," he whispered, the word a vow. "Wherever life takes us, we decide. Together. No more leagues. No more teams. Just us."

As they sat wrapped up in each other, watching the first gentle ripple of a breeze finally stir the lake's grey surface, Shane understood. The path ahead was unmapped. It was shrouded in the same soft grey as the afternoon. But for the first time since they were boys with skates and dreams, they were looking toward a horizon they would choose for themselves. And that was more than enough.

The rain was a soft, steady percussion on the roof, a sound that had woven itself into the fabric of their peace. Four days since the heat broke, and the cottage had settled into a rhythm so deeply ordinary it felt simply perfect. Ilya stood at the kitchen counter, slicing fruit for breakfast, his gaze drifting to the living room.

Shane was curled on the couch, a book open in his lap, a blanket pooled around his waist. The tightness that had lived in his shoulders since the finals was gone. His face, in profile, was relaxed, his lips slightly parted as he read. He'd slept through the night again, his dreams quiet. He ate with a returned appetite, they laughed at the stupid wildlife documentaries Shane put on, and smiled, really *smiled*, when Ilya kissed him for no reason at all. The sanctuary was complete.

Ilya's morning habits continued, a secret held in plain sight. As he passed the couch, he bent, pressing his lips to the crown of Shane's head. "Going to take my calls on the porch,

solnyshko,” he murmured. His nose lingered, inhaling. The foundational scent, honeysuckle, clear air was strong. And there, woven into it like the most delicate gold thread, was the other. Warmer. Delicate. A little stronger every day. His blood hummed with a certainty that was almost painful in its intensity. But he would wait. He would guard this fragile, burgeoning hope with silence until a test could turn it into fact.

Shane tilted his head back, accepting the kiss with a soft hum. “Don’t get wet.”

Outside, the world was a study in grey and green. The lake was mist-shrouded, the trees dripping. Ilya leaned against the porch rail, the damp chill a contrast to the warmth in his chest, and took the calls.

His agent, Misha, was first. “Boston is desperate. They’re talking legacy contract. They think this all blows over, that Shane goes back to his team, everything goes back to normal.”

Ilya watched a raindrop trace a path down a pine needle. “No.”

There was a pause. “No negotiation?”

“No interest.” The answer came easily, cleanly. Boston had been a great, but only because Shane now, the idea of asking Shane to leave Canada, to leave the fragile, hard-won stability of his parents’ support, the city that was his home, for the sake of a game, felt wrong. Hockey was not important enough. Not anymore.

Misha, who knew more than most, simply sighed. “Okay. I figured. Ottawa is next. They are... very serious.”

The call with the Ottawa Centaurs’ ownership was different. They weren’t just executives; they were builders, their voices brimming with a hungry ambition. The numbers they quoted were astronomical, but it was what came after that made Ilya still, his focus sharpening.

A captaincy. Not as a ceremonial title, but as the foundational pillar. A voice in the room when roster decisions were made. A hand in shaping the culture from the ground up. An invitation into hockey operations, a bridge to a future after the ice. And finally, the staggering carrot: a path to a majority stake. They didn't just want a star. They wanted a long term partner.

As they spoke, Ilya didn't see a jersey. He saw empty locker rooms waiting to be filled. He heard the echo of his own lonely, eighteen-year-old footsteps in a foreign hallway. He thought of a system that had nearly broken Shane, that had looked the other way until forced to see.

He could build something different. A culture where an omega, if they had real talent can go to be a member of a real team. A team where Shane could maybe walk in, anytime, and be met with respect, not scrutiny. He dreamed for years of them being together like that, to be part of the same team. It wasn't just a contract offer. It was a legacy. Shane and himself had been called generational players since before their drafts and this would maybe give them the chance to prove just how true that prediction was.

"We will send the formal terms," the lead owner said. "But the intent is here. We want you to help us build this team, Mr. Rozanov. We've watched how you've handled everything involving Mr. Hollander. We don't just want championships. We want to build the league people deserve. If he was ever interested in joining us too, we'd welcome him with open arms. As long as he's healthy..."

"I will consider it, and open the subject with him too." Ilya said, his voice even. "Very seriously."

He ended the call and stood in the quiet, the rain's patter the only sound. The future, which had felt like a narrow, uncertain path, had suddenly exploded into a vast, open plain. It was terrifying. It was exhilarating.

Behind him, the screen door hissed open. Shane stepped out, carrying two steaming mugs. He'd pulled on one of Ilya's hoodies over his t-shirt. He handed a mug over, his eyes searching Ilya's face.

"Everything okay?" he asked. "You look... thoughtful."

Ilya took the coffee, his fingers brushing Shane's. He looked at him, his mate, relaxed and whole, here in their home, and then out at the misty lake, toward a horizon that had just dramatically expanded.

He smiled, a soft, private thing. "Maybe, I think I found our next home." he said, wrapping his free arm around Shane's shoulders and pulling him close. He kissed his temple, breathing in that beloved, complex scent, now layered with a promise he alone knew. "I think our future just became... much bigger than I expected."

The rain had stopped, leaving the world outside the cottage washed clean and gleaming. The conversation about Ottawa from last night over dinner, still hummed in the air between them, a new, electrifying frequency beneath their quiet routine. Ilya had shared no details, only that loaded, promising "maybe." Shane, with the profound trust that still stole Ilya's breath, had simply nodded, kissed his cheek, and gone back to his book, content to let the future unfold in Ilya's time.

It was Shane who suggested it later, over a lunch of reheated soup. "We should have my parents over. Tomorrow. Before... before we have to think about anything else." His tone was casual, but Ilya felt the subtle pull of anxiety through the bond, the desire for normalcy, for a tether to the familiar before stepping into the unknown.

"Of course," Ilya agreed instantly.

The decision immediately changed the atmosphere in the cottage. The languid, syrupy peace of the last weeks would need to be interrupted to start to let the world in. Shane's analytical mind snapped into cleaning mode. He began moving through the rooms with a critical eye, his nose wrinkling.

"Oh, god," he muttered, stopping in the center of the living room. He took a deep breath, and a flush crept up his neck. "Ilya. It smells like... like a *brothel* in here."

Ilya, who had been perfectly content in the dense, intimate tapestry of their mingled scent took a few extra seconds to mentally translate the word and couldn't help but smirk. He leaned against the doorway, crossing his arms. "It smells like us," he corrected, his voice low. "It smells perfect in here. Of my mate being happy. Lets keep it like this until Pike and the dinosaur come visit. They might enjoy it." Every word was a possessive purr.

Shane shot him a look that was equal parts exasperation and affection. "It smells like we haven't opened a window since we moved in. My mother has the nose of a bloodhound. She'll take one step inside and know *exactly* what we've been doing. We need to air this place out. Now."

Ilya pushed off the wall and closed the distance between them. He caught Shane by the hips, pulling him close despite his half-hearted squirm. "Dont be so boring, Hollander. Her son got his heat while living with his Alpha. I'm pretty sure she knows exactly what we've been up to," he murmured, dipping his head to nuzzle at Shane's throat, inhaling deeply. The scent was perfect, layered, *his*. "Let everyone know. You are so thoroughly loved, solnyshko. There is no corner of this place that does not bear the mark of it."

Shane's resistance melted, his hands coming up to rest on Ilya's chest. "You're impossible," he sighed, but he was leaning into the touch.

"I am yours," Ilya corrected. He kissed him then, slow and deep, a promise against his mouth. When he pulled back, he smiled. "But we will open the windows. For you."

The rest of the day was spent in a flurry of domesticity. They threw open every window and door, letting the cool, pine-scented lake air sweep through the rooms. They changed the linens, laundered blankets, and wiped down surfaces. Shane moved with a focused, slightly embarrassed energy, while Ilya followed, his touches constant- a hand on Shane's back as they passed, a kiss planted on his shoulder as he folded laundry.

Each time Ilya's nose brushed Shane's skin- his neck as he reached for a high shelf, his wrist as he handed him a dish, he checked. The secret thread was still there, intertwined with the familiar notes, a little stronger each day.

As they stood together on the porch at dusk, watching the last of the sun gild the lake, the cottage smelled fresh behind them. But beneath the clean linen and lake air, the scent of *them* remained, indelible. Ilya wrapped his arms around Shane from behind, pulling him close against the evening chill.

“See?” he whispered into his hair. “Perfect.”

The next evening, the familiar crunch of gravel announced their arrival. Ilya felt the subtle shift in Shane beside him, a straightening of the spine, a conscious breath. He placed a steadying hand on the small of his back, just as he had in Montreal a lifetime ago, and felt Shane lean into it.

David’s handshake was firm, his eyes kind. Yuna’s hug for Shane was tight, her gaze already sweeping over him, missing nothing, the ease in his posture, the way he turned instinctively toward Ilya’s touch. Her sharp eyes then took in the cottage, the cleared air, the deliberate normalcy. She said nothing, but Ilya saw the understanding in her face.

Dinner was a warm, if subtly charged, affair. The conversation flowed easily enough, talk of the lake, the weather, a funny story from David’s work. But Ilya could feel the question hanging in the air, a specter at the table.

It was Yuna who finally gave it voice, as they cleared the main plates. Her tone was casual, but her eyes were on Shane. “I spoke with the team’s GM yesterday. They’re being... patient. But they need an indication, Shane, of your intentions. The league’s statement is holding, but silence is starting to breed new rumors. People are talking all over their socials that you be allowed to play.”

Shane, stacking dishes, went very still. The bond transmitted a flash of that old, icy anxiety, the pressure of a world trying to fit him back into a predetermined slot. He gave a small, stiff nod. “I know.”

Yuna's gaze flickered to Ilya, then back to her son. "And you, Ilya?" she asked, her voice softening imperceptibly. "What are your intentions? Are you going to resign with Boston?"

Ilya saw Shane's knuckles whiten on a plate. He stepped forward, his hand finding its familiar place on Shane's lower back. He could feel the slight tremor there.

"Our intentions," Ilya said, his voice calm and deliberate, filling the quiet kitchen, "are to decide together. On our timeline." He met Yuna's assessing look squarely. "There have been... developments. Opportunities. We are considering them."

He didn't look at Shane, but he felt the shock through the bond, followed by a wave of dizzying relief. Ilya had just publicly, to the two people whose opinion mattered most to Shane, shifted the axis. It was no longer **Shane's** problem to solve, but **theirs** to consider.

Yuna studied him for a long moment, then a slow, knowing smile touched her lips. She nodded, once. "Good."

The porch air was cool and clean, scented with wet pine and the distant, mineral tang of the lake. Inside, through the screen door, Ilya could hear the muffled sounds of Shane and David arguing good-naturedly about where to place the projector screen. He held the door open for Yuna, then let it sigh shut behind them, enclosing them in a pocket of quiet.

Shane had caught his eye as they stood, a silent question in the raise of his brow. Ilya had simply reached out and given his thigh a firm, reassuring squeeze under the table, a touch that said *trust me*. Their bond had pulsed with curiosity, but no anxiety. That in itself was a victory.

Yuna leaned against the railing, looking out at the dark water. She didn't ask why they were out here. She was a woman who understood the value of a private audience.

"The opportunity I mentioned," Ilya began, his voice low. "It is from Ottawa."

Yuna turned her head, her sharp eyes catching the faint light from the window. “The Centaurs? Are you sure you want to take it? I mean I love the idea but they’re not exactly in the best standing.”

He nodded. “Bottom 5 team, but is not just playing for them. They are not just offering a contract. They are offering a... a foundation. Captaincy. A voice in what players they bring on. A path to ownership later. They want me to help build the culture. From the ground up.”

For a long moment, Yuna was silent. He could see her mind working, analyzing the offer not just as a hockey deal, but as a life strategy. When she spoke, her voice held none of the confrontational edge from their past clash in her kitchen. This was pure, professional assessment.

“It’s brilliant,” she said finally, a note of genuine admiration in her tone. “For them, and for you. They get instant credibility and a face for the franchise. You get agency. Real influence. Players never get that this early in their careers. They just get traded.” She turned fully toward him, her arms crossing. “You would be closer to Montreal. To family. The media pressure there would be different, intense, but newer, less ingrained with old narratives about you. Or about Shane.” She paused, her gaze softening a fraction. “It is a place where you could both... start fresh. On your own terms.”

Ilya absorbed her points, each one landing with the weight of truth. She saw it clearly, the architecture of the opportunity. “The legal structures,” he said. “The partnership clauses, the eventual ownership stake. It is complex. Canadian law, league bylaws...”

“A minefield,” Yuna finished for him. “But a navigable one with the right team.”

Ilya met her eyes. “Would you work with Misha? My agent is excellent with negotiations, but you know the Canadian landscape I think. You know what protections Shane would need, by extension, what I would need to ensure stability.” He wasn’t asking the mother of his mate. He was asking Yuna Hollander, the formidable strategist. “I would value your counsel.”

Yuna looked at him, and in the dim light, he saw the last vestige of the old wariness dissolve, replaced by a glint of respect and something akin to partnership. She gave a slow, definitive nod. “Of course. Send me the term sheet. We’ll tear it apart and put it back together.” A faint, shrewd smile touched her lips. “I’ll make sure they build in clauses for family relocation, for

private security protocols, and for complete media autonomy. You'll have the final say on any narrative."

Relief, warm and solid, settled in Ilya's chest. It was one thing to imagine a future; it was another to have a skilled general agree to help map the campaign. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet," she said, her tone dry but not unkind. "The hard work is ahead." She glanced back toward the cottage, where the glow of the projector now flickered against the window. "Does he know?"

"About Ottawa? Not everything. Do you think he'll want us to live together? I mean, we've only ever had here when spending so long..." Ilya followed her gaze.

Yuna's intake of breath was soft, but he heard it. Her eyes found his, searching. He said nothing, just held her gaze, letting his own certainty show. After a moment, her expression shifted into something profoundly understanding, and she nodded once more, this time with a gravity that acknowledged the shared secret.

"I think he'd love it," she said quietly. "Let's go inside. The movie is starting, and my son gets fussy if his dessert melts."

Ilya followed her in. The living room was warm, lit by the blue glow of the film's opening credits. Shane was on the couch, a bowl of ice cream in hand, and he looked up as they entered. His eyes found Ilya's, a silent question answered by Ilya's small, reassuring nod and the hand that came to rest, once more, on his shoulder as he sat beside him.

As the movie played, Ilya's mind was no longer on the porch or the contract. It was here, in this room, with the weight of Shane against his side, the taste of shared dessert, and the quiet, capable presence of an ally across the room. The path forward was still forming, but for the first time, it felt like they had a full crew to help them sail.

The days after Yuna and David's visit slipped into a new kind of rhythm, one so deeply peaceful it felt like a held breath. The frantic energy of the heat, the strategic tension of the

calls, even the pleasant buzz of company, all of it had receded, leaving the cottage in a state of profound, sun-drenched calm. Ilya moved through it with a heart so full it threatened to crack his ribs.

His first observation, was Shane's phone. It was now on the kitchen counter, plugged in, its screen dark. The device that had once been a chain tethering Shane to the world's expectations now seemed forgotten. Shane didn't reach for it first thing in the morning. He didn't absently check it while coffee brewed. He'd gone this whole time without a single glance toward its silent presence.

Ilya would watch him, a fierce, tender pride swelling in his chest. This was the man he'd fought for through fire and darkness: not the little golden boy of NHL, not the media figure, but Shane, unplugged and present. It was a surrender to peace more telling than any words.

His second, secret observation was the scent. It was his constant, silent liturgy. Every morning, as Shane slept in, his face soft against the pillow, Ilya would breathe him in. The new thread, that soft, warm, floral note, was no longer a whisper. It had become a clear, steady harmony woven into the symphony of Shane. It was strongest in the quiet moments: when Shane dozed off on the couch in a patch of late afternoon sun, when Ilya held him from behind at the sink as they washed dishes together, their hands moving in warm, soapy water. Ilya was desperate to touch his stomach, wondering when Shane would finally notice that something was different.

The alpha in him wanted to roar with it, to spin Shane around and pour the certainty into his mouth with a kiss. But the man, the one who had learned the cost of unchecked possession, held it close to his chest. He would wait for his mate to feel how different things would be.

The domesticity became their entire world. Ilya, who had once expressed care through surveillance and control, now did it through scrambled eggs and chopped fruit arranged carefully on a plate. He'd watch, barely breathing, as Shane ate every bite, his own happiness a bright, secret sun inside him.

"You're staring," Shane murmured one morning, a faint blush on his cheeks as he looked up from his breakfast.

“I am appreciating my beautiful mate,” Ilya corrected, his voice low. He reached out, not to grab, but to tuck a stray strand of hair behind Shane’s ear, his fingers lingering for a heartbeat on his jaw. He really hoped Shane kept his hair longer. His thumb swept once, gently, over the apple of Shane’s cheek. The urge to scent him right there was overwhelming. Instead, he leaned in and pressed a soft, closed-mouth kiss to his temple. “My beautiful mate, eating the breakfast I made for him.”

Shane’s blush deepened, but he leaned into the touch, a soft, contented sigh escaping him. He didn’t question the increased affection, the constant, grounding touches. He seemed to absorb them like sunlight, relaxing further into the safety of it.

They walked the lake path daily, Shane’s hand always in his. Ilya found himself constantly adjusting Shane’s clothing, smoothing his collar, re-tying the hood of his light sweater when the breeze picked up, his fingers brushing the warm skin of his throat. Each touch was a silent check-in, reaffirming.

One afternoon, while shelving groceries, Ilya paused. Shane was across the kitchen, humming softly to himself as he put away cans of soup. The slanting light caught the line of his throat, the relaxed slope of his shoulders. The scent in the room was of clean laundry, fresh pine from the open window, and them- deeply them, with that new, golden warmth at its heart. He didn’t think happiness like this would ever reach him.

A wave of such potent, dizzying joy hit Ilya that he had to brace a hand on the counter. It was all here. Everything he had destroyed himself to earn, and then rebuilt himself to deserve. The peace. The trust. The shared, quiet life. And now, this impossible, blossoming secret growing in the man he loved.

Shane turned, catching his expression. A soft, curious smile touched his lips. “What is it?”

Ilya crossed the space between them in two strides. He didn’t speak. He simply framed Shane’s face in his hands and kissed him, deep and slow and pouring every ounce of that wordless, grateful joy into it. When he finally pulled back, resting his forehead against Shane’s, his eyes were closed.

“Is nothing,” he whispered, his voice rough. “I’m just very, very happy right now.”

Shane's hands came up to curl around his wrists, holding him there. He didn't press for an explanation. He just accepted the kiss, the moment, the overwhelming wave of love. He still didn't know. He simply trusted.

Later, as they sat by the cold fireplace, Shane's head in his lap as Ilya read aloud, Ilya let his fingers card endlessly through Shane's soft hair. He breathed in the scent rising from him, now as familiar and essential as his own heartbeat. The phone on the counter remained dark. The world outside remained at bay.

The fourth week at the cottage had a different quality. The initial, profound peace had solidified into a sustainable rhythm, but a quiet sense of forward motion began to hum beneath it. One bright morning, while Ilya chopped wood in a steady, methodical rhythm outside, Shane stood in the living room, staring at the dark rectangle of his phone on the kitchen counter.

He'd avoided it like a live wire. Now, with a steadying breath that fogged in the cool air, he picked it up and powered it on.

The notifications bloomed. Over one hundred texts, dozens of emails, voicemail box full. His pulse kicked, but the old, icy dread didn't follow. He felt a strange detachment, as if observing the concerns of a past life.

He scrolled. The head coach, a couple of measured check-ins. The GM, a single line asking for a call "at my earliest convenience." A few teammates, Petey, Luc, a couple of others, with short, awkward messages of support that felt more like obligations. Nothing terrible. Nothing screaming with vitriol or ultimatums, but it was less than half the team.

The two voicemails from Commissioner Crowell's office were the heaviest. He deleted them without listening. Whatever they had to say, it could wait for a statement, drafted together.

A small, determined calm settled over him. He opened the group chat- Hayden, JJ, Rose, Scott, Kip. The bedrock of his world outside of Ilya. The last messages were from weeks ago, a chaotic mix of concern, jokes, and Rose's wild theories about elopement. He typed slowly, his thumbs sure.

SHANE- Hey everyone. I'm up at the cottage. Would everyone be able to come by in a few weeks?

The responses were almost instantaneous, a overlapping cascade of relief and characteristic noise.

JJ- I'm down- no cute girls around.

HAYD- Kiddos miss their uncle Shane.

Rose- YES!!! Slutty summer vacay at the lake!

A faint smile touched Shane's lips. Before he could second-guess it, he tapped the 'add member' icon and selected Ilya's contact. He sent a quick, private text to Ilya: Added you to the group chat. The wolves are howling. But behave yourself.

From the window, he saw Ilya pause mid-swing, set the axe down, and pull his own phone from his pocket. A moment later, Shane's phone buzzed.

IGR- Hello.

JJ- OH SHIT.

HAYD- Rozanov.

Rose- !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Scott- We're in. NY is miserable in this heat.

The bickering started almost immediately. Hayden, ever the protective alpha, made a pointed comment about Boston's defensive strategy last season. Ilya, leaning against the woodpile now and typing with dirty thumbs, fired back a critique of Montreal's power play units. It was barbed, familiar, and underneath it, Shane could sense a weird, grudging testing of boundaries- Hayden checking Ilya's intentions for his friend, Ilya asserting his permanent place.

Shane watched the rapid-fire texts for another minute, the old, fond exasperation warming his chest. Then, he simply set his phone down, screen-up on the counter, and walked away.

He drifted into the kitchen. The comfort of a concrete task called to him. Lunch. He opened the pantry. It was looking sparse. Cans of soup, some pasta, a few lonely packets of oatmeal. The fridge wasn't much better; eggs, butter, the last of the cheese. They'd need to either place a grocery order for delivery to the gate, or drive into town.

The decision felt pleasantly mundane. He pulled out eggs, butter, the cheese. They could manage a frittata with what was left. As he began cracking eggs into a bowl, the rhythmic sound a quiet counterpoint to the distant chop of Ilya's axe, he listened to the rise and fall of voices from the living room. Ilya had come inside, phone still in hand, a smirk playing on his lips as he engaged in whatever Hayden was texting.

"He is being stubborn- talks a big game for being the 15th best player in Montreal," Ilya said, not looking up from his screen as he leaned against the kitchen doorway.

"He's not wrong about it," Shane replied softly, whisking. "And be nicer to him. Hayden's a good player."

Ilya finally glanced over, his smirk softening into something more private as he watched Shane move calmly around the kitchen. The tension that had gripped Shane's shoulders when he'd picked up the phone was gone, replaced by a focused serenity.

"We will need groceries soon," Shane stated, pouring the egg mixture into a sizzling pan.

"Either we order, or we go out."

Ilya pushed off the doorframe and came to stand behind him, his chin hooking over Shane's shoulder to watch the eggs begin to set. His arms circled Shane's waist, his large hands splaying possessively over his abdomen. He breathed in deeply, the scent of cooking food, clean cotton, and that deepening, golden warmth that was now as essential to him as oxygen.

“We will go out,” Ilya murmured against his neck, his voice a low vibration. “Together. A little drive will be nice. We have been hibernating long enough.” It was a small step, a test of the outside world, but one they would take side-by-side. For now, there was lunch to make, friends to plan for, and the quiet, steadfast certainty that, pantry be damned, they had everything they needed right here.

The crunch of gravel under tires was a foreign sound after weeks of quiet. Ilya watched from the small loft window, his body tense as a coiled spring, as the caravan of familiar vehicles wound up the drive. Hayden’s SUV, with a cartoon character decal on the back window, led the way. JJ’s truck followed, then Scott’s sensible sedan with a baby seat visible through the glass. A while later came Rose’s little convertible brought up the rear, a splash of color against the green.

They stepped onto the porch together, a smile already breaking over Shane’s face. The sight loosened something tight in Ilya’s chest, even as his instincts prickled. Three other alphas. On his territory. Near his pregnant mate. The urge to stand between Shane and the world, was a physical ache. He breathed through it, fingers gripping the windowsill. *He needs them. He thrives with them.*

The cottage, recently aired out but still deeply imprinted with their scent, was soon filled with a warm, chaotic energy. Hayden emerged first, carefully extracting a sleeping Emma from her car seat before helping Jackie, who held their infant daughter, Amber, against her shoulder. Greetings were a flurry of hugs for Shane, exclamations over the lake, and the universal chatter of arrival.

His presence silent, watchful. Hayden’s gaze, sharp and assessing, met his immediately. Ilya gave a single, curt nod. It was not friendly yet, but it was an acknowledgment: a truce for today.

It was in the kitchen, as everyone milled with drinks, that the first knowing glances were exchanged. Kip, carrying a bag of snacks, paused as he passed Shane, his nostrils flaring

almost imperceptibly. His eyes widened, darting from Shane's oblivious, smiling face to Ilya's. Jackie, bouncing Amber gently, caught the look. Her gaze softened with sudden, profound understanding as she too inhaled the unique, layered scent that now clung to Shane, honeysuckle, cedar, and that softer, warmer, golden note beneath.

Her eyes found Ilya's, a question in them. He gave the barest shake of his head, his expression pleading and fierce in equal measure. *Not yet.* Jackie's lips pressed into a knowing line, and she nodded, turning her attention back to her daughter. The secret was safe, held within the circle of those who loved him.

The afternoon unfolded in an ease that relaxed Shane. JJ and Hayden set up a video game, their competitive barbs filling the living room. Scott and Kip orchestrated the baby logistics with practiced efficiency. Rose commandeered the porch for a work call, her voice a brisk counterpoint to the laughter inside.

And Ilya... Ilya found himself included. Not with open arms, but with a gradual, testing acceptance. When he quipped that Hayden's defensive strategy in the game was "provincial," Hayden fired back that at least his character wasn't dressed like a "villain from a cheap spy movie." It was teasing, barbed but without real malice. They were learning his language.

What they all noticed, the unspoken truth that smoothed every rough edge, was Shane. He moved among them with a lightness they hadn't ever seen. The shadows under his eyes were gone, replaced by a calm, steady warmth. He laughed freely, leaning into Ilya's side on the couch, his hand finding Ilya's knee as naturally as breathing.

The teasing went both ways. When Ilya, during a debate about league politics, took a jab a little too deep at Montreal's management, Shane didn't argue. He simply reached over, plucked the beer from Ilya's hand, and set it on the high mantelpiece.

"Hey," Ilya protested, mock-offended.

"You're cut off from controversy," Shane said, his voice mild but firm. "You get it back when you remember how to play nice with others."

The room erupted in laughter. JJ howled. “He’s got you on a leash, Rozanov!”

Ilya’s response was to slump dramatically against Shane, burying his grinning face in Shane’s shoulder. “My mate is cruel,” he lamented, his voice muffled. “See what I endure for love?”

It was a performance, and they all knew it. They saw the way Ilya’s arms wrapped around Shane, not to restrain, but to just be closer. They saw the way Shane’s fingers carded through Ilya’s hair, a silent pardon. Hayden, watching from his armchair, took a long sip of his drink. The rigid, protective set of his jaw had finally relaxed. It wasn’t approval, not yet. But it was a cease-fire. An observation that the man who had caused so much pain was now the clear source of his friend’s profound happiness.

As dusk fell and a movie played across the screen, Ilya sat on the floor, his back against the sofa where Shane was curled. On screen, explosions lit up the night. In the room, Amber gurgled softly in Ilya’s arms. Noah was asleep in a nest of blankets. Shane’s hand drifted down, his fingers gently stroking through Ilya’s hair.

Ilya leaned into the touch, his eyes closing. The scent of his mate, of their friends, of home and future, surrounded him. The chaos was temporary. The peace, he understood now, was not just in the solitude of the lake, but could be found here, in this careful, earned trust, in the laughter of friends, and in the secret, growing hope that slept between his hands every night.

The afternoon sun poured honey-gold over the dock, and the lake, finally calm after a breezy morning, mirrored the clear sky. The cottage’s wraparound deck and the grassy slope down to the water were a sprawl of comfortable chaos. Emma, fueled by what seemed like pure solar energy, was learning to walk and tried to chase a ball with JJ, while Scott supervised from a deck chair, Noah napping in a carrier on his chest. Hayden and Jackie were a quiet unit on the porch swing, Amber sleeping peacefully against Jackie’s shoulder.

Shane emerged from the cottage, carrying a tray of drinks. He’d changed after lunch into what he clearly considered ‘lake casual’: a pair of impeccably tailored, slim-fit chino shorts and a vintage band t-shirt that was somehow both faded and crisp but had belonged to Ilya a few years ago.

From her perch on the deck railing, Rose snorted. “Going for a paddle or a photoshoot for Cottage Life magazine?”

Ilya, who was meticulously coiling a length of rope nearby, didn’t look up. “I have given up,” he announced to the air, his tone one of profound, theatrical resignation. “I buy him the soft clothes. The big sweaters. He looks like a kitten in them. Perfect. But he has a... a compulsion.” He finally glanced at Rose, a flicker of conspiratorial understanding passing between them. “It is a sickness. But,” he sighed, casting a look at Shane, who was now being interrogated by Emma about the physics of skipping stones, “he is so pretty, we must forgive him for his boring.”

A genuine laugh burst from Rose. It was the first unguarded, non-sarcastic sound she’d made in Ilya’s presence. “That’s it exactly. He has that whole preppy college freshman thing going on. You should have seen the ‘ratty practice clothes’ he tried to pass off.”

“I heard that!” Shane called over, but he was smiling, a faint blush on his cheeks. He set the tray down and walked toward them, his focus already shifting to the kayaks pulled up on the shore. “Who’s up for a circuit before the light goes?”

The group slowly mobilized. JJ and Scott took the first double kayak, arguing amiably about steering. Rose claimed a single. As Shane bent to adjust the foot pegs in another, Ilya appeared at his elbow.

“The life jacket,” Ilya said, his voice low.

“Ilya, it’s calm as glass, and it’s like four feet deep here,” Shane protested, but he was already reaching for it.

“Indulge me,” Ilya said, not asking. He took the jacket and held it open, and Shane slid his arms in, submitting to the familiar ritual of Ilya tightening the straps, his fingers brushing Shane’s ribs, checking the fit with a few firm tugs. His touch was proprietary, but his eyes, when they met Shane’s, were soft. “One hour. No racing JJ.”

“Yes, alpha,” Shane murmured, the title a private tease that made Ilya’s lips quirk. He pressed a quick kiss to Shane’s lips before handing him a paddle.

From her kayak, Rose watched the exchange. The protectiveness wasn’t smothering; it was ingrained, a constant, low-grade current of care. She’d spent the morning waiting for it to curdle into control, but it never did. Shane didn’t chafe under it; he leaned into it, as naturally as leaning into the sun.

Later, when they swapped activities for a hike on the forest trail, the pattern held. Ilya positioned himself just behind Shane, a steadying hand appearing on the small of his back on the steeper inclines. When Shane, flushed and happy, started explaining a particular moss to Emma with the focused intensity of a botanist, Ilya quietly unscrewed the cap of a water bottle and handed it over, waiting until Shane drank before taking it back.

Hayden fell into step beside Ilya at one point, his gaze following his son, who was now holding Shane’s hand, listening raptly. “You know he’s not made of glass, right?” Hayden said, his voice low.

Ilya kept his eyes on Shane’s back. “I know exactly what he is made of,” he replied, his voice flat. “Steel. And nerve. And light.” He finally glanced at Hayden. “You would do the same for your mate.”

Hayden held his gaze for a long moment, then gave a single, conceding nod. He couldn’t argue with the results. Shane, ahead of them, was laughing at something Jackie said, his face turned up to the dappled sun, looking younger and freer than he had in years.

As the golden hour deepened, the group reconvened on the dock, legs dangling in the cool water. Shane sat between Ilya’s knees, leaning back against his chest. Ilya’s arms were looped loosely around his waist, his chin resting on Shane’s shoulder. Rose, sitting beside them with her feet in the water, nudged Shane with her toe.

“You know,” she said, her voice quieter now, “the outfit is still ridiculous. But the view out here almost makes up for it.”

Shane elbowed her gently, and Ilya's arms tightened around him in a silent, comfortable squeeze. The lake swallowed the last of the sun's fire, and the first stars began to prick through the deep blue. In the soft twilight, surrounded by the quiet chatter of his found family, the gentle lap of water, and the solid, unwavering safety of Ilya's embrace, Shane felt the last lingering knot of tension dissolve. It was a peace that didn't need to be hidden or defended. It was simply theirs.

Chapter End Notes

Well... I was nice. 😇

I gave them a peaceful cottage. A soft chapter. Domestic bliss. Communication. Healing. Good food. Naps. Zero public disasters.

Frankly, I'm a little suspicious of myself.

So now I have an important question...

Should I continue making healthy, emotionally stable decisions...

OR

Should I let the intrusive thoughts win and absolutely ruin everyone's emotional well-being again? 🙄

(No promises that your votes will influence me. They probably won't. The plot goblin is very loud.)

As always, thank you all so much for reading, commenting, screaming in the tags, and making posting every chapter so much fun. You all are the best. ❤️

See you next chapter... and maybe keep a therapist on standby. Just in case. 😊

Chapter 38: Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

dropping this one off while on the plane. I'm on a mini-moon for a week.
hope y'all love this chapter- I was nice to our boys lol.
thank you Lisa, Tony and B- y'all are amazing

The crunch of gravel under tires the next morning heralded the last arrival the next morning. Shane, helping Ilya wipe down the breakfast dishes, felt a familiar, thin thread of anxiety pull taut in his chest. Through the window, he saw the sleek rental car come to a stop, and two figures emerged: Marly, stretching his long limbs, and beside him, Svetlana.

His grip on the dish towel tightened. This was only the third time he'd really met her. The first had been a brief, formal introduction, then Christmas. She was lovely to everyone but it was overshadowed by the unspoken knowledge that hung in the air: Ilya had slept with her. She was beautiful, sharp as a honed blade, and she knew a version of Ilya that Shane never had, a younger, perhaps less shattered one. The old, insecure ghost of his pre-bond self whispered a warning.

He felt Ilya's presence solidify behind him, a warm, steady wall at his back. A large hand settled on his hip, not gripping, simply resting there. Ilya's nose brushed the shell of his ear. "Breathe, lyubimyy. She adores you already. She's been terrorizing me for weeks with texts demanding to know why I haven't brought you to visit."

The words soothed something raw inside him, but the old insecurity still lingered. "Do you... miss it?" Shane asked quietly. "I mean... I know you're a lot more experienced." His voice barely rose above a whisper as he stared at the floor, heat creeping into his cheeks.

Ilya immediately understood. He turned Shane gently by the shoulders until they were facing each other, waiting until those hesitant brown eyes finally lifted to meet his own. His blue gaze was unwavering, full of quiet certainty.

"That belonged to another lifetime," he said softly. "You are my life now. She knows that. I do not miss any of it, because I have everything I have ever wanted standing right in front of me."

Shane searched his face for even the smallest trace of hesitation and found none. Somewhere along the way, the man he'd fallen in love with had changed. The fiercely possessive alpha who had once tried to protect him through control and suspicion had become someone steadier, someone who no longer needed to prove love through ownership. His protectiveness hadn't disappeared. It had simply shifted into something quieter, built on trust instead of fear. Shane leaned forward without thinking, resting his forehead against Ilya's neck, and for the first time since they'd pulled into the driveway, every last knot of anxiety loosened from his chest.

They went out to the porch to greet them. Svetlana, in fashionable hiking clothes that still looked effortlessly chic, bypassed Ilya completely. She took Shane's face in her hands, her

dark eyes scanning his with an unnerving intensity. “Finally,” she said, her Russian accent not as thick as Ilya’s. “The man who tamed the wild beast.” She kissed him firmly on both cheeks before pulling back, a smirk playing on her lips. “We will make time to get to know each other, me and you, yes? You look tired. He is wearing you out?”

Shane blinked, a startled laugh escaping him. The bluntness was disarming, not hostile.

“Svetlana,” Ilya growled, but there was fondness in it.

She waved a dismissive hand at him. “Oh, hush. I am getting to know my new best friend.” Her gaze flickered over Shane again, and for a fraction of a second, it dipped to his midsection before snapping back to his face. Her expression didn’t change, but something in her eyes deepened with knowing. She linked her arm through Shane’s. “Come. You will make me tea and tell me all the secrets he is too stubborn to share. And I need to meet the others, yes?”

The day unfolded, and Shane’s anxiety slowly dissolved under the force of Svetlana’s particular brand of camaraderie. She was, as Ilya had warned, brutally honest. She roasted Ilya mercilessly at lunch, recounting embarrassing stories from their youth that had the whole table howling. But her attention always circled back to Shane, including him in the joke, asking his opinion, her teasing laced with a genuine, growing warmth.

Ilya watched it all, his initial watchfulness easing into a contented calm. He tried not to hover between them. He didn’t interject or try to control the narrative. He simply existed within the orbit of their gathering, his touches on Shane, a hand on his lower back as he passed, a refilled water glass placed silently before him, remaining constant and gentle. When Svetlana challenged Shane to a game of chess on the porch, Ilya just smiled, settling nearby with his phone between Marly and JJ, listening to their playful trash talk.

At one point, as Shane pondered a move, Svetlana leaned in and said, too low for the others to hear, “You look a lot better than the last time I saw you. So does Ilyushka” Shane froze, his heart stuttering. She glanced over at Ilya, who was watching them, his phone forgotten. A silent communication passed between the old friends. Svetlana’s smirk returned, softer now. She sat back. “It is a good look on you. Do not tell him I said so. His head is big enough.”

Later, as the group prepared dinner together, Shane found himself at the counter next to Ilya, chopping vegetables. The room was loud with overlapping conversations, Marly and JJ debating music, Rose and Svetlana comparing the winters in Montreal and Moscow. His parents had joined the group and were now getting to know Marly and Svetlana. He had a feeling that she and his mother would be ignoring the others soon. Ilya’s shoulder pressed against his, a solid point of contact in the happy chaos.

Shane nudged him with his elbow. “You’re being very... well-behaved.”

Ilya looked down at him, a soft, private smile on his face. He leaned close, his voice a warm rumble in Shane’s ear. “I have everything I need right here. Why would I need to behave badly?” He stole a piece of pepper from Shane’s cutting board. “She likes you. I knew she would.”

“She’s terrifying,” Shane whispered back, grinning.

“The best ones always are,” Ilya agreed, his gaze sweeping over their friends, his found family, before settling back on Shane with a look of such profound, settled happiness that it stole Shane’s breath. The ghost of past insecurities, of photos in the rain and investigative files, finally vanished. This was their present. This trust, this easy inclusion, was the future they were building, one healed piece at a time.

The evening settled into a deep, contented quiet after the dinner dishes were cleared. The group had migrated to the large sectional in the living room, a tangle of comfortable limbs and soft conversation. Emma was asleep on a pile of blankets, Amber dozed in Jackie’s arms, and the fire crackled low in the hearth. It was a picture of unscripted, easy belonging that Ilya would have once analyzed for threats, for hidden tensions. Now, he simply wanted to preserve it.

A soft, uncharacteristic impulse moved his hand. He pulled his good camera from its case and discreetly raised it.

His first capture was of David and Yuna. They sat on the loveseat, David’s arm around his wife’s shoulders, her head tilted toward him as they listened to Marly tell a story. The lines of perpetual concern on Yuna’s face were smoothed away in the firelight, replaced by a quiet warmth. Click. A silent thank you for their wary, hard-won ceasefire.

He shifted slightly. Shane was half-sprawled across his lap, idly tracing patterns on Ilya’s forearm with his finger, engrossed in Kip and Rose’s debate about the best local bakery. The golden light caught the faint smile on his profile, the absolute relaxation in his body. Ilya’s heart swelled, a physical ache of tenderness. He lifted the camera, framing Shane’s peaceful expression, the way his own arm curled possessively around Shane’s waist. Click. This was his center. His home.

“Okay, enough lurking, Rozanov,” Rose’s voice cut through the murmur, sharp but playful. “If you’re going to document, do it properly. Group picture.”

There was a chorus of good-natured groans and shuffling as everyone rearranged themselves on and around the large couch. Hayden pulled a sleeping Emma closer. Scott adjusted Noah in his carrier. Svetlana rolled her eyes but slid in next to Marly, a smirk on her face. Ilya handed his camera to JJ, who went to position it on the mantel.

“Everyone squeeze in! Shane, stop giving heart eyes to Ilya, it’s creepy,” JJ directed.

Ilya pulled Shane back fully into his lap, his arms locking around his middle, his chin hooking over Shane’s shoulder. Shane laughed, a real, unguarded sound, and leaned back into the solid comfort of his chest. On either side, their friends pressed close, a mosaic of smiles, sleepy children, and linked hands.

“On three! One... two... three!”

The camera flashed. JJ checked the screen. “Not bad. Now a funny one!”

They made faces and wild gestures. Ilya licked the side of Shane's face, making him try to aim a smack on his head. Svetlana and Rose each kissed a side of Marlys cheeks. Hayden and Scott posed as bodybuilders while Jackie and Kip laughed at them.

As the group dissolved back into their previous relaxed positions, Ilya scrolled through the few photos. David and Yuna, a unit. Shane, soft and content in his hold. The final, crowded image: a tangible record of a family he had never dared to imagine, much less believe he could be part of.

He looked down at the man in his arms, who was now sleepily arguing with Hayden about movie choices. This peace, this sprawling, complicated love, this home, was only possible because of his love for Shane. Not just by being who he was, but by having the courage to bridge the worlds, to trust Ilya enough to bring him into his circle. Shane had taken the fragmented pieces of Ilya's existence and woven them into this whole, vibrant tapestry.

Ilya tightened his hold, pressing a kiss into Shane's hair, breathing in the scent of him. He didn't need to say it aloud. The truth was there in the quiet click of a camera, in the images now saved, in the weight of his mate against his heart. Shane had made the impossible not just possible, but real. And for the first time in his life, Ilya Rozanov felt not like a solitary force, but like he truly, completely, belonged.

When Kip and Jackie stood up with the babies, Shane sat up and followed them, some silent omega invitation.

Shane followed the soft shuffle of Jackie's slippers down the hall, away from the low murmur of the movie and into the quiet, lamplit bedroom Scott and Kip had claimed. He sat on the edge of the bed as Kip went to change Noah and Jackie grabbed the offered blanket.

Jackie settled into the rocking chair by the window, unbuttoning her blouse with a practiced ease. Shane sat there, drawing his knees up. A moment later, Kip joined them, leaning against the headboard and adjusting his own shirt much like Jackie but he didn't bother to cover up, Noah's dark curls and fist by his face gave some privacy. Kip offered a tired, contented smile when he saw Shane looking over curiously.

"That," Kip said, nodding toward the living room, "went about a thousand times better than I think any of us expected."

"It did," Jackie agreed, her voice a soft hum as Amber latched on. She let her head fall back against the chair, her eyes closing for a second before finding Shane's. "He was... fun. I totally get the attraction, and not just because he looks hot."

Shane nodded and blushed. He knew that Ilya was extremely attractive. His gaze fixed on the baby in Jackie's arms. He was captivated by the tiny, determined movements, the perfect focus of her little face, the way Jackie's entire being seemed to soften into a shield of absolute attention. He'd been around the babies before, of course, but now he watched with a new, hungry curiosity that felt bone-deep.

"I was just wondering..." He searched for the right words. "What's it... feel like?" he asked quietly, the question leaving him before he could filter it. Jackie blinked. "Nursing?"

He nodded. "I know biologically how it works. I've read about it." He shrugged sheepishly. "I guess I just realized I have absolutely no idea what it actually feels like."

Jackie exchanged an amused look with Kip.

"That's... a really sweet question. I've never thought about how to explain it."

Kip looked down at Noah sleeping peacefully against him. "It's different for everyone," he began. "For me..." He smiled softly. "It's strangely calming."

"Calming?" Shane asked.

"Yeah. At first it was uncomfortable while we were both figuring it out. Babies don't exactly come with instruction manuals." He laughed. "But once Noah got the hang of it..."

He glanced down again, his entire expression melting.

"...it's hard to explain. It's like this overwhelming sense that you're exactly where you're supposed to be. It's bonding us together and I usually just take my time. Sometimes I just talk to him, sometimes we just look at each other."

Jackie nodded immediately. "That's probably one of the best ways to describe it."

She traced a finger over Emma's tiny hand.

"Sometimes it hurts, especially in the beginning. Sometimes they're little gremlins who bite."

"Oh, they absolutely bite," Kip muttered.

"No one prepares you for that." Jackie agreed dramatically.

Shane winced. "I feel like that's important information."

"It is. But most of the time..." Jackie smiled down at her daughter. "...it's so peaceful."

She looked up at Shane.

"They completely trust you. They look at you like you're their entire world. Your body not only made a whole other human, but its feeding them too. It's an incredible."

Kip nodded. "And it's not just feeding them."

"No?"

"It's..." He searched for the words. "Comfort."

Jackie picked up the thought seamlessly. "If Emma's scared, she'll calm down."

"If Noah gets overwhelmed, he settles."

"If they wake from a nightmare, they're okay again while being connected to you."

Shane listened quietly. "That sounds beautiful."

"Oh," Jackie said softly. "It is."

Kip smiled. "Other than your mate, you can't be closer to another human being."

Jackie laughed. "And you might think it's cute getting spit up on."

"Don't forget that part."

"I was trying to romanticize it."

"You can't romanticize projectile milk."

Shane laughed hard enough that Emma cracked one eye open before deciding everyone was still acceptable and promptly fell back asleep. "I guess I never really thought about it that way."

Jackie tilted her head. "What made you ask?"

Shane looked out toward the dark window.

"I don't know." He smiled to himself. "I've just been thinking a lot lately about... what could come next."

Jackie's expression softened. She looked down at Emma. "You both would be such good parents, Shane."

Kip nodded in agreement.

Shane was quiet for a long moment. "That sounds..." He searched for the right word.

"Incredible."

"It is," Jackie whispered.

"It's the most terrifying and natural thing all at once. One second, you're sure you have no idea what you're doing. The next, you just... know. Their need just rewires you. You become an answer."

Jackie smiled, stroking Amber's downy head. "It's like your heart suddenly exists outside your body, walking around in the world. You're never not aware of it. There is nothing else to compare the feeling. This," she gestured to the baby at her breast, "is the only thing in the universe right now. All the noise just stops."

Shane listened, absorbing their words. He found his hand resting lightly on his own lower stomach, a subconscious gesture he didn't notice, but Jackie did. Her eyes softened further.

"What about you two?" Kip asked, his tone gentle, nudging. "Any plans on the horizon? The cottage could use the pitter-patter of more tiny feet."

A warm blush crept up Shane's neck. He looked down, picking at a thread on the comforter. "Hopefully soon," he murmured. Then, with a slight shrug that tried to mask the weight of the admission, he added, "It's... it's up to Ilya, really. And what happens with... everything. The season, the league, all of it."

It was the honest, complicated truth. His future, their future, was a beautiful, tangled knot of personal longing and professional uncertainty. The desire was there, glowing brightly within him, but its timing was held in the balance of contracts and commissioners and the healing of a very public wound.

Jackie reached out with her free hand and found Shane's, giving it the same firm, reassuring squeeze. "It'll happen," she said, her voice sure. "When it's right. And we'll be right here."

The simplicity of her faith undid him a little. He squeezed her hand back, unable to speak around the sudden swell of emotion in his throat.

After a few more minutes of comfortable silence, Shane rose. He pressed a kiss to Jackie's temple, then Kip's, and slipped out of the room.

The living room was dark now, the movie over, the fire reduced to embers. Ilya was still on the loveseat they like to snuggle in.

He looked up as Shane approached. In the dim glow, his face was all quiet devotion. He didn't ask what they'd talked about. He simply opened his arms.

Shane sank into them, settling between Ilya's legs, his back against Ilya's chest. He felt Ilya's nose press into his hair, the deep, calming inhale that was as much a part of their language now as any word.

"Okay?" Ilya murmured against his skin.

Shane nodded, covering Ilya's hands where they lay linked over his stomach. "Yeah," he whispered, leaning his full weight back into the solid, unwavering safety of the man who held

him. "More than okay."

He tilted his head back, finding Ilya's lips for a soft, lingering kiss. When they parted, he kept his forehead resting against Ilya's, his eyes closed, and breathed the word into the space between them, a secret wish and a shared promise.

The fire had dwindled to a bed of pulsating crimson coals, painting the living room in shadows that danced and stretched. The movie's end credits had long since faded to black. On the deep, worn sofa, Shane was a dead weight across Ilya's chest, his breathing the slow, deep drag of absolute surrender. One hand was fisted loosely in Ilya's shirt, an anchor even in sleep.

Ilya waited, motionless, until he was sure that the house was quiet and Shane was in deep sleep. Then, with the infinite care, he shifted. He slid one arm beneath Shane's knees, the other supporting his back, and stood in a single, smooth motion. Shane's head lolled against his shoulder, a soft, trusting sigh warming the skin of Ilya's neck.

Ilya smiled to himself. This was becoming a habit of Shane's but he loved it so far. He carried him through the silent cottage, down the short hall to their bedroom. The lush bed that Shane liked welcomed them, still holding the day's warmth. Ilya laid him down, his movements so precise they barely stirred the air. He removed Shane's socks, his fingers gently massaging an arch, then drew the duvet up over him. Shane murmured, turning onto his side, seeking the pillow that smelled most of Ilya.

Instead of joining him immediately, Ilya stood by the bed. The soft glow from the ensuite light caught the elegant line of Shane's throat, the dark fan of his lashes against his cheek, the perfect, unguarded peace on his face. He'd seen the articles before and after the news about them broke out. Everyone could admit that Shane was beautiful. Even when posing as a beta, people didn't really call him handsome, that word was too small of a description. He'd always been seen as beautiful and Ilya couldn't find the words enough to describe how thankful he was that Shane wanted him back.

His phone was on the nightstand. He picked it up, silenced the shutter sound and disabled the flash, and framed the shot. He took one, then another, capturing the slope of a shoulder, the curve of a smile that lingered from a pleasant dream. This was not for anyone else. This was for the private archive of a man who had never believed he could have this

He set the phone aside and finally slid into bed, his body curving around Shane's. The habit began automatically, instinct deeper than thought. He buried his face in the space between Shane's shoulder blades, where his scent pooled, rich and complex. He breathed in, a long, meditative draw.

The tapestry was all there. Honeysuckle and the sweet, grounding note of omega. The dark, spicy signature of his own claim, woven in so thoroughly it was now a fundamental thread of Shane's essence. And there, beneath it all, the new note, softer, warmer, a delicate floral that he couldn't quite place yet. He followed it with his nose, tracing a path down Shane's spine, smiling at the slight goosebumps and shivers as he went lower.

His hand, as if pulled by a magnet, came to rest over Shane's lower abdomen. He spread his fingers wide, his palm a warm weight against the soft cotton of Shane's sleep pants. He held his breath, waiting, wishing with a ferocity that was a physical ache in his chest for some sign, some tangible proof beneath his hand. A curve, a firmness, anything to confirm what his soul and his senses already shrieked was true.

There was nothing. Just the familiar, warm flatness of Shane's stomach, the steady rise and fall of his breath. The difference, for now, existed only in the invisible realm of scent and potential.

He pressed a kiss to the knob of Shane's spine, his lips lingering. Soon, he promised the quiet, the secret, the man sleeping in his arms. He didn't speak the word aloud. He let it vibrate through their connection, a silent frequency of hope and unwavering patience. Then he tightened his embrace, fitting himself around Shane until not a sliver of space remained between them, and let the profound silence of the night, and the profound certainty in his heart, lull him toward sleep.

The kitchen in the early morning was bright and David had music playing in the background. Sunlight streamed through the windows, illuminating the dust motes dancing above the butcher block island. Outside, the lake was a placid mirror, and the only sounds were the distant, sleepy chirps of birds and the soft snores from the various bedrooms.

Ilya stood at the stove, his focus on the task that David had assigned him. While he was growing more comfortable with Yuna, Shane's father was different. He was nice- nicer from the very start but Ilya's history taught him that it could and probably would change at some point. He moved quietly with his mate's father, cracking eggs into a bowl with a single, sharp tap, whisking them into a frothy, uniform yellow. The scent of frying bacon and brewing coffee filled the air. It was nice.

David moved around him with the comfortable, unobtrusive rhythm of a man who knew his way around a kitchen. He was buttering toast, setting out plates, adding fruit randomly to a large fruit salad. His movements were slower, more deliberate. For a while, the only sounds were the sizzle of the pan, the scrape of a knife, and the gentle clink of ceramic.

"The lake is like glass this morning," David observed, not looking up from arranging a stack of toast on a platter. "Might be a good day for the kayaks."

"Da," Ilya agreed, his voice a low rumble. "Shane mentioned wanting to go out. I will make sure he wears life jacket." Ilya was trying to appear more relaxed than what he felt.

David smiled faintly, wiping his hands on a dish towel. He leaned back against the counter, watching Ilya for a moment. The Russian's large hands were surprisingly deft, gently folding shredded cheese into the eggs before they set.

“You take good care of him,” David said, his tone conversational, but the weight behind the words filled the sunny kitchen.

Ilya’s stirring hand stilled for just a second. He didn’t look up, his gaze fixed on the creamy curds forming in the pan. “Is no problem. I love your son,” he said, the words simple and starkly true.

“I know it is.” David pushed off the counter and came to stand nearer, picking up a spoon to help transfer the scrambled eggs to a serving dish. “Yuna and I... we see it. We’ve always seen how he felt about you, even when it was... complicated.” He paused, choosing his words with the same care Ilya was using on the food. “He’s not an easy person, our Shane. He feels things so deeply, he gets stuck in his own head. He has these routines, these worries he’ll never voice. It hasn’t always been easy for him.”

Ilya finally turned his head, meeting David’s gaze. The older man’s eyes were kind, etched with the same gentle patience Shane sometimes showed. “I know,” Ilya said. “The routines. The silence when he is thinking too much. The way he believes he must carry every weight alone.” He said it not as criticism, but as intimate knowledge, things he had learned to read. “Is not a burden. It is... him.”

David’s expression softened further, a deep warmth spreading through it. He reached out and placed a firm, steady hand on Ilya’s shoulder. “That’s what I’m trying to say. Thank you. For seeing him. For... for weathering the storms with him. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him this happy. This peaceful. Not as a boy, not as a teenager, not even when he won the Cup. It’s a different kind of happy. It’s in his bones now.”

The words swelled Ilya’s chest, a validation more precious than any trophy. He looked down, a muscle working in his jaw as he absorbed them. The bond hummed, a quiet, resonant chord. He thought of the secret scent, the golden thread of their future, and felt a surge of fierce, protective joy.

“He... he makes it easy,” Ilya said, his voice even rougher now. He looked back at David, his blue eyes clear and earnest. “To want to be better. To build a life with him. He is my home.” He took a slow breath, the decision to share this feeling as natural as the confession that had preceded it. “We are going to have it all. Not just here. In Ottawa.”

David’s eyebrows lifted, not in shock, but in keen interest. “Ottawa?”

“The Centaurs. They have made an offer. It is not just to play. They want my help to rebuild the team, reshape the culture... everything.” Ilya spoke slowly, feeling out the shape of this future aloud for the first time to someone other than Shane, Yuna or his agent. “We would buy a house there. Put down roots. It is a place where we can both... start fresh. On our terms.”

A slow, wondrous smile spread across David’s face. He didn’t ask about money or clauses. He heard the heart of it: choice, legacy, a foundation. “Ottawa,” he repeated, the word blooming with possibility. Then, a memory seemed to strike him, his smile turning wistful and amused. “You know... it’s funny, It’s home for us, we’ve spent more time in Montreal of course, in the recent years..”

He patted his pockets, finding his worn leather wallet. He opened it, not to the billfold, but to a small, plastic-sleeved compartment for photos. Behind a picture of Yuna and a young Shane was another, tucked away. He slid it out and handed it to Ilya.

It was a faded color photo, its edges softened from age. A boy of about ten grinned up at the camera, a gap where a front tooth was missing making his smile impossibly wide and infectious. He was swamped in a maroon and gold hockey jersey that draped past his shorts. In his hands, he held a crudely made sign on poster board that read, in careful block letters: GO CENTAURS! The blurry background was the unmistakable upper bowl of an NHL arena.

It was Shane. A Shane of pure joy, his whole being alight with the magic of the game.

Ilya's breath caught. He took the photo, holding it with a tenderness usually reserved for sacred objects. He stared, tracing the lines of that young, hopeful face with his eyes. This was a piece of Shane's history he had never seen, a ghost from a time before pressure, before secrets, before him. The love that swelled in his chest was so vast it was painful.

"His first NHL game, team's first game too." David said softly, his own gaze distant with the memory. "I drove us there. He talked about it for months. To him, it was everything. That night, he told me he was going to play in that league." David looked back at Ilya, his eyes shining. "And now you're going to help build that very team. Ask Yuna, she might have some pictures of him in his bedroom with all the posters."

He handed the photo back with reverence. "I had a plan to get the team in a better position and then having Shane join the team. It would be great to play together," Ilya confessed.

David nodded, carefully slipping the photo back into its sleeve. "I know you will." He clapped Ilya on the back this time, the gesture full of a father's unspoken blessing. "Now, let's get everyone up and eating. Food needs to be served before that bacon burns and we have a mutiny on our hands."

As the first sounds of stirring came from the hallway, Ilya turned back to the stove, the image of the young Shane's radiant face seared into his mind. It joined the other images he cherished- the sleeping man, the laughing mate, the secret hope. They were all part of the same beautiful, ongoing story. And he, Ilya Rozanov, who had once believed he was only capable of destruction, was now being entrusted with its next, most hopeful chapter.

The air was warm and and scented with pine as the group had migrated down to the shore after breakfast, a loose, laughing cluster ready to enjoy the water. Kayaks and paddles were lined up on the small, pebbled beach.

The tension began quietly, a familiar current beneath the idyllic surface. As Shane reached for a yellow kayak, Ilya's hand closed over his wrist, not hard, but firm enough to stop him.

"The life jacket, Hollander.," Ilya said, his voice low. It wasn't a suggestion.

Shane's easy smile tightened. He pulled his wrist free. "Rozanov, it's a lake. I've kayaked it a hundred times."

"And you will wear the jacket the hundred and first time," Ilya replied, his tone leaving no room for debate. He reached for the bright orange vest hanging on a hook.

A flush crept up Shane's neck. He could feel the attention of their friends shifting from their own preparations to the standoff on the shore. Hayden paused, a paddle in hand. Rose's eyebrows arched. It was the first crack in the perfect, peaceful facade of the weekend.

"I'm not a child," Shane said, his voice dropping, meant only for Ilya. "And I'm not made of glass. You don't need to bubble-wrap me."

Ilya's jaw clenched. The words were a direct hit to the core of his fear, the ghost of the syringe, the memory of Shane collapsing. His protectiveness, usually a quiet hum, roared into a defensive snarl. "It is not about being a child. It is about safety. Is simple precaution. Why do you question me?"

"Because it's my body!" Shane shot back, the volume rising. He took a step back, putting space between them. "I can take care of myself, I've been doing it for years without your help! I am right here. I am fine."

The accusation hung in the air, sharp and painful. Ilya flinched as if struck. The reference to their past stung. It was a low blow, and they both knew it. The group had gone utterly still, watching with a kind of horrified fascination. This was the underbelly of the devotion they'd witnessed, the raw edge where love scraped against control.

"That is not fair," Ilya growled, his own temper rising to meet Shane's. The accent thickened, roughening his words. "I am not that man anymore. This isn't me trying to control you. I'm just trying to make sure you're ok!"

"You're smothering me!" Shane yelled back, throwing his hands up. "Trust that I know my own limits! That I can paddle a goddamn kayak on a flat lake without drowning! Do you think I'm incompetent? Is that it?"

"I think things happen! I think you have been through hell and I will not let a stupid, preventable accident be the thing that- " He cut himself off, chest heaving, the rest of the sentence too terrible to voice.

They stood glaring at each other, two paces apart, breathing heavily. The silence from their friends was absolute.

Shane's eyes were bright with furious, unshed tears. He shook his head slowly, a look of profound disappointment settling over his features. It was worse than anger. "I can't do this right now," he said, his voice suddenly quiet and flat. He turned on his heel and strode away, not toward the cottage, but down the shoreline, away from all of them.

For three stunned seconds, no one moved. Then Ilya seemed to crumple in on himself, the fight draining out of him, replaced by a panic they had all seen before- the hollow, desperate

look from the arena tunnel months ago.

“Hollander- Shane, wait.” He was moving before he finished the sentence, abandoning the life jacket on the rocks and striding after him.

The group watched, mesmerized, as the scene unfolded down the beach. Ilya caught up quickly, reaching for Shane’s arm. “Shane, please. I am sorry. I did not mean-”

Shane shook him off without breaking his determined stride. “Don’t.”

“I am an idiot. A worried, overbearing idiot.” Ilya kept pace, his hands held out in placation. He tried to step in front of him, to force Shane to stop and look at him. Shane just sidestepped him, his gaze fixed on some distant point on the opposite shore.

“You’re not talking to me,” Ilya pleaded, a desperate edge in his voice. “Yell, hit me, do something but don’t ignore me. This is worse.”

“Good,” Shane bit out.

Finally, near a bend in the shoreline lined with tall reeds, Ilya managed to get fully in his path. He framed Shane’s face with his hands, his touch gentle now, his thumbs stroking his cheeks. “Please. Look at me. I am sorry. You are right. It is your body. Your choice. I just... I get so scared.” He leaned in, trying to capture Shane’s lips in a conciliatory kiss.

Shane turned his head away. “No.”

The rejection was a physical blow. Ilya froze, his hands still on Shane’s face, his own expression one of utter devastation. He searched Shane’s averted profile, the stubborn set of his jaw, and saw not hatred, but a boundary, firmly and painfully held.

Slowly, he dropped his hands. He took a full step back, giving Shane the space he had just fought for. He ran a hand through his hair, looking lost. “What do you need?” he asked, the question raw and simple.

Shane finally looked at him, his brown eyes still stormy but clear. “I need you to go back to the others and I’m going for a walk. Alone.”

It was a direct order. A punishment. And a test.

Ilya swallowed hard. The alpha in him rebelled at the thought of letting his upset mate walk off alone. The man who had promised to do better, to love better, nodded. “Okay,” he whispered. “Twenty minutes.”

He turned and walked back toward the group, his shoulders slumped, every line of his body broadcasting defeat. He didn’t look at any of them as he passed, stood on the dock and looked towards where Shane had walked off.

Back on the shore, Hayden let out a low whistle. Jackie hid a smile in Amber’s blanket. Rose met Svetlana’s eyes, a silent well, damn passing between them.

Shane had won. Not by yelling louder, but by refusing to be managed. And Ilya, the most stubborn force any of them had ever known, had surrendered.

Shane slammed the bedroom door, but he didn't know why he was so mad. Sure, Ilya was a bit high handed over something as simple as a life vest but it wasn't that big of a deal. The walk hadn't cleared his head and he was more upset that Ilya hadn't followed him.

Ilya stood frozen for a second in the hallway when the door slammed shut, the ghost of their shouted words still ringing in his ears. The panic that had been a simmering pot since Shane walked away now boiled over, acidic and sharp. He'd pushed too far. He'd become the thing he swore he wouldn't be, the controlling shadow from their past, just wearing a different mask now.

He turned the knob and slipped inside.

Shane stood with his back to him, shoulders rigid, staring out the window that faced the deep woods. The afternoon light cut across him, highlighting the tense line of his neck.

"Shane," Ilya began, his voice scraped raw.

"Don't." It was a flat, one-word wall.

Ilya moved closer, his steps silent on the floor. He could feel the anger vibrating off Shane, like a hot, shimmering aura. When he finally dared to step around and see his face, the sight punched the air from his lungs.

Shane was glowering, his brows drawn tight, his mouth a thin, stubborn line. His cheeks were flushed with righteous indignation. He looked... he looked like an affronted kitten. It was so utterly Shane, so far from genuine hatred and so deeply rooted in hurt feelings, that a completely inappropriate, hysterical bubble of laughter tried to rise in Ilya's throat. He bit down hard on the inside of his cheek, the sharp, coppery pain the only thing keeping a disastrous, fond grin from breaking across his face. *Bozhe moi*, he is adorable. And he will stab me if I laugh.

The internal struggle must have shown in his eyes, because Shane's glare intensified. "What?" he snapped.

"Nothing," Ilya choked out, swallowing the laugh and the blood. The humor died, replaced by a crushing wave of remorse. He moved forward slowly, and when he was closer, he wrapped his arms around Shane's hips, pressing their foreheads together. The familiar scent was there, but strained, tangled with the bitter notes of their argument.

"I am sorry," he whispered. "I am a stupid, frightened idiot. My fear is not your burden to carry. Your body is your own. Your choices are your own. And I know you are more than capable of taking care of yourself, I forget... I see the ghosts of what almost happened, and I try to build a cage to keep them out, but the cage is around you." The words tumbled out, inelegant and true. He just hoped that he was using the right words to express what he was

feeling. “I hate that I made you look at me with that... that disappointment. Please. Forgive this idiot. Punish me, but do not shut me out.”

He felt the rigid tension in Shane’s body begin to soften. A long, shuddering sigh escaped him. Then, Shane’s hands came up, not pushing him away, but settling hesitantly in his hair.

“You can’t do that,” Shane said, his voice quieter now, thick with spent emotion. “You can’t just... smother me because you’re scared. I’m not a thing on your shelf, Ilya. I need you to see me. The me that’s right here, not the one in your nightmares.”

“I see you, I really do, sweetheart.” Ilya vowed, tilting his head back to look up at him. The storm in Shane’s brown eyes was clearing, leaving behind a weary, vulnerable truth. “Just please never walk away from me like that again.”

Shane stared up at him, his fingers tightening slightly in Ilya’s hair. The last of the anger seemed to drain away, leaving behind a deep, communicative exhaustion, and something else. A flicker of that same desperate need Ilya felt, the need to reconnect, to overwrite the conflict with certainty. Ever since his heat had ended, Ilya had been treating him as if he was glass. This was the first time he’d raised his voice, first time he’d been demanding and “alpha” in weeks.

Wordlessly, Shane stepped back, pulling Ilya up with him. He turned and walked backward, drawing Ilya with him until his back met the cool glass of the window that faced the secluded woods, not the lake. A silent thank you flashed in Ilya’s mind; their friends were mercifully out of sight.

Then, Shane sank to his knees.

The sight was so profoundly shocking, so utterly submissive and deliberate, that Ilya’s brain short-circuited. Ilya didn’t have time to protest or ask if Shane really wanted to do it before Shane started working on him.

Shane’s hands made quick work of his shorts. He took him into his mouth with a focused, devastating intent that had Ilya’s head thudding back against the window frame with a soft thump. A guttural groan was torn from his throat. Shane’s technique had gotten so much better over the last year and it had Ilya going crazy after a few minutes. Ilya’s hands fisted Shane’s longer hair, his entire universe narrowing to the wet, consuming heat and the beautiful man willingly giving it.

He was close, so close, the tension coiling unbearably tight at the base of his spine. Then- a faint sound came from the front of the house, far away but jarring in this hyper-focused moment.

Possessiveness, sharper than any fear, lanced through him. No. This is not for anyone else to hear.

With a ragged gasp, he pulled Shane up by his shoulders, breaking the contact. Shane stumbled up, his lips swollen and wet, his eyes glazed with a dazed, needy confusion. “Ilya-?”

“Shh,” Ilya rasped, already moving. He didn’t give Shane a chance to process. He spun him around, away from the window, and walked him forcefully toward the bed. With frantic, efficient hands, he yanked Shane’s shorts and briefs down in one motion, then shoved his own pants completely off.

He bent Shane over the side of the mattress, making sure he covered as much as possible of Shane’s body with his own. He didn’t wait, didn’t prepare. He was slick enough from Shane’s mouth, and Shane was open, willing, his body pliant from arousal and emotional surrender. Ilya pushed into him in one deep, claiming thrust.

Shane cried out, a sound swallowed by the quilt. Ilya covered him, one arm banding across his chest, the other hand coming to cover Shane’s mouth to keep the sound down. He set a brutal, fast pace, a frantic, physical rewriting of the last hour. This was no tender reconnection. This was ownership, of belonging, a desperate, silent scream of Mine, you are mine, we are this, not that argument, this.

It was over quickly, a violent, shuddering release that felt less like pleasure and more like a vital system reboot. Ilya collapsed over him, spent, his face buried in the space between Shane’s shoulder blades. He breathed in, deep and starving.

The scent was different now. The bitterness of the fight was gone. In its place was the hot, clean smell of sex, of sweat, of them, recombined, reasserted, dominant. He had, as he always instinctively needed to, overwritten the discord with the fundamental truth of their union.

Slowly, he softened and slipped out. He turned Shane gently, pulling him up onto the bed and into his arms. Shane went willingly, boneless, his earlier fury and subsequent fervor dissolved into a state of shocky, satiated calm. Ilya held him close, raining soft, whispered kisses over his face, his eyelids, his cheeks, his temple.

“I am sorry,” he murmured again, the words now a vow against his skin. “I will try harder. I will learn. Was I too rough?”

Shane didn’t answer with words. He simply nuzzled closer, his breath evening out into the deep, trusting rhythm of sleep. Ilya held him, listening. The cottage was silent. The world, for now, was held at bay.

Ilya pulled away worried. “Shane, answer me. Are you ok? Did I hurt you?”

He saw Shane blush but not look at him. He cradled Shane’s face until he got the eye contact he needed. “Talk to me.”

“I thought I did something wrong during my heat. I mean you’ve treated me different.”

“Different? How sweetheart?”

A blush bloomed deeper on Shane’s face but Ilya didn’t let him hide away. “Um, when we’re together, you treat me different. Like I’ll break or something. I mean, what we’ve been doing is great and I love it, but I also miss the other stuff.”

Ilya sat there dumbfounded. Just when he thought he knew what Shane was thinking he came up with this.

“Forget it-” Shane started but Ilya cut him off.

“Remind me of this conversation when everyone leaves. In case you hadn’t noticed, you can get loud sometimes.”

“You’re such an asshole! I’m not loud!”

“Oh yes you are. And I love it. Next time I’ll record it and you can hear how-”

Shane stopped Ilya that time with a kiss.

Ilya held Shane, the frantic energy of their reconciliation settling into a warm, heavy calm. The memory of his old self, the one who would have dissected every micro-expression, logged the argument in a mental file, he knew that he’d have to come up with a way to take care of Shane without it being too noticeable. That was not who he was here, now, with Shane’s trust slowly re-knitting itself against his skin.

“I am sorry,” he whispered again, lips moving against Shane’s temple. “Not just for the life jacket. For making you feel... managed. I forget myself sometimes. I just love you so much, I can't have anything happen to you.”

Shane shifted, tilting his head back to look at him. His eyes were clear, the storm passed. “I know. And I’m sorry for the low blow. Bringing up the past like that. It wasn’t fair.”

“It was true,” Ilya conceded softly. “And now I have our whole lives to make it up to you though.” He kissed him, slow and sweet, a seal on the truce. “Come. A shower. Then we should go back out before Marly wins all their money.”

The shower was quick but needed. Ilya washed Shane’s back with a soft sponge, his touch reverent but not demanding. He smoothed shampoo through his hair, massaging his scalp until Shane hummed with contentment. They dried off and dressed in fresh clothes, the last remnants of tension already gone.

When they emerged, hand in hand, onto the sun-drenched porch, a chorus of exaggeratedly innocent whistles and coughs greeted them. Rose fanned herself dramatically. JJ pretended to check a non-existent watch.

“Twenty-three minutes for the walk,” Marly announced with a smirk. “Followed by fifty-seven minutes of... conflict resolution. Jackie wins the pot. I demand a recount based on artistic interpretation.”

Shane rolled his eyes, but a smile played on his lips. Ilya just squeezed his hand, grinning down at Shane, and led him down to the shore.

The afternoon unfolded in a lazy, golden haze. The kayaks were finally put to use. Ilya, Scott, and Kip took a double and a single, paddling out toward the deeper water. The rhythm of the paddles and the vast silence of the lake was peaceful.

After a while, Scott maneuvered his kayak closer to Ilya's. "So," he said, his voice casual but his eyes keen. "Things seem good. Really good."

"They are," Ilya said, his gaze instinctively tracking Shane's form on the distant dock, where he sat with Jackie and Rose, a baby on his lap.

Scott followed his look, then back to Ilya. He was quiet for a few paddle strokes. "He seems... really good. Healthy. Happy." He paused, then added, his tone dropping to something more confidential, "His scent's different, Ilya. Softer around the edges. Warmer. Kip noticed it the second they hugged."

Ilya's paddle stilled in the water. He met Scott's gaze. There was no judgment there, only a calm, alpha-to-alpha camaraderie. Scott wasn't asking. He was telling. He'd sensed the same delicate, blooming truth that had become Ilya's secret compass.

Ilya gave a single, slow nod, his throat tight. "Is still very new. Shane hasn't even noticed yet" he said, the words barely more than a breath.

Scott's face broke into a wide, understanding grin. He nodded back, a world of congratulations in the gesture. "Good," he said simply, giving Ilya a moment of private, dizzying joy.

"Um, when Kip was pregnant... did it change anything? I mean-"

"Are you blushing Rozanov?"

"Shut up old man. I'm asking you a question and if you keep being stupid I'll flip your boat over."

Scott just laughed again but calmed down. "Of course it was different. He had bad morning sickness and it just changed our relationship for a long time but we adjusted and I learned to listen to him and what he needed from me."

Ilya nodded. Looking over at the shore but not being able to see what was going on clearly. "Thank you, Hunter. Your experience in your old age is useful."

Back on shore, the group eventually all worked together for a makeshift barbecue. They grilled burgers and vegetables, everyone pitching in. They ate sitting on the weathered planks of the dock, legs dangling over the water, passing plates and sharing laughs. The conversation ebbed and flowed, eventually turning, as it always did with this group, to hockey.

On one side, Svetlana, Yuna, and Marly were locked in a rapid-fire, multilingual debate about the Eastern Conference's offseason moves, their voices a lively counterpoint to the lapping water.

On the other, Shane sat cross-legged, Emma asleep against his side, gently bouncing a fussy Amber on his knee while Jackie sorted bottles. Rose watched him, a soft smile on her face.

“You’re a natural, you know,” Rose said, nodding at the baby in his arms. “When are you going to make me an aunt? I need a tiny Hollander-Rozanov to corrupt.”

Shane’s cheeks flushed a deep, lovely pink. He looked down at Amber, then out at the lake where Ilya was now helping Kip haul the kayaks to the storage. “Hopefully soon,” he murmured, the words full of quiet yearning. “It’s... we’re talking about it. Figuring out the timing.”

Jackie reached over and squeezed his free hand, her smile knowing and encouraging.

Ilya, walking up the dock with Kip, caught the tail end of it. He saw Shane’s blush, the tender way he held the baby, the hopeful set of his shoulders. His heart clenched with a love so fierce it felt like gravity, pulling him inexorably toward his mate.

He dropped down next him, sinking down behind Shane on the dock and wrapping his arms around his waist, pulling him back against his chest. He nuzzled into Shane’s neck, not to scent for confirmation, the truth was a song in his blood now, but simply to breathe him in, to be home.

Shane leaned back into him with a soft sigh, his earlier frustration forgotten, replaced by this deep, settled contentment. The sun began its descent, painting the sky in streaks of orange and purple. Around them, their family talked and laughed, the scent of grilled food and lake water and future hanging in the warm air. Ilya held on, watching the light dance on the water, thinking of a young boy in a too-big Centaurs jersey, of a man learning to love without chains, and of the soft, secret promise growing between them. He sat there with his arms around his mate and joined the conversation. He couldn’t ask for a more perfect day.

The last car had disappeared down the gravel drive, with Shane and Ilya waving it off until they turned onto the main road. The cottage held the lingering echoes of laughter, the scents of their friends, it had been the perfect 4 days. The dishes were done, the extra linens washed. Now, in the deep, comfortable silence of the evening, they were curled together on the couch, Shane’s laptop balanced on Ilya’s thighs.

The screen glowed with listings. Stone and timber facades, modern glass boxes, sprawling yards backing onto wooded lots. They’d filtered for Ottawa, for privacy, for space.

“This one has a separate studio space over the garage,” Shane murmured, clicking through photos. “You could use it as a gym. Or a quiet place to watch game tape.”

“Mmm,” Ilya agreed, his chin resting on Shane’s shoulder. His attention was less on the square footage and more on the way Shane’s eyes scanned the details, the slight, unconscious smile that played on his lips as he imagined a life within those walls. This was the planning

he had once tried to control with trackers and security reports. Now, he was simply part of the dream.

Shane clicked to another listing, a modern farmhouse on a few acres. “Look at that kitchen. You could actually maneuver in there without elbowing me every time you turn around.”

“I like elbowing you,” Ilya said, but he was smiling. He nuzzled Shane’s neck, breathing in the now-familiar, layered scent. The golden thread was there, a constant, quiet hum of promise beneath the notes of clean cotton and Shane. It made every decision feel momentous, sacred.

He watched as Shane’s expression shifted, growing softer, more wistful, as he scrolled through photos of a family room with a huge stone fireplace. “My parents could visit. They’d have their own space. And... there’s room. For a nursery. Upstairs.”

The words hung in the air, delicate and hopeful. Ilya’s arm tightened around him. “Sounds perfect,” he echoed, his voice rough.

Shane leaned back against him, tilting his head to look up. His eyes were bright, not with heat, but with a profound, simple happiness. “You playing for a Canadian team... I know it’s a huge career decision. But just thinking about it, about us building a life there, in my hometown... it just feels right. It feels like coming home in a way I didn’t even know I needed.”

That was the moment it cemented for Ilya. Not the contract details, not the legacy offer, but this: the pure, unguarded light in Shane’s eyes at the thought of their shared future on this soil. He was giving Shane a homecoming. That was worth any price.

“It is right,” Ilya said, kissing his temple. “So, we choose. Our top five. We will send them to your mother. She will find the hidden flaws, the bad plumbing. Then we go see them.”

They worked together, debating merits, dismissing listings with too many neighbors or too little character. They settled on five: the farmhouse, a sleek lakefront property, a renovated century home close to a village, a timber-frame retreat deep in the woods, and a surprisingly cozy modern build with a wall of windows facing a private ravine. It was a list of possibilities, a map of their future.

Shane drafted the email to Yuna, attaching the links. ‘Mom, these are our favorites. Any initial thoughts? We were thinking of coming down next Thursday to see them, if you and Dad want to come with and be our second eyes.’

He hit send with a quiet, final click.

A knot of nervous tension, separate from the happy anticipation, began to coil in Ilya’s gut. The press conference to announce his signing with Ottawa was scheduled for the following week.

His plan, formed while he watched Shane sleep was a good one, but he would expect Shane to push back. He had already instructed his financial manager and a discreet real estate

attorney in Ottawa. His intention was not to simply contribute, but to purchase the house outright, in both of their names but he would pay for it. He knew, with a cold, certain clarity, that Shane would hate the idea. It would feel like a removal of agency, an echo of the old dynamics where Ilya made the decisions and Shane lived within them. Possession, not partnership, Shane's voice from the shore argument whispered in his memory.

But the alpha drive in him, the part forged in scarcity and honed by a lifetime of fighting for what was his, insisted. He wanted to give Shane this. He wanted there to be a wall, a deed, a piece of land that was irrevocably theirs, secured by him. It was a primal, his version of a nesting impulse, magnified a thousandfold by the secret life he knew was growing within Shane.

As Shane dozed off against him, lulled by the rhythm of his own heartbeat, Ilya carefully extracted his phone. He opened a new email, his body shielding the screen.

To: Anna Kovalenko
Re: Properties for Private Viewing (URGENT)

Anna,

Please expedite viewing on the five properties we discussed. All offers and negotiations are to be directed solely to my attorney. My partner will be with us but is not to be informed of the cost or anything to do with the financial discussions.

I will be in Ottawa Thursday. Have the files ready.

He hit send before he could second-guess it. The deed was done. He looked down at Shane, peaceful and trusting in the circle of his arms, completely unaware of the unilateral decision just set in motion. Ilya's heart ached with love and a thread of sharp fear. He was building their fortress, just as he'd promised.

There was an anticipatory buzz of a city on the cusp of something. The press conference was held in a sleek auditorium within the Centaurs' practice facility. Ilya stood in a green room, adjusting the cuffs of a perfectly tailored navy suit.

Ilya adjusted the cuff of his suit jacket, his reflection in the mirror a study in controlled composure. The navy suit was impeccable, the tie knotted with precision, but his pulse was a steady, heavy drum against his ribs.

The door opened, and Shane stepped in, followed by David and Yuna Hollander.

The sight stole the air from Ilya's lungs. Shane looked effortlessly sharp in a grey suit, a small, reassuring smile on his lips. But it was the presence of his parents that resonated deep in Ilya's chest, a vibration of disbelief and gratitude. Yuna came over and brushed away something on his shoulder and touched his tie, giving him an approving once-over. David clapped a warm hand on his shoulder.

His eyes kept drifting to the small monitor showing the auditorium filling up. And there, in the first row, but hidden behind screens flanking Shane, were David and Yuna Hollander.

The sight of them, choosing to be here, for him, sent a wave of something so profound through his chest it momentarily stole his breath. This was not a game. This was the unveiling of a plan that would uproot their son's life. Yet they sat, Yuna in a sharp blazer, David with a supportive hand on Shane's shoulder, their presence a silent, formidable statement. It was an acceptance he had fought for through fire and darkness, and its quiet reality was almost overwhelming.

"Ready, Mr. Rozanov?" a team executive asked, beaming.

Ilya nodded, his game face settling into place, confident, focused, unreadable. "Ready."

The walk to the dais was a blur of flashes. He took his seat between the team's General Manager, a sharp-eyed woman named Claire Thibodeau, and the owner, a jovial but shrewd man named Robert Fortin and his new head coach, Brandon Wiebe. Shane's gaze found his immediately, a steady anchor in the storm of light and sound.

Claire Thibodeau spoke first, her voice clear and commanding. "Today isn't just about signing a world-class player. It's about embracing a world-class mind. Ilya Rozanov represents a new chapter for the Ottawa Centaurs, one built on excellence, leadership, and a profound understanding of what it takes to build a winning culture from the foundation up."

Robert Fortin leaned into his microphone. "We're are so excited for Ilya to join us. His insights on personnel, on player development, on creating an environment where talent thrives... that's the real signature on this deal."

Coach Wiebe spoke after, his voice booming with genuine enthusiasm. "Today marks a pivotal moment in the history of the Ottawa Centaurs. We are not just signing a player; we are welcoming a leader, a competitor, and a visionary. Ilya Rozanov represents excellence on the ice, but more importantly, he represents the character and culture we are committed to building here. I know we've struggled the past few years but I believe in this team, and I've seen the talent and potential of my boys and I think Ilya will be one of the final pieces to take us to where we want to be."

Then it was his turn. The room hushed. Ilya leaned forward, his hands clasped on the table.

"Thank you," he began, his voice lower, cutting through the silence, a chorus of camera shutters, the flashbulbs reflecting off the rows of Centaurs logos behind him. He adjusted the microphone once, glanced briefly across the packed room of reporters, then looked toward the Centaurs jersey folded neatly beside him.

"I have never been good at speeches," he admitted, earning a ripple of laughter. "So I will keep this simple."

He rested one hand lightly on the table.

"For four years, I gave everything I had to the Boston Raiders. That organization helped make me the player I am today. I will always be grateful to my teammates, coaches, staff, and

especially the fans. They stood behind me through championships, injuries, and moments when I probably made their blood pressure much higher than necessary."

A few reporters chuckled.

"Leaving was not an easy decision."

He paused, choosing his words carefully.

"But sometimes your career asks one thing of you, and your life asks another. For the first time in a long time, those two things finally pointed me in the same direction."

His expression softened just enough to be noticeable.

"When I spoke with Ottawa's management, I saw an organization that wanted to win, but more importantly, one that understood who I am beyond hockey. They believed in me as a player and as a person. That mattered."

He looked down at the Centaurs jersey before continuing.

"I know there are questions about why now. Why Ottawa. Why leave after everything that has happened this year."

A faint smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.

"The answer is very simple."

"I'm happy. And everyone in this room knows why, really, but that is not the topic of today."

The room fell noticeably quieter.

"And when you are fortunate enough to find happiness, you stop making decisions out of fear. You make them because they bring you closer to the life you want to build."

He let the words settle before continuing.

"I am here because I believe this team can compete for the Stanley Cup. I believe in the players already in this room, the leadership here, and the direction this organization is taking. I intend to do everything I can to help bring another championship to this city."

His smile grew just slightly.

"I have spent my career trying to make life difficult for every team in Canada."

More laughter.

"I suppose it is time I try helping instead."

He reached for the jersey beside him, unfolding it carefully before holding it up for the cameras.

"To the fans, I know trust is earned. I promise you this."

"I will show up every day. I will wear this jersey with pride, and I will give everything I have."

He nodded once.

The questions began, a rapid-fire volley.

"Ilya, why Ottawa? You had more lucrative offers from established contenders."

"The most lucrative offer is the chance to build something that lasts. Money is temporary. A legacy is permanent, I want my name remembered. I believe in the vision Claire and Robert have outlined. I want to be a part of that building that."

"Your relationship with Shane Hollander has become very public. Did his situation influence your decision to come to a Canadian team?"

A subtle shift in the air. Ilya didn't flinch. "My personal life and my professional life are intertwined, as they are for anyone. My priority is my family's well-being and happiness. Being in Canada feels like a homecoming for us. That stability allows me to focus entirely on my commitment to this team."

Through it all, he was aware of the first row. Of Shane, listening intently, a proud, soft smile on his face. Of David, nodding along at points. Of Yuna, her analytical gaze assessing every word, every reaction, not as a critic now, but as a strategist for their shared side.

When the formal session ended and the scrum began, Ilya was surrounded. He handled it with a patient, firm grace, until a young reporter squeezed to the front.

"Mr. Rozanov! What's the first thing you're going to do in Ottawa? Any message for the fans?"

Ilya looked past the microphones, his eyes finding Shane's again. A genuine, unguarded smile broke through his professional demeanor. "The first thing?" he said, his voice softening. "I am going to go house-hunting with my family."

Later, escaping to a quiet hallway, he found them waiting. Shane stepped into his arms without a word, burying his face in Ilya's neck. Ilya held him tightly, breathing in the scent of him, honeysuckle, warmth, and that secret, precious promise.

David clapped a heavy hand on his back. "You were magnificent up there. Really." Yuna simply nodded, her eyes sharp but approving. "The messaging was perfect. You controlled the narrative and looked fantastic. Its all over TV.."

The fourth house was not a house. It was a home, already waiting for them.

They had seen the sleek lakefront property- too exposed, the renovated century home - charming but with wiring Yuna declared "a fire hazard", and the timber-frame renovated house-too isolated. Then they turned down a long, tree-lined driveway, and the world fell away.

The wrought-iron gates parted silently, revealing a long, tree-lined drive that curved through nearly two and a half acres of manicured grounds. By the time the house came into view, Shane had forgotten whatever he'd been about to say.

"Jesus..."

The estate looked less like a home and more like something lifted from the pages of a magazine. Built from pale stone that glowed softly beneath the afternoon sun, it sat proudly at the end of the drive with a broad staircase leading to towering double entry doors. A fountain burbled quietly in the circular drive, its gentle spray catching the light while mature maples framed the property with enough privacy that the outside world seemed to disappear.

"This is a house?" Shane breathed.

Ilya chuckled. "Apparently."

The moment they stepped inside, Shane instinctively slowed. The foyer rose two stories overhead, crowned by an enormous crystal chandelier that scattered light across polished marble floors. A sweeping curved staircase wrapped elegantly toward the second floor, its black wrought-iron railing contrasting against creamy stone and warm wood accents. Massive windows flooded the home with natural light, making even ten-foot-tall doors seem almost ordinary.

It was undeniably grand, yet somehow it didn't feel cold. The rich herringbone hardwood floors softened the expansiveness, and the walls, painted in warm ivory tones, reflected the sunlight until the entire home seemed to glow.

Every room flowed effortlessly into the next. The formal dining room looked as though it belonged in a stately manor, while the kitchen somehow managed to be even more impressive. A waterfall island of creamy stone dominated the center of the room, surrounded by custom cabinetry, professional-grade appliances hidden behind matching panels, and a butler's pantry tucked discreetly behind one wall. It was the kind of kitchen that begged to be filled with the smell of fresh bread, Sunday breakfasts, and too many people talking over one another.

The family room overlooked the backyard through walls of glass. Beyond them stretched an expansive stone terrace, perfectly kept lawns, and towering trees that wrapped around the property like a protective embrace. Despite the size of the estate, there wasn't another house in sight.

Shane wandered from room to room almost absently, running his fingertips along polished wood banisters and intricate crown molding, peeking into bedrooms that each seemed larger than his first apartment. Every guest suite had its own ensuite bathroom, enough space that friends and family could visit without ever feeling crowded.

Then they reached the primary suite.

It occupied an entire wing of the second floor.

The bedroom opened into a private sitting room anchored by a fireplace before leading into a dressing room large enough to rival an upscale boutique. Beyond that waited a spa-like bathroom clad in marble, complete with a soaking tub positioned beneath oversized windows, a massive walk-in shower, and heated stone floors.

Shane stood silently for several seconds.

"It feels..." he finally whispered.

"What?"

He looked around once more before smiling. "This could be home Ilya, our home. Do you love it too?"

Ilya didn't answer immediately.

Instead, he slipped his hand into Shane's.

"That's exactly what I was hoping you'd say. If you love it, I do too."

Shane continued to roam around with his parents, commenting on how nice the previous owners were able to blend traditional and modern home features.

This was the moment. The fear of Shane's reaction was a cold knot in his stomach, but the alpha imperative to provide, to secure this sanctuary for his family, was a roar that drowned it out. He could not risk a bidding war. He could not risk losing this to a stranger. This was theirs.

He caught Anna's eye and gave a slight tilt of his head toward the formal dining room, away from the others. She excused herself from Yuna and followed him.

In the quiet, empty room, Ilya kept his voice low, his back to the doorway where he could still see Shane admiring the pantry. “This is the one,” he said, the words final.

Anna’s professional mask held, but her eyes gleamed. “It’s a highly desirable property. The sellers have multiple offers expected. We’ll need to move quickly and aggressively.”

Ilya didn’t blink. “Get it. Whatever the number is, go above it. All cash, no contingencies. Close as fast as legally possible.” He met her gaze, letting every ounce of his will show. “Discretion is paramount. The offer comes from my holdings. My fiancé is not to be involved in the financial discussions. He is to believe it is a joint process until the papers are signed.”

For a fleeting second, he saw a flicker in her eyes, perhaps recognition of the dynamic, perhaps simple professional understanding of a wealthy client’s peculiarities. She simply nodded. “I’ll draw up the offer immediately. We’ll present it tonight.”

“Good.”

He rejoined the group as Shane was coming back from a peek at the primary bathroom, his eyes alight. “Ilya, the tub is practically a swimming pool. And there’s a steam shower.”

Ilya slipped an arm around his waist, pulling him close. He pressed his nose to Shane’s temple, inhaling the scent of his excitement, his hope. “You like it,” he murmured, a statement.

“I love it,” Shane breathed, turning in his arms. “It feels... it feels like us. Like a place we could really live.”

The guilt was a sharp, quick sting, quickly buried under the avalanche of rightness. “Then it is ours,” Ilya said, and kissed him, pouring every promise into it.

As they drove away, Shane chatted happily with his parents in the back seat about room layouts and furniture, his hand resting on Ilya’s thigh. Ilya drove, one hand on the wheel, the other covering Shane’s. The secret of the offer hummed between them, a live wire only he could feel. He had secured the fortress for his mate, a gilded cage to protect his family.

Chapter 39: Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

Thank you all so much for your patience with this update! Thanks to Lisa, Anna, Antony and Bee- y'all are amazing. I was away and then needed a few days to get home, unpack, catch up on real life, and convince my brain that it was time to start writing again. But now I'm tanned, relaxed and back to our regularly scheduled program.

I missed these two while I was gone, so naturally I came back and gave you a chapter full of cutesy domestic bits for the most part.

I hope the wait was worth it. ❤️

Chapter Notes

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

The afternoon sun slanted through the cottage windows, painting warm rectangles on the floorboards. Ilya was at the kitchen table, scrolling through all the pictures that he'd taken and picking the ones to post, a smile playing on his lips. The ring of his phone was shrill in the quiet.

He answered, and his entire demeanor shifted into vibrant, focused energy. "Anna, good afternoon."

Shane, reading on the couch, watched as Ilya's face broke into a radiant grin. He listened, then let out a short, delighted laugh. "It is done? Officially? Otklicno!"

He shot a look at Shane, eyes blazing with triumph, and gave a thumbs-up. Shane felt an answering smile, but Ilya was already turning away, pacing toward the bedroom for privacy, his voice dropping to an excited, rapid-fire Russian. The happiness was palpable.

Shane's own phone buzzed, an unknown Ottawa number. The bubble of joy pricked. He glanced at the closed bedroom door, heard Ilya's enthusiasm, "Da, the sooner the better. When can we go in and sign the papers?" and slipped quietly onto the porch.

The lake air was cool. He answered. "Shane Hollander."

"Shane. Commissioner Crowell." The voice was smooth, polished, cold as a river stone. "I understand congratulations are in order. A fresh start in Ottawa. And I've heard that you two put in an offer for a rather... substantial real estate acquisition, I'm told. You're building quite the nest."

Inside, Ilya leaned against the bedroom doorframe. "The security system must be top tier, Anna. Invisible. Yes, before we move a single box." He listened, nodding. "The third bedroom on the east wing- the one with the morning light. That will be his office. He does not know it yet." A soft, private chuckle. "He will argue it is too big. I will win."

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"It's a big commitment," Crowell continued, his tone shifting to one of grave, confiding concern. "A lifetime. I've been reviewing some archival material lately. League events, All-Star weekends. The photographic record of your mate is... prolific. Tatiana Milo in Barcelona. That singer- what was her name?, after the awards in L.A. The constant speculation in every city. A man with that history of... appetite... it doesn't just vanish because he signs a mortgage."

On the porch, Shane said nothing. He watched a loon dive on the glassy lake, his grip tightening on the phone.

"He's a creature of obsession, Shane. I've heard rumors." Crowell pressed, his voice dropping to a near-whisper. "We both know that. He obsessed over you, and now he obsesses over this domestic project. But what is his *next* obsession? I worry that you're placing a tremendous amount of pressure on a relationship that's still relatively young. When he's on a road trip, surrounded by fresh admiration?" He paused, letting the image hang. "One photograph. One blurry shot of him leaving a club with someone who isn't you. That's all it will take. The narrative writes itself: 'See? We told you. The omega couldn't hold him. He went back to what he knew.' It wouldn't just be gossip, it would be an insult to you, Shane."

All your hard work, all of your accomplishments despite your nature will be gone, every standard you've tried to set, would be drowned out by the chorus saying you were naive. We can still save this. Imagine if we embraced this little mishap and you become a symbolic goal for the omega's of the world. If you carry on with Rozanov, you'd become a cautionary tale, not a pioneer."

Shane's breath fogged in the cool air. The old fear, the one that had whispered to him for years, *you are not enough*, stirred from where it had been buried.

"You have a window," Crowell said, his tone now almost kind, the manipulative knife twisting. "Before you have lasting consequences, before the world sees you as permanently bound to his narrative. You can still step back into your own story. A clean break. You could have a future defined by your own achievements, not forever shadowed by his past and his inevitable... regression."

Crowell paused for a few seconds as if deep in thought.

"You've always been one of the smartest players in this league, Shane. Don't make the mistake so many young omegas make. Don't confuse being needed with being loved."

"And the room next to the primary suite," Ilya was saying, his voice warm with a future dream. "We will leave it empty for now. Just paint it a soft color. Neutral. This will be Shane's project for the next few months so I want him to have a blank canvas to do whatever he'd like." He could see it. Christmases with Yuna criticizing his tree-topper. Summers with their friends spilling out onto the patio. Shane, curled in that sunroom, at peace. A real home.

The silence stretched on the line. Crowell mistook it for hesitation.

"Shane? Are you still there? Think about it. You're smart. You know the odds."

“I do know the odds, Commissioner,” Shane said, his voice calm, clear, and cutting through the chill. It wasn’t the angry, defensive tone Crowell might have expected. It was weary, final, and utterly certain. “I know the odds of a man changing every single one of his behaviors. I know the odds of someone confronting the worst parts of themselves and choosing, every single day, to be better. I’ve lived those odds.”

He turned his back to the lake, leaning against the porch post. “You have files, photographs. Headlines. I have a man who loves me and doesn’t ask for anything back, because he believed I deserved to know the worst of him before I chose him. We love each other, and I choose that. I chose Ilya..”

“Love is not a guarantee, Shane. Men like Rozanov love grand gestures. Houses, rings. Headlines. Those are easy. Ordinary faithfulness is harder ” Crowell interjected, a sharp edge returning to his voice.

“No, it’s not,” Shane agreed. “But you don’t know him or me if you think I’m taking this lightly. I know my worth, Crowell. I know my value to this league and I’m willing to bet that if I go public with this conversation, I would have the people’s support.”

He could almost hear Crowell’s frustration on the other end.

“You talk about my career being destroyed by a scandal,” Shane continued, his voice strengthening. “But what undermines it more? Standing beside a man who is actively, publicly trying to be better? Or running from him because the league’s commissioner is afraid of old gossip? You want me to preemptively punish him, and myself, for a sin he hasn’t committed, based on a man he isn’t anymore. That’s not protection. That’s perpetuating the very cycle we’re trying to break.”

“You’re making a sentimental mistake,” Crowell hissed, the facade crumbling.

“And you’re making a strategic one,” Shane replied. “You’re betting on his failure. I’m betting on him. We’ll see which of us is right. But that bet? It’s mine to make. Not yours. We’re done here.”

He ended the call. The fear Crowell had resurrected shivered, looked back towards the living room but Ilya must still be on his phone call. Shane took a deep, steady breath, the cool air filling his lungs. He let it out slowly, then he turned and went inside.

Ilya was back at the kitchen table a few minutes later, a big smile across his face.

He looked up as Shane entered, his blue eyes still sparkling with the sheer, undiluted joy of planning a future. “Sweetheart! Anna thinks we could move in two weeks.”

Shane leaned against the doorframe, taking in the scene. The contrast was absolute. The world might see Ilya Rozanov, the volatile star, the relentless predator. Shane saw the man he loved fervently, the one that didn’t make sense to love but they had made it anyways. Every fear Crowell had voiced shriveled in the face of this simple joy.

He was still on the phone but not with Anna, his free hand gesturing broadly.

“...and the flooring in the whole house must be warm. He cannot be cold in the winter.” Ilya’s voice was energetic and just sounded happy. He looked up and saw Shane. His expression softened from focused excitement to open affection. He covered the phone’s mic. “Come here, my love, tell Peter you want heated floors in your home. He is arguing about cost-per-square-foot. It is nonsense. Your feet will be warm.”

The last of the chill from Crowell’s call evaporated. This was the man Crowell claimed would grow bored. This was the “obsession” he warned about. Shane saw the truth with crystalline clarity: the world would always see the shadow of Ilya’s past. But Shane wouldn’t allow himself to dwell on their past mistakes.

“Heated floors sound perfect,” Shane said, his voice steady, a smile touching his lips.

Ilya's eyes lit up, as if Shane had granted him a great prize. He returned to his call, triumphant. "You hear? It is settled. His feet will be warm."

Shane moved to the sink, filling a glass with water and laughing. He listened as Ilya debated the merits of different kitchen faucets with the seriousness of a general planning a campaign. The fears Crowell had tried to sell—of infidelity, of regression, of public shame—seemed not just unlikely, but ludicrous. They belonged to a different story. Their story was here, in this room, written on a napkin in terrible handwriting, full of plans for warm feet and guest rooms for snoring friends.

Later, after the calls ended, Ilya pulled him onto the couch, his energy settling into a contented hum. He nuzzled into Shane's neck, a long, deep breath that was more comfort than scent-check. "Everything okay?" he murmured. "You were outside a long time."

Shane carded his fingers through Ilya's hair. "Just a call. Nothing important." It was the truth. Compared to the future unfolding in this room, Crowell's manipulation was background noise. "Tell me more about this garage loft for Marly. Does it have a lock to keep him out of your vodka?"

Ilya's laugh was a warm vibration against him. "I will install a fingerprint lock. His fingerprints will not be in the system."

They spent the evening like that, wrapped in a quiet optimism, the blueprints of their future feeling more real and solid than any attempt to undermine it.

The next morning, the cottage was steeped in sunlight and Ilya had turned on the radio to some rap song as they started to pack. The vibrant chaos of the past week had departed with their friends, leaving behind a resonant silence. It felt lived-in, beloved. A soft, patterned blanket was folded with care over the back of the armchair. Near the television remote, a single hair tie, Rose's, probably, was looped around a cabinet handle. The air itself held a subtle, layered fragrance: the faint, clean scent of JJ's cologne, the ghost of baby powder, the

echo of shared meals and woodsmoke. Shane moved through the rooms, a bittersweet ache in his chest. It had all gone so fast.

The crunch of gravel announced the cure for the quiet. David's truck pulled up, and he and Yuna emerged, ready to help them close up the house and get it ready for the cleaners to come and do a deep clean to get it ready for whenever they had time to escape again for a few days.

David gave Shane a brief, one-armed hug, then moved past him, his eyes already scanning. He headed outside, his path taking him around the perimeter, checking window latches, testing the cover on the boat lift, his hands instinctively finding the loose board on the top porch step that needed a nail. He vanished into the shed, the sounds of him organizing tools and making his small fixes.

Yuna pressed a kiss to Shane's cheek and set her bag on the table. She beelined for the kitchen, opening the refrigerator with a critical hum. "We'll take the unopened milk, the eggs. This cheese can stay for the cleaners." She began efficiently sorting, wiping shelves, her movements brisk and capable. She pulled open the pantry, checking dates on cans, consolidating boxes of pasta. "Your father fixed the dripping tap in the guest bath last visit," she stated, not asking. "I'll leave a list for the cleaning service about the oven."

Shane stood for a moment in the great room, watching his parents seamlessly reintegrate the space back into good order, back into waiting. The bittersweet feeling softened, replaced by a deep, grounding gratitude. This was his foundation. The week of chaotic love with his found family, now followed by the steady, practical love of his first family. And upstairs, still asleep, was the love that had fused his world together.

He watched them all working together with a smile, he couldn't have imagined his life going this way a few years ago and now everything was almost perfect. He stood and went to start a pitcher of iced tea for everyone. Summer was about over but they had so much more to look forward to.

Together, they moved from room to room, stripping linens, flipping mattresses, and reassembling beds with crisp, hospital corners. Ilya followed David's lead on the specific way the Hollanders liked things done, his attention to detail absolute. They found that they worked extremely well together comparing notes on their 'type A' partners, it was a world

away from the tense, scrutinized first meeting under terrible circumstances. It made Ilya feel like he was family, pulling his weight.

Meanwhile, Shane had vanished. Yuna found him an hour later in the sun-drenched living room, not packing, but on his laptop. His phone lay beside it, glowing with a different retailer's app. Dozens of browser tabs fanned across the screen: furniture makers, lighting studios, architectural salvage yards, rug galleries. He had floor plans of the Ottawa house pulled up, and was using a stylus to nervously sketch different sectional sofa configurations in the great room's blank space.

"The dimensions are just... awkward," he muttered to himself, zooming in. "A standard three-seater leaves too much dead space, but an L-shape might block the sightline to the fireplace."

"Shane," Yuna said, sitting beside him on the couch. She picked up his phone, scrolling through his open tabs: dining tables -oak vs. walnut, trestle vs. pedestal, pendant lights -glass, ceramic, woven, paint swatches with fifteen shades of off-white. "You've been researching all this?"

He ran a hand through his hair, looking genuinely stressed. "Yea, it's worse than reviewing game footage. At least with those, there's a clear objective. This?" He gestured at the screens. "This is a lot harder. And it has to be *right*. It's our first real home. Together. It has to be perfect."

Yuna's stern expression softened. She set the phone down. "You know, when your father and I bought our first house, I spent six weeks deciding between two couches. They were both beige. One had slightly tighter tufting on the cushions."

Shane's head snapped up. "That's not the same at all. I mean from what Ilya's told me, his home in Russia was miserable and the house in Boston came furnished. I want him to love our home."

The impassioned mini rant made Yuna smile, a real, warm one that reached her eyes. She saw herself in him, the same mind that needed to understand every variable, that believed deeply in the significance of details. "You're right," she conceded. "They were different. But the

point is, I don't think it really matters what the house looks like as long as you two are together. The home wasn't in the things we bought or anything to do with money."

Shane leaned back, some of the tension leaving his shoulders. "I just want him to love it. I want to walk in and for it to feel like... us."

"It will," she said, her voice gentle. "Because you'll both be there. And everything will be beautiful." She patted his knee. "Now, has Ilya expressed any strong opinions? Or is he leaving the setting up entirely to your brain?"

Shane groaned. "One. He has expressed exactly one opinion. On the entire house."

From the hallway, where he and David were maneuvering a rolled-up rug, Ilya's voice floated in, clear and matter-of-fact. "The bed. The bed is the only thing that truly matters."

David, grunting as they set the rug down, asked, "Oh yeah? I don't think this is a conversation we should be having right now."

Ilya appeared in the doorway, wiping his hands on his jeans, his face a mask of pure, unselfconscious seriousness. "It must be a custom four-poster. Not from a store. Hand-made. And it must be very, very sturdy. This is the most important piece."

Then, Shane's face flooded with a spectacular, crimson blush as the implication, the very specific, physical implication- of "sturdy" crashed over him. "*Ilya!*" he choked out.

David's eyes widened, then crinkled at the corners. A snort escaped him, then a full-bellied, roaring laugh that echoed through the cottage. He doubled over, bracing himself against the wall. "Sturdy! Oh, that's perfect!"

Yuna closed her eyes, pinching the bridge of her nose. "I am choosing," she announced to the ceiling, "to ignore this entire conversation. I am thinking about puppies and birds."

But Ilya was looking between them, genuinely perplexed by the reaction. He stepped fully into the room, his brow furrowed. “What is funny? This is a practical concern.”

This only made David laugh harder, tears leaking from his eyes. Shane buried his face in a couch cushion, his shoulders shaking with mortified laughter of his own.

Ilya crossed his arms, a faint, defensive pout on his lips. “I do not understand. We are discussing furniture priorities. I have stated mine.”

Yuna opened one eye to look at him, at her son laughing into a cushion, at her husband wheezing with joy by the door. The sound was not the careful, uneasy coexistence of before. It was full, unguarded, and real. A bubble of laughter escaped her own stern composure. She shook her head, giving up. “We get it, we get it, Ilya. We’ll... we’ll find you a good bed.”

The moment drifted by, the laughter softening into warm, shared smiles. Ilya, still slightly confused but pleased by the general happiness, offered a small shrug, kissed the tops of Shane’s head and went back to help David with the rug. Shane lifted his head, his face still pink, but his eyes were bright with affection and amusement. In the comfortable clutter of the half-packed cottage, surrounded by the people he loved most, the pressure of perfect paint swatches and sectional dimensions finally seemed to melt away.

The drive from the cottage to Shane’s Montreal house felt like crossing a bridge between two lives. The lingering pine scent in the car gradually gave way to the familiar urban hum of his neighborhood. Pulling into the driveway of the sleek, modern house felt surreal. This had been his sanctuary, his independent proof of success. Now, it was a waystation, full of memories waiting to be boxed.

“Okay,” Shane said, killing the engine and staring at the front door. “I made a packing list. We start with the non-essentials. Books, decor, the guest room linens. We’ll live lightly here for the next two weeks until we can get the keys.”

Ilya nodded with an indulging smile, his gaze scanning the front windows. “I will do the high shelves and the heavy things. I’m your servant.” He leaned against the console and placed a light kiss on Shane’s lips.

They fell into a rhythm, slowly going through his possessions and making piles of what to donate, what to pack, what they'd need to use for the next few weeks. Shane moved through the home, but a noticeable lag had entered his movements.

In his office, Shane sat on the floor surrounded by towers of books. He pulled a few off a shelf, dusted them, and placed them in a box. Then he stopped. He stared at the next stack, a collection of hockey biographies and coaching manuals, his hand resting on top of them. The titles blurred. A deep mental fog, thick and soft, had settled over his thoughts. He just needed a minute. The clock on his desk ticked. Five full minutes passed before he blinked, shook his head slightly, and reached for the next book, a faint frown on his face. *Just tired*, he reasoned. *It's been a busy summer.*

Ilya appeared in the doorway, two empty cardboard flats in his hands. He took in the scene: the single half-filled box, Shane's distant expression. "You are tired," he stated, his voice careful, not pushing.

"A little," Shane admitted, forcing a smile. "Just got lost in thought. Remembering how much I paid for some of these coaching guides."

Ilya didn't smile back. His eyes were doing that thing again, the hyper-attentive scan, lingering on Shane's face. He set the flats down and crossed the room, kneeling beside him. He didn't ask to help. He simply picked up a book, checked its condition, and placed it neatly in the box. His shoulder pressed against Shane's, a solid, warm point of contact. "Then maybe we take a break? There is no rush."

As he walked Shane towards the master bedroom, Ilya's head tilted almost imperceptibly toward Shane. He was breathing deeply, subtly. The scent coming off him was of paper, old ink, and honeysuckle. But beneath it, woven into the fabric of his sweat and skin from the effort, was that other note, the soft, warm, floral one that was quickly becoming his favorite. It was stronger today, or perhaps Ilya was just more desperate to confirm that everything was going well and that Shane would notice soon. It was there. A constant, quiet reminder that they were going to be a proper family soon, that Ilya would finally have a real family of his own.

Shane pushed himself up to grab one of the jogging pants he liked to sleep in from the higher shelf in the closet when he felt a slight wave of dizziness, causing him to sway a bit before Ilya caught him..

“Shane?” Ilya picked him up, carrying him to their bed.

“I’m fine,” Shane said, opening his eyes. “I guess I’m more tired than I thought. Or low blood sugar or something.” He waved Ilya off and tried to sit up. “I’m gonna grab some juice.”

Ilya pushed him down. “Let me get it, be right back.” Every instinct screamed at Ilya to tell him, to tell Shane that his heat had been successful, had been perfect. But he remembered the life jacket, the accusation of being managed. He forced himself to calm down and grabbed a ginger ale and a protein bar. *He is tired. It is normal. It is more than normal*, the possessive, hopeful part of his mind whispered.

He walked into the bedroom and tried not to hover but did insist that Shane eat the protein bar when he tried to refuse. They laid down, Shane cuddling up to Ilya. A few minutes later, he felt Shane fully relax and his breath deepen. He took advantage and slipped a hand down to place it on his lower belly, smiling when he thought of his child growing.

Later, as they sealed boxes labeled ‘STUDY - BOOKS,’ Shane leaned back against the wall, surveying their progress. A profound, physical exhaustion seeped into his bones, deeper than the ache of physical labor. It was a heavy, full-body weariness that made the idea of ordering dinner and laying down to watch a movie ideal.

“I think that’s enough for today,” he said, his voice lacking its usual conviction.

Ilya was at his side in an instant. “Yes. More than enough.” He didn’t suggest they go back to bed. He simply pulled Shane into his arms, not in passion, but in support, letting Shane’s weight lean against him. He buried his nose in Shane’s hair, inhaling that now-complex scent.

“We can order food,” Ilya murmured into his hair. “After we eat, I will run you a bath.”

Shane didn't argue. He simply nodded, his forehead resting against Ilya's shoulder. In the quiet, half-packed house, surrounded by the half filled boxes, he let himself be led. The fatigue was surprising to him since they had napped that afternoon. The dizziness must be just the stress of the past few days and the fact that Ilya sometimes wouldn't let him sleep until the middle of the night.

He didn't see the way Ilya's hand spread, large and possessive, over his lower back as they walked to the living room couch. He didn't see the look of awed, terrified certainty in Ilya's eyes as he called in their food order, his gaze never leaving Shane's tired form on the sofa.

For Shane, it was the end of a long day. For Ilya, it was almost a weird sort of pride that he was the cause of Shane being exhausted. After they ate, he kept his promise and had drawn them a bath. Shane had insisted that Ilya climb in with him and they laid together until the water cooled. When Ilya started kissing his neck and trailing his hand down. He stopped when he felt Shane stiffened slightly.

“I'm so sorry, Ilya.” He whispered with a blush. He couldn't suppress the yawn that escaped.

“Don't be sorry sweetheart, one night without will not kill me.” He picked up Shane and sat him down and proceeded to dry him off. He kissed Shane when he huffed. “Stop, let me take care of my mate. I fucked all the energy out of him so I must make amends.” Shane laughed at that and stood as Ilya dried him off and slipped on a pair of sleep pants before grabbing another towel and went to dry his hair.

The Montreal house was quiet, the only sounds the soft hum of the refrigerator and the distant, rhythmic sigh of Shane's breathing from the bedroom. He'd fallen asleep almost immediately after his bath and Ilya only held him for a few minutes to make sure he wouldn't wake up any time soon. Ilya stood in the dark living room, surrounded by half-packed boxes, his phone feeling heavy in his hand. The name on the screen PIKE was proof of how much

his world had changed. This was the alpha who had looked at him with pure, protective hatred on a sun-drenched deck. Now, he might be the only one who could understand the specific, clawing fear in Ilya's chest.

He swiped to call and moved to the enclosed balcony, shutting the door softly behind him. The night air was cool, carrying the faint sounds of the city.

It rang twice. "Rozanov." Hayden's voice was its usual flat, assessing tone. No greeting, but no immediate hostility either.

"He wants to go to the training camp," Ilya said, dispensing with any preamble. The words came out rushed, edged with a tension he couldn't hide. "We've just bought a house and I thought he'd want to focus on that and I didn't bring up plans for the season but...he wants to start before anything is settled." He paced the small balcony, like a caged animal. "He had a call with Crowell last week and I do not know whole conversation."

There was a pause on the line. Ilya could almost hear Pike's mind working, recalibrating. "He's going to want to play. It's what he does. It's in his blood."

"I know that, Pike," Ilya shot back, then forced himself to lower his voice, glancing at the bedroom window. "That is not what I am calling about. You have a nose, Hayden. You were at the cottage."

The silence this time was different. Thicker. When Hayden spoke again, his voice had dropped, lost its defensive edge for something more grave. "Yeah. I caught it. I think most of us noticed. It's faint, but it's there. I guess congratulations are in order."

The confirmation was a relief so profound it made Ilya's knees feel weak. He wasn't hallucinating. The scent was real, perceptible to another alpha who cared. "He does not know," Ilya whispered, the confession torn from him. "He thinks he is just tired from packing. He gets dizzy. He... he is my responsibility. And he wants to go into a room full of alphas, with cameras, with reporters hovering, while he is-" He cut himself off, running a hand over his face.

“While he’s in a vulnerable state,” Hayden finished for him, his tone shifting into something resembling understanding. “Look. I’ll be there. JJ, a few others I’ve noticed were still on Shane’s side, we’ll be there. We’ll run interference. We’ll keep the idiots and the media off him. He won’t take contact drills but it’s still Shane. He will want to fully participate.”

“How do I stop him from play, Pike?”

“Stop Hollander from playing? Yeah, that’s not happening until he knows that he’s pregnant. And even then, he’ll come right back when he’s given birth.” Hayden’s voice was blunt. “But you need to understand the bigger picture, Rozanov. This is him, even the bullshit that management is trying to pull, he’ll still play. I’ve been making calls. Feeling out the room, so to speak.”

Ilya went still. “And?”

“And it’s about what we thought. Maybe worse. Out of 23 teammates, we have 7 that would defend and respect Shane’s ability to play. The rest?” Hayden let out a short, humorless breath. “They’d see a liability. A distraction. A ‘character concern.’ They’d tolerate him if he was scoring fifty goals, but they wouldn’t protect him. And right now, he needs protection more than he needs a roster spot. I’ve heard some alpha’s on the team plan to go after him, no matter the status of your bond is.”

The numbers were a cold splash of reality. Ilya had known it would be bad, but hearing it quantified by someone like Hayden, made it horrifically real.

“He’ll notice the changes in his body soon, but he needs time,” Ilya said, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“It’s the only one that makes sense,” Hayden agreed. “You build your fortress there. We’ll handle the camp. It’s two days. He gets his fix, feels connected, and leaves on his own terms if he’s not happy. That’s what he needs right now.”

The tight coil of anxiety in Ilya’s chest began to loosen, just a fraction. He had an ally. He had a plan. “Thank you, Pike.”

“Don’t thank me. Just keep your head on straight. The obsessive, possessive shit? Channel it into something else. Shane can’t be smothered like that. He’ll bolt.”

It was the same warning as others had given him, just watered down. Possession versus devotion. Ilya looked through the glass door at the dark shape of his sleeping mate. “I will try. Thank you, Pike. You give much better advice than how you play.” he said with a smirk, hanging up before Pike hollered a response.

He ended the call and stood in the quiet dark for a long time. The city lights twinkled, indifferent. Inside, his world was contracting and expanding all at once- to the fragile, sleeping form in the next room, and to the few, chosen people who would now help him guard it. He was not alone. The realization was as foreign as it was solid. With a final, steadying breath, he went back inside, trying to enjoy some of the piece that would be ending soon when they would have to start spending some time away from each other..

The Ottawa arena on the first day of informal skates had Ilya’s body humming with a different frequency than any Ilya had ever known. In Boston, his arrival had been an event- a spectacle met with a mix of awe, wariness, and the heavy weight of immediate, championship-or-bust expectation. Here, as he shouldered his gear bag through the players’ entrance, the atmosphere was one of quiet, eager readiness.

He had kissed Shane early that morning and made the 2 hour drive to the arena, music blasting, glad to have had one of his own cars delivered to avoid driving one of Shane’s boring sensible SUVs.

A young defenseman, Dykstra if he remembered right. “Rozanov! Welcome to the team!” He called out, rushing over to him and walking together. Ilya knew he was a good player, just in an incohesive team. He’d faced him on the ice a few times and his checks were solid- having cracked a rib or two on Ilya and at least one of his teeth were fake on a count of him.

Ilya paused. “Glad to be here.” He continued walking, the other man wore a beatup hat and jeans with a button down shirt. He knew that the team had talent. He’d spent time with Shane that week going over old games and the older players history with other teams. Shane saw the same promise that Ilya did and with their new coach it could really be an improvement this year.

In the locker room, the vibe was relaxed. A few veterans nodded. “Rozanov. ‘Bout time,” grunted the veteran defenseman, a man Ilya had battled in the corners since rookie season. It was an acknowledgment, not a challenge. There were no sidelong glances, no whispered assessments of the ‘problem’ they’d acquired. He was simply a piece they’d been waiting for, finally clicking into place.

Head Coach Brandon Wiebe found him at his stall. No office summons, no dramatic speech. Just a firm handshake and a steady, evaluating look. “Ilya. Glad you’re here. We’ve got a lot of young guys who listen with their eyes. Show them what a pro looks like. On the ice, in the gym, in the community. The rest,” he shrugged, a faint smile touching his lips, “we’ll figure out together. Mistakes are expected. Just don’t make the same one twice.” It was stunning in its simplicity. No threats, no ultimatums.

Before he could even hit the ice, Harris Drover, the Director of Communications, introduced himself and intercepted him with a tablet and an easy smile. “Ilya, welcome! Quick question when you have a moment, no rush. Once you and Shane are settled in the new place, would you both be open to a low-key feature? Nothing invasive. Just introducing the new line up’ kind of thing. The fans would love to see Shane, if he’s comfortable. Think about it?”

The question was so casual, so seamlessly including Shane as a natural, welcomed part of his Ottawa life, that it momentarily short-circuited Ilya’s brain. In the past, any mention of his personal life was either tabloid fodder or a strategic liability to be managed. Here, it was an asset, a point of connection. He managed a nod. “I will discuss it with him.”

But the deepest sense of dislocation, the good kind came in the equipment room. Dale, the grizzled, perpetually grease-stained equipment manager, looked up from a skate holder and grinned. “There he is. Hollow’s at seven-eighths, right? And you like your sticks with a mid-kick, 85 flex, tape to the heel.” He handed Ilya a practice jersey and a box with his preferred hockey tape.

Ilya stood still. They knew. They had quietly, patiently gathered the intimate details of his preferences, the minutiae that made his tools an extension of his will. It was a new team saying, Welcome, glad you're here.

As he stepped onto the ice for the first time in Centaurs colors, the crisp scrape of his freshly sharpened blades was the only sound in his head. The nervous energy of the young players, the focused calm of the veterans, the vast, empty seats waiting to be filled, it all spread out before him.

For the first time in his career, the weight on his shoulders didn't feel like the burden of expectation. It felt like the solid, promising weight of a promise that he'd be integral to lifting his whole team up. He took a long, deep breath, the cold arena air filling his lungs, and pushed off, ready to work.

The first official practice with the Centaurs was less an evaluation and more a gauge to see how well they could sync up together naturally. Ilya had asked for the session to be filmed so he can study everyone individually, and for perhaps the first time in his career, felt no burning need to exert his dominance across it in bold, angry checks. He was excited to see where he could take his new team.

He was placed on a line with Zane Boodram, 'Bood' and Troy Barrett. Their first shift together was great- almost as synchronized as Marly, Harrison had been with him. Ilya didn't force the puck; he read Bood's subtle shoulder dip; he timed a curl into the slot just as Barrett engaged the defender. It was chemistry that just needed to be worked on a bit but it showed so much promise.

"Hey, man," Barrett grunted after a crisp passing drill connected for a tap-in goal, a grin splitting his face. "That felt great! I can't wait to see more."

Ilya retrieved the puck from the net, a faint smirk on his lips. "Yes, I think so. Some more time and I hope to take the team to the playoffs."

Boodram laughed, skating between them. "You really think we can get there, Roz? We're like the last team in the rankings."

Ilya thought for a minute, grabbing the water bottle from the bench and squirting some water through the helmet cage. “Yes, I am not a loser so that makes you all non-losers by extension. We need to work together to make that happen and whoever drags us down will have bag skating for the rest of the season.”

Around them, the younger players moved with a different energy. Luca Haas, a swift but raw winger, fumbled a saucer pass at the blue line, flubbing a controlled entry. A year ago, Ilya might have let a scornful silence do the criticizing. Now, he glided over as they reset.

“Haas,” he said, his voice low, carrying no farther than the young man’s ears. Haas flinched, then blushed, preparing for a lecture. “You are watching the puck, not your feet. Your edges are here,” Ilya tapped his own ankle with his stick, “but your eyes are there.” He pointed to the falling puck. “Trust your hands. Look where you are going, not at what you already have.”

Haas blinked, stunned. “Uh. Yeah. Okay. Thanks, Captain.”

The word ‘Captain’ still sent a strange jolt through him, but he gave a curt nod and skated away. He offered Comeau a tip on closing his hand quicker on move, and praised Mitty for a very creative save when he aimed the puck to the right corner. The advice was technical, precise, and devoid of the personal venom that had once been his normal. By the midway point, the tension in the younger players’ shoulders had begun to ease, replaced by a focused determination. The few nerves that were still there by the end of practice would be eased even further soon and he was feeling very positive about his new team.

Yet, beneath the focus, half his mind was still on his mate. During water breaks, leaning against the boards with his bottle, his hand would drift to his phone, tucked in a pocket of his gear bag. He’d wake the screen, see no missed calls, no urgent texts from the security feed, and his shoulders would drop a fraction. *He is safe. He is with his mother, packing books.* Pike will look out for him when he joins his team the next day. It was the logical frame of mind, but the instinct, the deep, wiring that had been forged in his very soul, was a live wire. Every quiet moment on the ice was a moment his mind wanted to check on Shane.

During one such break, Barrett skated up, taking a long pull from his bottle. “So, the big move. How’s Hollander handling everything? My mate nearly murdered me when we moved. Still claims I lost his grandmother’s vase.”

Ilya didn't stiffen. Instead, without even realizing it, his expression softened, the hard lines of his concentration melting away. He stared out across the empty ice, seeing a different scene. "He is packing up his house in Montreal and going to the training starting tomorrow. We will be apart for a few days then we will have four days together." He shook his head, a genuine, affectionate exasperation in the gesture. "I miss him already."

Barrett and Boodram, who had drifted over, exchanged a wide-eyed glance over Ilya's head. This was Ilya Rozanov. The human highlight reel, the Russian Menace, the man whose very name was a synonym for intensity. Hearing him talking about his mate so affectionately was a surprise, more so that it was Shane Hollander- undoubtedly the best player in the league. How they managed to keep it a secret for so long was wild to imagine.

Boodram's lips twitched. "Sounds hard, huh? But man. Hollander? How'd you manage to get him?"

"He's hot, yes. But I am hot also," Ilya said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "No one but me is good enough for him." he said with a cocky grin as they went back to center ice.

The whistle blew, calling them back for the next drill. As they pushed off, Barrett leaned toward Boodram, his voice a whisper. "He's so gone, man."

"Totally," Boodram whispered back, a grin spreading across his face.

Ilya, already five strides ahead, his focus narrowing back to the drill Coach Wiebe was drawing up, was unaware of the quiet revelation he'd sparked.

The separation was a strange, thin ache, a constant awareness of a missing limb. Ilya had been gone for seventy-two hours, and the Montreal house felt cavernous without him and the

house was pretty much all packed up and ready for the move. But his presence was woven into the day through the steady stream of calls.

The phone would ring mid-morning, Shane elbow-deep in bubble wrap. “Hello Lapochka,” Ilya’s voice, a little breathless, would come down the line. “I am in the hotel room right now. After practice we went to this bar around the corner from the arena.”

Shane would lean against a half-packed box, smiling. “Did you have a good time? How’s the hotel?”

“It was fun, they make the rookies pay for drinks. Have you eaten?”

The conversations were snippets, five minutes here, three minutes there. A call during Ilya’s lunch, him describing the easy, profane banter of his new linemates, Boodram and Barrett. Another late at night, the sound of a hotel shower running in the background, his voice thick with exhaustion but bright as he recounted how the team puppy, Chiron, had stolen a reporter’s microphone that day.

“He is a tiny little ball of energy. Harris has named him ‘Director of Morale.’ I think we might need a dog, sweetheart.”

Shane would update him on the slow progress of packing his life into boxes, about how he started working out and eating better. It was all just the simple day to day things that they were now missing since leaving their little secluded cottage.

A few days later, it was Shane’s turn. The familiar drive to the Voyageurs’ practice facility should have felt like a homecoming. Instead, as he shouldered his bag through the doors, a chill that had nothing to do with the air conditioning settled over him.

The hum of conversation in the hallway leading to the locker room didn't just dip as he approached; it severed. A group of younger players, ones he'd mentored through rookie skates, fell silent. Their eyes skittered away from his, finding sudden intense interest in their phone screens or the floor tiles. It wasn't hostility, exactly. It was a withdrawal. Like they had judged him and found him lacking.

Pushing into the locker room was worse. The space fractured. In one corner, Hayden looked up from lacing his skates and gave a firm, welcoming nod. JJ called out, "Hollander! You finally decide to work for a living?" His tone was deliberately normal, a lifeline thrown.

But across the room, a cluster of veterans, men he'd won a Cup with, for Christ's sake-paused their conversation. Their eyes didn't hold the usual camaraderie, but a cold, assessing curiosity. One met his gaze for a second too long before turning back, saying something low that made another smirk. The divide was a physical line drawn down the center of the room: those who saw Shane Hollander, the same teammate of the past 4 years, and those who saw Shane Hollander, Omega, problem, Ilya Rozanov's mate.

An old, familiar feeling, like the trapped, icy panic of that rundown house where he had been drugged, the sense of being a specimen under a microscope, threatened to climb his throat. *This is different*, he told himself fiercely. *This is their problem, not yours. I have every right to be here, I've earned it.*

He didn't react. He gave JJ a mock glare. "Really JJ? Do I have to remind you who begged Rose to grab him his soda that was a few inches away so he wouldn't need to move his hand?" He moved to his stall, which felt oddly exposed, and began his own pre-game ritual with meticulous care. He stayed close to Hayden during the warm-up skate, the solid, protective presence of his friend a buffer against the sidelong glances.

On the ice, he could escape. Hockey was what he knew, here at least, that still made sense. He threw himself into drills, his passes perfect, his positioning sharp. But about halfway through the first hour, the engine of his body sputtered. A deep, usual fatigue, different from the pleasant burn of exertion, washed through him. His breath came harder. During a conditioning lap, a slight wave of light-headedness made him blink hard against the bright arena lights.

"You okay, Hollander?" one of the trainers asked, noting his pallor as he came off for a water break.

“Yes, of course,” Shane said, taking a long drink.

He pushed through, but his performance was noted. Hayden watched him carefully. The younger players looked worried but not hostile. The other faction, he knew, would be mentally filing this away as weakness.

After the skate, the chilly divide persisted in the locker room, in the way conversations resumed only once he’d passed. He dressed quickly, his heart aching for the simple, eager phone calls of Ilya’s day, of how well his new team was adapting to the new dynamics and that he was excited to compare how they played this year versus last.

Back in the silent house, the phone rang almost the moment he walked in. Ilya’s face filled the screen, a facetime call this time. He was in his hotel room, hair damp from a shower, looking tired but animated.

“Tell me,” Shane said, sinking onto the couch, letting the sound of his voice wash over him.

Ilya did. He talked about a drill Wiebe had made them do, about the way the young defenseman, Haas, had asked him for extra video work. “He is nervous, but he tries very hard. This is good. He reminds me of you a bit.” His smile was proud.

As Ilya spoke, Shane felt the cold knot from the rink begin to thaw. Ilya was in a new city, with a new team, and was being welcomed into the fold of something new. Shane had been worried- Ilya had given up being on a top 5 team in order to be closer. He could have just demanded that Shane move to Boston but he had taken Shane’s happiness into consideration first.

“And you, solnyshko?” Ilya asked, his gaze sharpening, seeing the residual tension in Shane’s shoulders. “How was your first day?”

Shane considered lying. But they’d promised, only the truth when it was just the two of them. “It was... fine,” he said, offering a half-smile. “Some of the guys are a little frosty. Post-

playoff grumpiness, probably.”

Ilya’s face stilled. The blue of his eyes turned icy, not with anger at Shane, but with a protective fury that was now channeled into a silent, fierce understanding. He didn’t rant. He didn’t demand names. He simply said, “They are fools. And you are the best of them.” He paused, then added, his voice dropping, “Hayden texted. He said you looked tired, pale.”

Of course he had. He’d need to talk to Hayden about that. He hadn’t realized that he and Ilya were on texting terms when it came to hovering. “I am tired,” Shane admitted after a few seconds. “It’s a lot. The packing, the... tension. It’s just stress.”

Ilya searched his face through the screen, his instinct to fix, to solve, almost palpable. But he held back. He’d learned that not every wound needed his immediate intervention. Sometimes Shane just needed to feel his support, no matter how much it bothered Ilya to let it go for now. “Eat the soup your mother left in the freezer. Go to sleep early. I will call you before I go to the arena.”

It wasn’t really a demand. He wanted to order Shane to his side, but knew that wouldn’t work. He wanted to demand the names of the players who were making him stressed but backed down. He’d find out sooner or later.

After they hung up, Shane sat in the quiet. The shadow of Crowell’s voice tried to whisper, *see, they’re turning on you, it’s starting*, but it was drowned out by the memory of Ilya’s proud smile talking about his rookie, and the solid, unshakeable promise that soon they’d be under one roof and starting their life together as an open couple.

The house was full of boxes, his body was humming with a strange fatigue, and his professional world had fractures running through it. But his heart, for the first time in his life, felt unshakably, permanently, at home. The rest was just noise. They would face it, as they faced everything now: not with a suffocating obsession like before, but with a quiet, united front.

The whistle blew, signaling a water break. A collective sigh of relief echoed in the rink as players glided toward the benches. Shane, his lungs burning with a deeper ache than the drill warranted, pulled his phone from his gear bag. A single notification glowed on the screen.

IGR- Did you eat lunch? When is your first break, the guys and wags want to meet you.

A small, involuntary smile touched Shane's lips. The sheer normalcy of it, the sweet worry was everything to him. He typed back a quick *Louise dropped off a few meals so I had a wrap and smoothie. Stop worrying.*

"Ugh. Disgusting."

Shane looked up. Hayden was leaning against the boards next to him, taking a long pull from his water bottle. He nodded at the phone in Shane's hand, a smirk playing on his face. "That's the 'my alpha is checking on me' smile. It's nauseating. I thought you two were above that kind of pathetic domestic bliss."

A faint blush warmed Shane's cheeks, but he didn't deny it. He just shrugged, the smile lingering. "He's worried I'll forget to eat. And shut the fuck up, you do the same with Jackie."

Hayden snorted, but it was fond. The easy exchange, the public acknowledgment of the bond, was like a tiny spark of warmth in the increasingly frigid atmosphere of the rink. It highlighted the chasm: here, with Hayden, JJ, a few others, he was still Shane. Elsewhere, he was becoming a problem.

The whistle blew again, calling them back for a neutral zone transition drill. The play was fast, demanding split-second decisions. Shane, fighting through the persistent fog of fatigue, made a sharp cut to support a breakout, but his pass to a streaking winger was a half-second late, intercepted at the blue line by a defending forward.

It was a minor mistake. Happened a dozen times a practice. But as they circled back, a voice cut through the sound of skates, loud enough to carry.

“Guess we’re all going to start to pick up your slack now,” Schneider said, not looking at anyone in particular as he glided past the group. “Must be hard to focus on the team when you’re used to being the main event. Wonder if the ‘C’ feels different now that management knows it comes with its own... publicity package.”

He didn’t say “omega.” He didn’t say “Rozanov.” He didn’t have to. The implication hung in the cold air: Shane’s position was charity, his leadership a side effect of the media circus. That his very presence was a distraction from “real hockey.”

The players nearby stiffened. Some looked away, uncomfortable. A few watched Shane, waiting.

For years, Shane had swallowed comments like this about omega’s. He’d let them slide, turned the other cheek, buried the fury under a mountain of impeccable professionalism and higher scoring stats. He’d done it to prove he belonged, to not make waves, to be the “good example.”

The fatigue, the loneliness of the packed house, the cold shoulders in his own locker room, and the warm, worried text on his phone, it all crystallized into a single, cold point of clarity.

No more.

The sound was shockingly loud in the arena: a sharp *crack* as Shane’s stick hit the ice, bouncing once before clattering to a stop. Every head swiveled, conversations died.

Shane didn’t yell. He pushed off with a calm, powerful stride, skating directly toward Schneider, who had stopped and turned, a defiant smirk on his face.

“Repeat that,” Shane said, his voice flat, carrying across the ice. “To my face.”

Schneider's smirk faltered, but he puffed out his chest. "I said everyone's thinking it. You think you really earned the captaincy that early in your career? It's about keeping the story up. Once the real season starts, we'll see who's really running this team. You got it because Rozanov deserved it and it looked better to have captain to captain in the faceoffs. Who would've guessed that you were getting fuc-"

It happened faster than anyone could process. Shane's right hand shot out. It wasn't a wild swing; it was a short, brutal, piston-straight punch that connected with a sickening *thwack* against the side of Schneider's jaw. Schneider's head snapped sideways, and he stumbled back, skates sliding, pure astonishment in his eyes.

A collective gasp ripped through the rink. *Shane Hollander* just threw a punch. Shane, who rarely even chirped other players, whose respect was so ingrained he rarely needed to raise his voice, had just crossed a line no one ever thought he'd approach.

Chaos erupted, Hayden and Comeau, were between them in an instant, hands shoving against chest plates, creating a wall between Shane and Schneider.

"Enough!" Hayden barked, his voice leaving no room for argument. He planted himself squarely in front of Shane, a human barricade.

JJ materialized at Shane's left shoulder, his usual joking demeanor gone, replaced by a cold, ready stillness. His presence was a silent pledge. More tellingly, several of the younger players, drifted instinctively to cluster behind Shane and JJ, their faces pale but set. The locker room's silent divide had just become a physical lineup.

The rink fell into a profound, ringing silence, broken only by the heavy breathing of the two separated men.

Shane, his knuckles throbbing, didn't try to get around Hayden. He looked past him, past the stunned Schneider, and scanned the faces of his teammates ringed around the ice. He saw the shock, but beneath it, in the averted eyes and hostile expressions of some veterans, he saw the truth. This wasn't just about Schneider. This was going to be a problem. They had been judging him, weighing him, and finding him lacking.

His anger, white-hot and pure, cooled into something heavier and more profound: a deep, weary disappointment.

He raised his voice, clear and cutting in the silent arena, addressing every player.

“If anybody else has a problem with me,” he said, his gaze sweeping across them, “say it now.”

Silence.

“Because I’m done,” he continued, the words dropping like stones, “listening to whispers in hallways and conversations that stop when I walk into a room.” Another long, punishing silence stretched out. No one moved. “If you’ve got something to say, say it to my face.” He paused, letting the finality sink in. “Otherwise, lace your skates up, get back on the ice, and do your fucking job. Because if I find out anyone’s undermining this team behind my back again,” he said, his tone chillingly matter-of-fact, “you’ll regret making that mistake.”

Nobody spoke. Not out of fear of another punch, but because the man before them had shed the last vestige of the accommodating omega who’d tried to prove he wasn’t a burden. This was Captain Shane Hollander, and he was done apologizing for existing.

“It’s a distraction!” Schneider shot back, his bravado cracking into genuine anger. “You and your- everything! It’s all anyone talks about! How are we supposed to just play?”

“You put your fucking head down and you play!” Shane’s voice rose now, not in a shout, but with the sharpness of contempt. “That’s how. The same way you did when we won the Cup. Or did you forget that part? My personal life isn’t in any of your damn business.”

The entire rink was paralyzed. No one had ever seen Shane Hollander like this, not pleading, not explaining, but dismantling a challenge with ruthless, controlled precision. He wasn’t the omega who needed protection. He was the captain, assertive and in full control apparently.

Hayden appeared then, sliding smoothly between them, a solid wall of muscle and quiet authority. He put a hand on Schneider's chest plate and gave a slight, firm shove backward. "Enough. Drill's over. Go take a lap. Cool off."

Schneider, face flushed with fury and humiliation, glared at Shane over Hayden's shoulder but ultimately turned and skated away, his strides jerky.

The sound of the coach's whistle at the tunnel entrance was a sharp release of tension. Coach Theriault stepped onto the bench, his sharp eyes taking in the scene, the separated players, the charged silence. He said nothing. He just blew the whistle again, long and shrill, and pointed to the far blue line.

"Hollander! My office." he said, turning around and not waiting to see if Shane would follow. Shane skated over and jumped over the boards to grab his blade guards. He put them on and made his way over to the small office off the locker room.

"Is everything handled out there?"

"Yes, it's handled."

Theriault looked uncomfortable for a second. "Listen, a call came and if you want to play next week you need to wear an extra pad around-" He cut himself off, motioning towards Shane's midriff.

"Jesus, I'm not pregnant! Why-"

"This isn't my rule, Hollander. Also, you can't check other players. And we're working on getting you another changing room. Crowell suggested I should talk to you. But I've never made it a habit of getting into my players' personal lives and I won't start now. I will say that I do not like this, Hollander. You're in a relationship with someone who we play against a lot and it's not a good look."

"Do you really think I'd throw a game or play worse against Rozanov?"

“I don’t know what to think, Shane. You should have come to me. You should've picked a different Alpha. I have TV crews camping outside, my private number leaking to ask for comment on your,” he paused, looking uncomfortable. “Situation. You’ve put us in a bad spot, Hollander.”

“It’s only a bad spot if you make it so. I’ve always given my all to this team. Ilya and I have been *something* since we first met before getting drafted and I’ve led this team to two cups and I’ve helped us beat his team more often than not. If it’s going to be a problem, or if I get shit from the team, I’ll sit this season out. You know I can and we’ll see how the does without me.”

“Don’t threaten me, kid. Where’s your sense of loyalty?”

“Where’s yours?” With that, Shane walked out and went back to the rink, his anger giving him a burst of energy and he kicked off the boards towards the team.

Later, in the suddenly quiet locker room, the silence was different. It was wary, like they were waiting for something. Shane sat alone on the bench in front of his stall, the adrenaline crash leaving him hollowed out and trembling with a fatigue that felt bone-deep. His hands fumbled slightly with the laces of his skates. The confrontations had taken everything he had.

He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and just breathed. Instinctively, his hand reached for his phone in his stall. He woke the screen.

A single notification waited for him.

IGR- How is my captain?

After the cold fury, the isolation, the weight of the entire room's judgment, the simple words were a lifeline. They saw him not as a problem, a distraction, but as what he was striving to be. A captain. *His* captain.

A small, exhausted, but genuine smile touched Shane's lips for the first time all afternoon. He typed back, his thumbs moving slowly.

Shane- I'm ok. Missing you.

When Hayden stopped in front of him. He didn't sit. He just nudged Shane's shoulder with his own, a solid, grounding bump. His voice was low, for Shane alone.

"Took you long enough." There was no teasing in it. It was an acknowledgment, approval. "Proud of you, Hollzy. Don't let anyone get away with calling you out like that..

Ilya's phone buzzed in his hand, a FaceTime request. He answered before the first ring finished, collapsing onto the edge of the too-stiff bed.

Shane's face filled the screen, illuminated by the soft lamp in their living room. He was leaning against a packed box, still in his practice gear, hair damp from a shower.

For a long moment, neither spoke. They just looked. The tight lines around Ilya's eyes softened. The residual tension in Shane's jaw released. A slow, weary, but utterly genuine smile spread across both their faces, like a silent *there you are*.

"You look tired," Ilya murmured, his voice rough.

“So do you,” Shane said, his smile turning wry. “Hotel life not all it’s cracked up to be?”

“Would be tolerable if you were here.” Ilya’s gaze drank him in, the slight pallor, the shadows under his eyes. The bond was like a phantom limb, aching. “I need to see you. All of you.”

Shane understood and blushed hard as he shifted, putting the phone down, propping it against a box. He stood, and with slow, deliberate movements, began to undress. The sweaty practice gear hit the floor, then his briefs. He stood naked in the lamplight, a blush on his skin, his expression open and waiting.

Ilya did the same, shoving his sweatpants down, his eyes locked on the screen. “Touch yourself,” he said, his voice a low command softened by need. “Let me watch.”

Shane’s hand moved to his cock, already half-hard from the visual of Ilya undressing. He stroked himself slowly, his breath hitching. On the screen, Ilya mirrored him, his own large hand fisting his length, his blue eyes dark and fixed on Shane’s body.

“Look at me,” Ilya breathed. “Only at me.”

They moved together in silence broken only by sharp inhales and soft, shared moans. It wasn’t about frantic release, but a way to bridge the distance with sensation, to overwrite the loneliness of the sterile room and the packed-up house with this, with them. Shane came first with a choked-off cry, his body bowing, and Ilya followed a moment after, his head thrown back, Shane’s name a guttural sigh.

For a minute, they just breathed, coming down, the connection humming warmly between them through the screen. Shane found a discarded t-shirt to clean up with, using it to cover himself a bit as he sat on the edge of the bed. Ilya did the same, settling back against the headboard.

“I miss you so much,” Ilya said finally, his voice relaxed now. “How was your day?”

Shane laughed, the sound real and warm. “Could have been better.”

They talked like that for a while. About the impossible number of boxes of books and knick knacks. About the art in Ilya’s storage that they’d have to look through to see what they’d keep. About what Shane had purchased online already and that Rose wanted to take him shopping the next day to look for more furniture..

Then, Shane’s gaze drifted to the packed-up remains of his study. The peace of the moment shifted, just slightly.

“I got into a fight today,” he said, matter-of-fact. “At practice.”

Ilya sat up straighter, all his attention focusing. “What happened?”

Shane told him. Not with drama, but with a flat, clean precision- Schneider’s comment, the crack of his stick on the ice, the confrontation, the silence, the final ultimatum. “I just... couldn’t swallow it anymore. I don’t know what came over me.”

On the screen, Ilya’s face did something complicated. The initial protective fury smoothed into something else. A deep, proud warmth. He smiled, a soft, knowing thing.

“I do,” Ilya said quietly. “You finally defended yourself the way you have always defended everyone else. Your team. Your family. Me.” He leaned closer to the camera, his eyes intense. “It was not a fight, solnyshko. It was you setting the boundaries. It sounds perfect.”

Shane absorbed the words, the unexpected validation. He saw the love and the fierce pride in Ilya’s eyes, and some final knot inside him loosened.

Ilya opened his mouth again. Shane saw it, the hesitation, the almost imperceptible intake of breath as if to launch into something bigger. His eyes searched Shane’s face, tracing the lingering tiredness, but also the new, hard-won peace that had settled there after the confession. The moment stretched, charged with something unspoken.

Then Ilya seemed to settle. He leaned back, the almost-moment passing. “You should sleep,” he said, his voice gentle. “You are exhausted.”

“You too. I’m just going to shower then go to bed.”

They lingered a few minutes more, in softer, simpler words, until the weight of the day pulled at their eyelids.

After the call ended, Ilya crossed the silent room to his unpacked suitcase. He pulled out the soft, faded navy hoodie Shane had worn the day before he left. He pulled it on, the fabric swallowing him, smelling irrevocably of honeysuckle, clean sweat, and that soft, secret, golden warmth. He buried his nose in the cuff and turned out the light.

In Montreal, Shane lay in the center of their too-big bed, skin still flushed from the warm water. He dragged Ilya’s pillow over, wrapping his arms and legs around it, burying his face in the cotton case that still held the faint, grounding scent of leather.

Shane lay in bed, the morning after the confrontation at the Voyageurs’ practice facility. The adrenaline had burned off, leaving behind a residue of brittle fatigue and the metallic taste of fractured trust. Staring at the ceiling, the echo of his own voice, *If you’ve got something to say, say it to my face*, playing on a loop in his mind. The silence in the rink afterwards had been a victory, but it felt cold and lonely. Something he’d never he’d feel while with his teammates.

His phone buzzed on the nightstand. Not Ilya, they’d talk in a couple more hours, but Rose.

Rose: Emergency intervention required. You’re being kidnapped for home decor purposes. I’ll be there in 30. Wear sensible shoes and bring your credit card. No arguments. You don’t

practice until tonight.

A faint, real smile touched his lips for the first time that morning. Rose. She didn't operate in whispers or cold shoulders. She operated in declarations, in bold statements, in relentless, loving gestures. She was exactly what he needed: a piece of his world that hadn't changed, that refused to treat him like anything other than Shane.

When she pulled up, she didn't ask about practice. She took one look at his face, the shadows under his eyes that even a good night's sleep couldn't erase, and pulled him into a fierce, perfumed hug. "Okay, we're fixing this with overpriced throw pillows and artisanal light fixtures. Get in."

The drive was filled with her effortless chatter, updates on a script she was excited about, a scandalous story about a friend from college, her elaborate plans for the upcoming fall. She deliberately steered clear of hockey, of Montreal, of anything that smelled of tension. She was normal, and Shane sank into it with grateful exhaustion.

They arrived at a high-end furniture boutique, all exposed brick and strategically placed greenery. Before Rose could even open her door, Shane was pulling his tablet from his bag. He opened an app as they walked in.

"Alright," he said, his voice taking on the focused tone he usually reserved for game tape. "The great room is 24 by 18. The ceiling is vaulted to 14 feet at the peak, so we need vertical scale. The main traffic flow is from the foyer here, to the kitchen here, so any sectional needs to leave a clear path of at least 36 inches. I've ruled out anything with a chaise on the west side because it would block the sightline to the fireplace."

Rose stared at him. On his tablet screen was a detailed floor plan of the Ottawa house, complete with dimensions. She burst out laughing, a bright sound that turned a few heads in the serene store.

"Oh my god. I love you so much, you know that right? Put that thing away and lets shop off vibes. We don't have to get everything today."

Shane blushed but didn't look up, scrolling through his inspiration photos. "I just want to be efficient."

"Stop," Rose declared, snatching the tablet from his hands and placing it in her own purse. "You will shop like I do. We go off based on how things feel and we can have a few different shopping trips. As long as you have a bed and a few chairs you will survive a few days in a new house." She marched over to a large, plush sectional in a deep slate grey and threw herself onto it dramatically, limbs splayed. "See? This one has a high nap-transfer rating. Critical for movie nights."

Shane couldn't help but laugh. He wandered over, running a hand over the fabric. "It's nice. But it's also seventeen thousand dollars. Expensive does not automatically mean comfortable."

"True," Rose conceded, rolling upright. "Very expensive so I guess it's great that you have a very rich mate and that you are wealthy in your own right. It's about value, Shane. The value of me being able to crash here after one too many glasses of wine and not wake up with a spinal injury." She pointed to a sleek, white bouclé armchair. "What about that for a reading nook?"

Shane looked horrified. "Ok then. No white furniture." She said when she looked at his expression.

They fell into a familiar, comfortable debate, roaming the showroom. Shane's meticulous planning met Rose's instinctual, sensory approach. He cared about durability, flow, and practicality. She cared about texture, vibe, and whether a rug felt "happy underfoot."

"This dining table," Shane said, stopping beside a long, rustic-chic trestle table made of reclaimed oak. He pulled up the dimensions on his phone to confirm. "It could seat ten, twelve if we squeeze. With the leaf in."

Rose leaned against it. "Why so big? Planning on hosting the entire league?"

Shane's gaze grew distant, a soft smile playing on his lips. He wasn't seeing a table. He was seeing a future. "My parents. JJ, obviously. You. Hayden and Jackie and the kids. Scott, Kip and Noah. Maybe Svetlana and Marly if they're in town. I want... I want there to be room. For everyone. For holidays. For just... I don't know. I want our life full of people. Ilya needs that." He said it quietly, the words full of a longing he hadn't fully articulated even to himself. He wanted the new house to be a hub, a place for gatherings and full of laughter. A real home, in a way the sterile Montreal house or even the isolated cottage had never been.

Rose watched him, her teasing expression softening. He kept saying "we" and "ours," the pronouns slipping out with a natural ease that spoke volumes. "Look at you," she said, her voice gentler. "All domestic and heart-eyed. It's disgusting. I love it."

Shane rolled his eyes, but the blush returned. To deflect, he pulled out his phone and took a picture of the table. He sent it to Ilya.

Shane- Potential dining table. Thoughts?

The reply came almost instantly.

IGR- Beautiful.

Shane snorted. He moved to a different table, a more modern piece with a concrete base and walnut top. He sent another picture.

IGR- Also beautiful.

Frustrated but amused, Shane found a third, a round, mid-century style with a pedestal base. Click. Send.

IGR- I like this one too.

Shane typed rapidly, his thumbs stabbing the screen.

Shane- THEY CANNOT ALL BE YOUR FAVORITE. YOU HAVE TO HAVE AN OPINION.

Three dots appeared. Then:

IGR- If you like them, then I like them. You have better taste.

Rose, who had been peeking over his shoulder, let out a cackle loud enough to make a nearby sales associate jump. “Oh, this is priceless! He’s hopeless!”

“He’s impossible!” Shane groaned, shoving his phone back in his pocket. “Decorating with him is like decorating with an extremely wealthy, extremely agreeable golden retriever. ‘Whatever you want, Shane! Is that *the* couch? I love it!’”

Rose was wiping tears of laughter from her eyes. “You poor, poor man. Stuck with a supportive, trusting mate who thinks you’re brilliant. However will you cope?”

They continued, the mood light and restorative. Shane slowly began to relax, the knots in his shoulders from the previous day’s confrontation loosening under the weight of ordinary decisions about armchair profiles and rug pile height. He was in his element, building something. Creating a future, one fabric swatch at a time.

Then, his phone buzzed with a FaceTime call. Ilya’s name filled the screen.

Shane’s entire demeanor transformed instantly. The focused, slightly anxious energy smoothed away, replaced by a warm, automatic brightness. His smile became effortless, reaching his eyes.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” Rose muttered, grinning. “Look at your face. It’s like someone flipped a ‘stupidly in love’ switch. It’s nauseating. Answer it!”

Shane swiped to accept. Ilya’s face appeared, slightly pixelated. He was in what looked like a hallway outside a locker room, still partly dressed in Centaurs training gear, his hair damp with sweat. He looked exhausted, but his eyes lit up the second Shane came into view.

“Sweetheart!” he said, his voice a warm rumble. “How are you? Did you eat breakfast?”

“I’m fine, yes, I ate,” Shane said, his voice unconsciously softening.

Rose immediately leaned into the frame. “He’s lying! He’s being a monster! A picky, spreadsheet-wielding monster who is rejecting all the good furniture!”

Ilya’s brow furrowed in concern. “You are a monster?”

“I am not a monster,” Shane said, shooting Rose a look. “I am being... discerning. She wants to buy a white chair that will be destroyed in a day.”

“It’s for the aesthetic,” Rose argued, plucking the phone from Shane’s hand. “Come on, Rozanov. Back me up. You want a chic, stylish home, right?” She began walking through the store, turning the camera to show various pieces.

Ilya’s responses were, as ever, utterly useless as design criticism. “That looks nice.” “Very bright.” “Yes, I see it.”

Frustrated but smiling, Shane reclaimed the phone. “Hold on, let me show you something I actually like.” He walked over to the large slate sectional Rose had tested earlier and sat down, sinking into the cushions. He angled the camera. “What do you think? For the great room. It’s big enough for everyone.”

Ilya's gaze was fixed not on the couch, but on Shane's face, on the way he settled into the cushions. "I like it."

"The couch, Ilya."

"Yes," Ilya said, a small, tired smile on his face. "You look comfortable on it. That is what matters."

Rose's laughter echoed again. "You're never getting an objective opinion from this man! He's just looking at you!"

Shane huffed but felt a flush of warmth. He moved to the reclaimed oak trestle table. "Okay, be serious for a second. This one. Or the round one I sent earlier. Which feels more like... us?"

Ilya was quiet for a moment, actually studying the table through the screen. "The big one," he said finally. "The long one. There is room for everyone. For your parents. For Pike and his three million kids. For JJ to put his feet up." He said it simply, as if stating a fact. There was no hesitation, no question. He was imagining the same crowded, noisy, joyful future Shane was.

The confirmation stole Shane's breath for a second. They were, without having discussed it in detail, picturing the same life.

"See?" Shane said, a note of triumph in his voice. "He can have an opinion!"

"A rare and miraculous event," Rose intoned.

Shane's smile faded to a mock scowl. "But only on the big stuff. He refuses to help with anything else. It's infuriating."

On the screen, Ilya shrugged, the movement stretching the fabric of his practice jersey. “I chose house,” he said, as if it were the most obvious logic in the world. “You choose what goes inside it. I want to come home and see what you made for us.” He said it casually, without a trace of grand sentiment. It was just the truth. It was Shane’s job to make it a home.

The simple statement hit Shane with unexpected force. His throat tightened, and he had to look away from the screen for a moment, blinking rapidly. It was the deepest form of trust. It was Ilya saying that he valued Shane’s opinions in this.

Rose, ever observant, saw the sheen in his eyes. She gently bumped his shoulder with her own, a silent gesture of support.

Before the emotion could overwhelm him, Ilya spoke again, his voice shifting to excited. ““Anna called me. Everything cleared early. We don't have to wait two weeks. The final papers are ready tonight.”

“Wait. Tonight? What happened to two weeks?”

“Apparently when you pay lawyers obscene amounts of money, sometimes they are useful. They will be sent to us tonight. My practice finishes in a few hours. I am not staying at the hotel. I will drive back to Montreal. We can sign everything tonight.”

Shane’s head snapped up, his emotional moment forgotten. “Tonight? We’ll be homeowners tonight?”

“Da. If you want.”

“Yes,” Shane said, the word bursting out of him. “Yes, of course.”

Ilya’s smile widened, mirroring his own. “Good. I will be home in a few hours. Buy whatever furniture you want.” A glint of familiar possessiveness entered his eye. “Except the bed. That is my responsibility. I think I found the perfect one and it will be delivered in a few days.”

Rose groaned loudly, throwing her head back. “I did NOT need to know that! We’re in public!”

Ilya looked genuinely confused by her reaction. “It is a piece of furniture. It requires specifics.”

“I’m hanging up now,” Rose announced, though she was still grinning.

Shane laughed, the sound light and free. “Drive safe. Don’t speed.”

“I will drive the exact speed limit,” Ilya promised, which Shane knew was a lie. “See you soon, moya lapochka.”

The call ended. Shane held the phone to his chest for a second, the glow from the conversation clinging to him. The paperwork, the house, Ilya coming home, it was all suddenly, wonderfully real.

“Okay, loverboy,” Rose said, linking her arm through his. “The clock is ticking. We have to make you a home before your alpha returns to claim his fancy bed.”

They shopped with renewed, giddy energy. The future was no longer an abstract collection of floor plans and paint chips. It was hours away. Shane’s exhaustion seemed to lift, pushed back by a wave of anticipatory joy.

As they were examining a stunning, if impractical, silk area rug, Rose suddenly paused. She flinched, a subtle, inward wince, and pressed a hand low against her abdomen.

“You okay?” Shane asked, glancing over.

Rose made an annoyed face, waving her free hand. “Ugh, yeah. Just cramps. My period’s about to start, I can feel it. Always at the most inconvenient times.” She shook her head,

dismissing it. “Anyway, this rug is criminal. You’d have to follow Ilya around with a spray bottle of Scotchgard.”

Shane nodded in agreement, his mind already moving to the next item, a perfect, sleek floor lamp he’d spotted. They finished their loop of the store and, decision-fatigue setting in, decided to break for lunch at a small bistro nearby.

Over salads, their conversation was light, circling back to the house, to Rose’s work, to anything but the undercurrent of strain from Shane’s hockey life. Shane was distracted, his thoughts a pleasant jumble of fabric swatches, legal documents, and the impending sound of Ilya’s key in the door. He pushed his food around his plate, eating little, attributing his lack of appetite to excitement and the lingering weariness that seemed his constant companion lately.

“I’ll be right back,” Rose said, dabbing her mouth with a napkin. “Bathroom.”

Shane nodded, pulling out his phone to look at the pictures he’d taken. A few minutes later, Rose returned, sliding back into the booth. She looked mildly irritated.

“Hey, you don’t happen to have a tampon or pad in your bag, do you?” she asked, her tone casual.

Shane shook his head automatically, not looking up from a photo of a console table. “No, sorry. I don’t think I have any at home either, I usually just...” His voice trailed off.

His fork, halfway to his mouth, stopped.

A cold, precise click echoed in his mind, like a lock sliding home.

He hadn’t needed one.

He mentally backtracked, counting weeks. After a heat, his cycle, while not clockwork, was regular enough. He'd get his period a couple of weeks later, a sure sign his body had reset. He kept loose track, if only to be prepared.

He'd had his heat at the cottage.

Weeks ago.

He'd had no period since.

With the chaos that followed, Crowell's call, buying the house, the packing, Ilya leaving, the confrontation at camp, the absence had simply... been overlooked.

The fork clattered softly onto his plate. He'd never been late. Granted he only let himself have one heat a year. But he'd always have one about 2 weeks after. Always. Even last year with the birth control. 15 days after his heat, he was in bed with a hot water bottle cursing any and everything for the pain.

But now, it all made sense... the profound, bone-deep exhaustion that sleep couldn't cure. The brain fog, staring at books for five minutes without seeing them. The dizziness when he stood up too fast. Ilya's constant, intense scenting, his nose always seeking his skin.

His heart began to pound, a slow, heavy drum against his ribs. His skin felt suddenly cold and too tight.

"Shane?"

Rose's voice sounded far away. He looked at her. She was watching him, her earlier irritation gone, replaced by a careful, assessing neutrality.

His breathing shallowed. "My period, I skipped it." he whispered, the words feeling foreign.

“Okay...” Rose said, her voice calm and low.

“No.” He shook his head, panic beginning to spiral in his chest. “Rose. I don’t mean late. I mean I didn’t... I should have gotten it weeks ago. After the cottage. I didn’t.”

The full implication crashed over him. He hadn’t just missed a cycle. He’d never had the post-heat reset at all. With everything going on, it completely went over his head.

Rose didn’t react with shock or glee. Her expression shifted into something practical and firm. She understood immediately that he was not in a place for congratulations or speculation. He was in freefall.

She reached into her purse, pulled out a handful of cash, and dropped it on the table to cover their lunch. She stood, gathering both her purse and Shane’s jacket and bag. “Come on.”

Shane stared at her, uncomprehending. “What?”

“Outside. Now.”

She didn’t wait for an argument. She took his elbow and guided him up and out of the booth, her movements efficient. She got him out of the restaurant, into the cool afternoon air, before the panic could fully root and show on his face in a public place.

On the sidewalk, Shane finally uttered the necessary, terrifying sentence. “I need to go to a pharmacy.”

Rose simply nodded. “Okay.”

She didn’t ask why. She didn’t say, *I think you’re pregnant*. She didn’t offer a single assumption. She was protecting him, giving him the agency to find out for himself, to own

whatever truth was coming. Her friendship in that moment was a steadfast wall against the storm.

As they walked to the car, Shane was silent, his mind reeling. The world had tilted on its axis. Every interaction from the past month replayed in sharp, suspicious detail.

Ilya's behavior... the hovering, the obsessive scenting, the way his anxiety had spiked after JJ's stupid "pregnant" joke in the group chat. He slid into the passenger seat of Rose's car, his movements numb.

"Ilya's coming home in a few hours," he said quietly, staring straight ahead.

Rose started the engine, her gaze forward. "Then let's figure out what's happening before he gets there."

She pulled out of the parking lot, her navigation already set for the nearest 24-hour pharmacy. Shane sat perfectly still beside her, the vibrant, playful day now a distant memory. Slowly, almost without his conscious mind directing it, his right hand drifted from his lap and came to rest, palm flat, against the lower plane of his abdomen.

The gesture was new. The car moved through the city, carrying him toward an answer that would change everything.

The drive to the pharmacy was a silent, suspended ride. Shane stared out the passenger window of Rose's car, watching the familiar Montreal streets blur past without seeing them. His mind was a frantic, scrolling ledger.

Heat at the cottage. Week one and two: recovery, bonding, the profound peace. Week three: friends arriving, the life jacket argument, the making up. Week four: Crowell's call, the decision, the offer on the house. Week five: packing begins, the deep tiredness sets in, the dizziness. Week six: Ilya leaves for Ottawa, training camp starts, the confrontation with Schneider...

The math was indisputable. The absence of his period wasn't a fluke or a delay. It was a fundamental omission in the expected sequence of his own biology.

Other sensations, previously filed under 'stress' or 'moving fatigue,' now reclassified themselves with terrifying clarity. The exhaustion that felt like gravity doubling. The way his brain would simply... buffer, leaving him staring at a wall. The strange, metallic taste in his mouth some mornings. The naps that felt like comas. Even his appetite, sometimes ravenous, sometimes repulsed by smells that never bothered him before. He didn't bring it up to Ilya before because Ilya was sometimes obsessed with what and how much he ate.

He'd built a perfectly reasonable narrative: emotional strain, physical labor, the weight of a public life. Now, the narrative crumbled, revealing a simpler, more monumental truth beneath.

Rose didn't fill the silence with chatter. She drove with a focused calm, occasionally glancing at him, her expression neutral but her presence a steady anchor. She was giving him the space to think, to feel, without layering her own assumptions on top of his panic.

When they pulled into the pharmacy parking lot, Shane moved automatically, like a sleepwalker. The bright, sterile interior was a shock to his system. He made his way to the family planning aisle and stopped, overwhelmed.

There were dozens of boxes. Strips, sticks, mid-stream, early detection, digital, non-digital. Claims of 99% accuracy, detection six days before a missed period, rapid results. His hockey brain, trained for preparation and certainty, short-circuited into overdrive. He couldn't trust just one. What if it was a false positive? A false negative? What if the batch was flawed? He needed a consensus.

Rose appeared at his elbow, watching as he picked up one box, read the fine print on the back, compared it to another. "Going for the fancy one, I see," she said, her voice devoid of its usual teasing edge. It was an observation, not a judgment.

"I need to be sure," Shane whispered, his throat tight.

“Ok, lets get a few,” she said simply.

He ended up with six different brands: a standard two-pack of line tests, a fancy early-detection stick, and a digital test that spelled it out in unambiguous letters and a few others. Rose took them from him and went to the cashier after making sure Shane hadn’t been spotted and he walked out while she waited in line. The cashier, a teenager absorbed in her phone, scanned them with utter indifference. The normalcy of the transaction was surreal.

The return to his half-packed house felt like entering a diorama of his former life. Boxes were stacked in the living room, their flaps open like mouths waiting to be fed. A lonely armchair sat in the center of the room, stripped of its cushions. The artwork was down, leaving ghostly rectangles on the walls. And now, he was potentially carrying a new life within him, one that hadn’t been part of the moving plan. How would Ilya take the news? They had discussed children in theory, but had Ilya really meant it?

“Do you want me to stay out here?” Rose asked, setting her keys on the barren kitchen counter.

Shane looked at the bathroom door, then back at her. He nodded, unable to speak. He needed to do this alone first.

Inside the bathroom, he locked the door and leaned against it, closing his eyes. The silence was deafening. He laid the tests on the edge of the sink, their cheerful, pastel boxes a grotesque contrast to his churning dread.

He followed the instructions on the first box with robotic precision. Pee in a small plastic cup they used for mouthwash and dipped a few of the the sticks, then started to wait three to five minutes. He set a timer on his phone, placed the stick face-down on a piece of toilet paper, and turned away, unable to watch. He washed his hands, staring at his pale reflection in the mirror. *Who are you?* the face seemed to ask.

The timer chimed.

He turned over the stick.

Two pink lines.

Clear as day.

His heart didn't leap. It sank, then lodged somewhere in his throat. No. Mistake. Evaporation line. Something.

He tore open the second test from the same box. His hands were shaking now. He repeated the process, his breath coming in short, sharp pants. He set the timer again. Stared at the wall. The seconds dragged.

Chime.

Two lines.

A cold numbness spread through his limbs. The digital test. The one that couldn't be misread. He fumbled with the packaging, his fingers clumsy. He used it, set it on the counter, and backed away until his shoulders hit the wall. He slid down to sit on the cold tile floor, drawing his knees up, and waited, staring at the blank screen of the test.

The little hourglass icon appeared, turning. Seconds ticked by. Then, the screen changed.

PREGNANT

The word, in stark, black pixels, was a verdict. It was also an answer. The denial he'd been clinging to evaporated. The world didn't end. It simply... transformed. It became a world where this was true.

A soft, choked sound escaped him. He wasn't sobbing, not yet. It was the sound of air leaving a punctured lung. He wrapped his arms around his knees and rested his forehead on them, the three tests lined up on the floor beside him like evidence.

A gentle knock. "Shane?" Rose's voice was soft through the door. "You okay in there? Can I come in?"

He couldn't speak. After a moment, he reached up and turned the lock.

The door opened slowly. Rose stepped in, her eyes immediately going to the tests on the floor. She didn't gasp. She didn't squeal. She simply closed the door behind her and sat down on the floor beside him, their shoulders touching.

For a long minute, they sat in silence, looking at the word **PREGNANT**.

"What do you need?" Rose finally asked, her voice low and practical.

Shane lifted his head. His vision was blurry. "I don't know," he whispered, the truth of it overwhelming. He felt adrift in a sea of gigantic, colliding emotions. A part of him, the part that had dreamed of a family with Ilya in some vague, distant future, was singing a quiet, awed hymn. Another part was terrified, of the changes, of the physical reality, of the world's reaction, of his own ability to do this. There was disbelief, wonder, and a profound sense of his own body becoming foreign territory.

"We're having a baby," he said aloud. The word 'we' did it. It wasn't just his body, his future. It was theirs. Ilya's. The reality of it slammed into him with physical force. A tiny, invisible cluster of cells was the most permanent tether imaginable. It was a bond deeper than any mark, any legal document.

The tears came then, hot and silent, streaming down his face. He wasn't crying from sadness, or pure joy, but from the sheer, terrifying magnitude of it all.

Rose put an arm around his shoulders and pulled him into a side hug, letting him cry. “It’s okay to be happy and terrified at the same time,” she murmured. “It’s probably the only sane way to feel.”

He cried against her shoulder for a few minutes, the storm of it gradually subsiding into shaky breaths. He pulled back, wiping his face with the heel of his hand, a weak, watery laugh escaping him. “I’m a mess.”

“You’re allowed to be,” she said, handing him a square of toilet paper. “You just found out you’re making a human.”

The familiar Rose-ism, even in this moment, made him smile. Then, another wave of panic crested. “Ilya,” he breathed. “He’s coming home in a few hours. I have to tell him.”

“Yeah,” Rose agreed. “You do.”

“How?” Shane asked, helplessly. “How do you... say that?”

Rose shrugged, a faint grin touching her lips. “I mean, ‘I’m pregnant’ seems to cover it. It’s concise.”

Shane stared at her, horrified. “That’s terrible advice. You just... blurt it out? After ‘hello’? ‘Hey, honey, how was practice? By the way, I’m pregnant.’ No. There has to be... a way. A moment.”

“You’ll figure it out,” she said, her confidence in him unwavering. “It’s you and Ilya. You’ll find your way.”

As if summoned, Shane’s phone, discarded on the bathroom counter, began to vibrate with a FaceTime call. Ilya’s name glowed on the screen.

Shane's eyes went wide. "Oh, god."

"Answer it," Rose said, getting to her feet. "I'll be in the living room giving you the illusion of privacy while definitely eavesdropping." She slipped out, closing the door behind her.

Shane took several deep, steadying breaths, splashed cold water on his face, and grabbed the phone. He swiped to answer just before it went to voicemail.

Ilya's face filled the screen. He was in a hotel room, his gear bag on the bed behind him, his hair damp from a shower. He looked tired but content. "Lyubimyy. Practice is done. I am leaving now. Should be home in a few hours if traffic not terrible."

Shane's heart hammered against his ribs. He was looking at Ilya, at the sharp cut of his jaw, the familiar intensity in his ocean blue eyes, the mouth that had kissed him a thousand times, and the surreal thought echoed: *You are the father of my baby. Our baby is inside me right now, Ilya.*

"Hey," Shane managed, his voice sounding strange to his own ears.

Ilya's smile faded instantly. His gaze sharpened, scanning Shane's face through the screen. "What is wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," Shane said, too quickly.

"Shane." Ilya's tone was flat, disbelieving. "You have a face."

"I always have a face."

"You have a specific face. The 'something is happening and I am trying to seem normal' face. Did something happen at the house? With the packing?" The protectiveness was already coiling in his voice, ready to spring.

“No, no, everything’s fine with the house,” Shane said, grasping for a redirect. “I’m just tired. How was practice? How’s the team looking?”

Ilya studied him for another long moment, clearly not convinced, but he allowed the subject change. “The line is good. Boodram sees the ice like a chessboard. Barrett is a wrecking ball with hands. Is... fun.” He said the word with a hint of wonder, as if fun on the ice was a newly discovered continent. “But you are sure you are okay? You look pale.”

“I’m sure,” Shane insisted, forcing a more genuine smile. “Just... excited for you to come home. What’s your ETA?”

“Three hours. Maybe less.” Ilya’s eyes softened. “I will drive safely. Do not worry.”

“I always worry,” Shane said, and it was the truest thing he’d said so far.

A comfortable silence fell between them, the kind that usually felt like companionship but now felt charged with Shane’s secret. Before ending the call, Ilya’s expression grew serious, his gaze piercing through the pixels.

“I love you,” he said, the words simple and profound.

They landed directly on the raw, exposed nerve of Shane’s new reality. His eyes instantly welled up again. He blinked rapidly, looking down. “I love you too,” he whispered, the words thick with emotion. “So much. Drive safe.”

He ended the call before he could completely break down. He sat on the closed toilet lid, clutching the phone to his chest, taking shuddering breaths.

A moment later, Rose’s voice floated through the door. “You’re absolutely terrible at hiding things. He knows something’s up.”

“I know,” Shane groaned.

Rose stayed for another hour, keeping him company amidst the boxes, talking about everything and nothing, providing a buffer against the ticking clock. When it was clear Shane was steadier, if still deeply anxious, she gathered her things.

“You should tell him alone,” she said, giving him a final, fierce hug. “This is yours. Both of yours. Call me after. No matter what time.”

He nodded, grateful beyond words. “Thank you, Rose. For... everything.”

She smiled, a knowing, gentle look in her eyes. “Now go find your way to tell him.”

Then she was gone, and the house was silent except for the echo of packing tape and his own frantic thoughts.

The wait was agony. He paced. He tried to pack a box and ended up putting a book in, taking it out, and putting it back in three times. He rehearsed speeches in his head. *Ilya, we need to talk. Ilya, something amazing happened today. Ilya, remember how JJ joked about me being pregnant?*

Every version sounded wrong.

Finally, headlights swept across the front window. Tires crunched on the driveway. The engine cut off.

Shane stood frozen in the middle of the living room, his hands clenched at his sides.

The key turned in the lock. The door opened.

Ilya stepped inside, dropping his duffel bag with a thud. He looked tired from the drive, but his face lit up the second he saw Shane. In two strides, he was across the room, his arms wrapping around Shane, pulling him into a hard, possessive embrace. He buried his face in Shane's neck, inhaling deeply, a low, satisfied hum vibrating in his chest. He kissed him, once, twice, a third time on his temple.

"I missed you," he murmured, his voice rough with fatigue and affection. "I'm kidnapping you and hiding you in my hockey bag when I leave."

Shane clung to him, his arms tight around Ilya's waist, his face pressed into his shoulder. He held on longer than usual, breathing in the scent of him, leather, clean cotton, the faint, sharp smell of arena ice that still clung to his skin. The thought was so loud it was a wonder Ilya couldn't hear it: There are three of us in this hug now.

"I missed you too," Shane whispered back.

Ilya pulled back slightly, his hands coming up to frame Shane's face, his thumbs stroking his freckles. He searched his eyes, the earlier suspicion from the phone call returning. "You are still having a face."

Before Shane could muster a reply or a deflection, a brisk knock sounded at the door.

Ilya frowned, glancing toward it. "Are you expecting someone?"

"Anna," Shane said, the name a lifeline and a curse. "The paperwork. She said she'd bring it by tonight."

The moment was suspended. Ilya gave him one last, searching look, then dropped a quick kiss on his lips and went to answer the door.

Anna, Ilya's real estate attorney, bustled in with a professional smile and a thick folder. "Congratulations, gentlemen! All systems are go. Just a few signatures to make it official."

They sat at the kitchen table, now cleared of everything except the folder. Anna spread out the final closing documents, explaining each one in her efficient, legalese-lite manner. Ilya was fully engaged, asking questions about property tax prorations and when they'd be able to start moving in, signing with a confident flourish, his excitement palpable.

"This is it," he said, grinning at Shane after signing a particularly hefty page.

Shane tried to match his smile. He picked up a pen, his hand trembling slightly. He stared at the line where his signature was supposed to go. He was signing papers to legally bind himself to Ilya in the ownership of a physical place, a foundation for their future, while a biological, irrevocable bond was already growing inside him. The juxtaposition was almost funny.

"Shane?" Anna prompted gently, pointing to the line. "Just here, and here."

He blinked, scribbled his name, his mind a thousand miles away, or more accurately, a few inches inward.

Ilya watched him, his brow slightly furrowed, but said nothing.

Finally, it was done. Anna gathered the papers, beaming. "Congratulations, homeowners. The keys are yours. Welcome to Ottawa."

She left with more handshakes and well-wishes. The front door closed with a definitive click.

Silence settled back over the half-packed house, but it was a different silence now. It was full. Full of the signed promise on the table, and the unspeakable secret in Shane's body.

Ilya turned to him, his earlier joy returning. He pulled Shane into another hug. “We have house,” he said, the simple declaration bursting with pride.

Shane hugged him back, resting his cheek against Ilya’s chest. “We have a house,” he echoed.

Ilya began talking, his words tumbling out in an eager stream. Plans for the move, which furniture to bring first, how they should christen the new kitchen. Shane listened, the words washing over him, his heart pounding so hard he was sure Ilya could feel it.

He had to do it. Now. Before he lost his nerve forever.

“Ilya.”

Something in his voice, a quiet, seismic shift- made Ilya stop mid-sentence. He pulled back, holding Shane at arm’s length. His playful expression vanished, replaced by complete, focused attention. “What is it?”

Shane took a shaky breath. His hands were trembling again. He stepped back, putting a small space between them. “I found something out today. When I was with Rose.”

Ilya went very still, his gaze locked on Shane’s face.

“She... she got her period. At lunch. She asked me if I had a tampon.” Shane’s words came out in a rush. “And when I said no, I just... I realized. I never got mine. After my heat. It never came.”

Ilya’s eyes widened almost imperceptibly. His breath hitched, but he didn’t speak. He just waited, a statue of tense anticipation.

“I went to the pharmacy,” Shane continued, his voice dropping to a whisper. “I bought tests. Because I had to know.” He turned and walked to the kitchen counter, where he had hidden

the digital test in a drawer. He pulled it out, his hand closing around the plastic stick. He couldn't look at Ilya. He just held it out, the display facing him.

Ilya's eyes dropped. He saw the word. **PREGNANT**.

For several long, agonizing seconds, Ilya said nothing. He didn't move. He simply stared at the test, his face unreadable. The silence was worse than any reaction.

Shane's nerve broke. "I took all the tests," he blurted out, the words tumbling over each other. "Different kinds. Because I didn't want to be wrong. They were all... they all said the same thing."

That detail, so perfectly, characteristically Shane in its pursuit of certainty, seemed to penetrate Ilya's shock. A sound escaped him, a half-choked thing that was almost a laugh but got strangled by the emotion welling in his eyes. He finally looked up from the test, his gaze finding Shane's. His blue eyes were blazing with a storm of feeling, awe, love, wonder.

His first question, when it came, was hushed, raw. "Are you happy?"

The concern, the priority of *Shane's* desire over everything else, undid him. Shane's composure crumbled. A sob tore from his throat, and he nodded, tears spilling over. "I think I am," he managed. Then, more honestly, "I'm scared."

Ilya stepped forward, closing the distance between them in one stride. He didn't grab the test. He didn't whoop. He cupped Shane's face in his hands, his thumbs wiping away the tears. "Don't be, my love. I don't think I have ever been so happy. This is the best night of my life." he whispered, the admission profound.

Shane laughed through his tears, a wet, hiccupping sound. "Really?"

"Da, really." Ilya's own eyes were shining. "But are you happy? Tell me you want this too, Shane."

His attention drifted then, down from Shane's face, over his chest, coming to rest on his abdomen, still flat and unchanged beneath his t-shirt. A reverence settled over his features. His hand started to lift, to reach out, but he hesitated, his fingers curling slightly. He looked back at Shane's face, a silent question in his eyes.

Can I?

Shane understood. Instead of answering with words, he reached down and took Ilya's large, warm hand in both of his. He guided it, placing Ilya's palm flat against his lower stomach, holding it there.

There was no kick. No flutter. No visible change. But in that touch, the abstract truth became physical. A shared point of reality.

"We're having a baby," Shane whispered.

Ilya's breath left him in a shuddering sigh. He leaned forward until his forehead rested against Shane's. "Our baby," he echoed, the words a prayer.

Then Ilya began to cry in earnest, silent tears tracking through the stubble on his cheeks. He was laughing and crying at the same time, murmuring something in Russian against Shane's skin, words that sounded like blessings, like promises, like overwhelmed disbelief. Shane held onto him, crying and laughing too, their tears mingling. It wasn't some dramatic scene. It was an intimate collapse of every barrier, a mutual surrender to a joy so big it had to be cried out.

Eventually, their breathing evened. They stood there, foreheads touching, Ilya's hand still splayed over Shane's stomach, the other arm wrapped tightly around his back.

Ilya's gaze shifted over Shane's shoulder, to the kitchen table where the stack of signed house documents lay. He looked back at Shane, then down at his own hand on Shane's abdomen. A slow, incredulous smile spread across his face, cutting through the tear-streaks.

He nodded toward the table. “We bought a house today,” he said, his voice hoarse but laced with dawning humor.

Shane nodded, sniffing.

Ilya’s smile widened. “And we are having a baby.”

The sheer, absurd productivity of it struck them both. A startled laugh burst from Shane. “Shut up.”

“Is a very productive day,” Ilya insisted, his own laughter rumbling in his chest. He pointed out, with flawless, ridiculous logic, “Is good we bought a house with extra bedrooms.”

The statement hung in the air. Shane’s laughter softened into something else. He thought of the empty room in the Ottawa floor plan, the one they’d looked at just that morning, the one with the morning light. The room without a purpose.

Suddenly, it had one.

A fresh wave of emotion, sweeter this time, washed over him. He looked into Ilya’s eyes, seeing the same awe, the same forward-looking wonder.

“I guess we’re going to need a nursery,” Shane said softly.

Ilya pulled him back into a full embrace, this one gentler, infinitely tender. He held him there, in the liminal space of their half-packed old life, with the paperwork for their new beginning on the table beside them, and the proof of their greatest creation held silently between them, in the warm sanctuary of their joined hands.

Chapter End Notes

Well. I was very nice to you all this chapter. Mostly.

We got Ilya finding his place with the Centaurs, Shane finally deciding he is DONE being everyone's polite little poster boy, Rose is awesome, Ilya continuing to try to behave but that's not fully possible in my brain, a new house...

...and, you know.

A baby. 😊

I have been waiting a long time to finally write Shane finding out, and I loved letting it happen through something as completely ordinary as Rose asking him for a tampon. Poor Shane really had every single clue sitting directly in front of him and still needed his period to personally fail to arrive before his brain connected the dots.

And Ilya asking if Shane was happy before anything else was very important to me. After everything these two have been through, I wanted this moment to belong to them before the rest of the world, hockey, the league, or anyone else gets an opinion.

Now the question is...

How long do we think it takes Shane to start replaying the last few weeks and realize that a certain giant Russian alpha was acting suspiciously unsurprised? 🙄

Thank you again for waiting for me while I took my vacation and got settled back home. I'm very happy to be writing our boys again, and I have a feeling Chapter 40 is going to be... interesting.

Please leave me your reactions because I have been DYING to know what everyone thinks about this reveal. ❤️

Chapter 40: Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

As always, the biggest thank you to my amazing beta reader for catching all the things my eyes skip over. You're an absolute lifesaver. 

And to my favorite gay besties...I appreciate you more than you'll ever know. 

Chapter Notes

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

The initial, breathless shock began to ebb, leaving in its wake a buzzing, tender awareness. As they moved through the familiar routine of getting ready for bed, Shane found himself moving differently. He was aware of Ilya in a hyper-focused way, as if his body had developed a new homing signal tuned exclusively to his alpha.

While brushing his teeth at the bathroom sink, Shane leaned his shoulder against Ilya's arm, seeking the solid contact. Ilya, washing his face, went still for a second, then continued, a soft hum of contentment vibrating through the point of connection.

In the bedroom, as Ilya pulled a clean t-shirt over his head, Shane came up behind him and wrapped his arms around his waist, pressing his forehead between Ilya's shoulder blades. He just stood there, holding on, breathing in the clean scent of soap and skin.

A few minutes later, as Ilya tossed his practice clothes to the laundry hamper, Shane drifted over again, this time nudging his nose against the side of Ilya's neck, inhaling deeply. The action was unconscious, a pure instinct seeking comfort, seeking *home*.

Ilya's hands stilled on the fabric. A slow, delighted smile spread across his face.

"Sweetheart," he said, his voice a low rumble.

“What?” Shane murmured, not moving, his lips brushing Ilya’s skin.

“You have scented me six times since we finished with Anna.”

Shane pulled back, a faint blush warming his cheeks. “I have not.”

Even as he denied it, he found himself leaning in again, rubbing his cheek against the curve of Ilya’s shoulder in a slow, cat-like motion.

Ilya turned his head, catching Shane’s gaze, his blue eyes sparkling. “Seven.”

The embarrassment was swift but shallow, quickly washed away by the utter fondness in Ilya’s expression. He wasn’t mocking. He was cataloging, thrilled by each small surrender to an instinct Shane had spent a lifetime carefully moderating in the name of professionalism and control. Ilya saw not weakness, but trust. It twisted a little knife in his heart but unlike before, he’d only thought of Shane’s well being from keeping a few secrets.

Once in bed, the restlessness returned, but of a different kind. Shane couldn’t settle. He flipped his pillow. He kicked the duvet off, then pulled it back up to his chin. He curled tightly against Ilya’s side, only to roll away a minute later, then shift back, his hand finding Ilya’s chest again. He was a live wire of undefined need, adjusting and readjusting the world around him without finding the configuration that soothed the low-grade buzz in his nerves.

Ilya watched him for several minutes, patient, letting Shane toss and turn. Finally, he spoke into the dark. “What do you need?”

“I don’t know,” Shane said, frustration edging his voice. Ilya sat up, turning on a lamp and running a hand over Shane’s cheek, going down and circling Shane’s throat lightly. He watched as Shane blushed and settled down a little. The embarrassment faded, replaced by a soft gratitude. Shane kissed his arm and let himself be led into Ilya’s arms again.

“I just... can’t settle.”

Ilya waited. He had learned the value of silence with Shane, of letting him find his own answers.

Shane flopped onto his back, staring at the ceiling. The feeling was a nagging, physical itch, a discontent that had nothing to do with his thoughts and everything to do with his skin, his bones, his very cells. And then, with a clarity that felt both shocking and obvious, he understood.

Quietly, his voice small with a vulnerability he usually guarded, he admitted, “I want to nest.”

The words hung in the air. For Shane, they were a confession, a confession that didn’t come easy for him to voice outloud. Nesting was one of the most stereotypically, undeniably omega behavior there was. It spoke of a deep, biological need for safety and preparation that he’d spent a lifetime viewing as a weakness. To voice it, to Ilya of all people, felt like surrendering a final, fiercely held piece of his independence.

Then reality crashed in. He looked around the half-stripped room, at the towers of sealed boxes. “But everything’s packed.”

His disappointment was a tangible thing, a physical slump of his shoulders.

Before the feeling could fully take root, Ilya was throwing back the covers and getting out of bed.

“Where are you going?” Shane asked, propping himself up on his elbows.

Ilya was already heading for the nearest stack of boxes in the hallway, his silhouette determined in the dim light from the bathroom. “You want a nest, then I will get you one.”

What followed was a comedy of errors that slowly dissolved the remaining tension. Ilya began opening any box labeled with clothing and bedding.

Shane sat up on the bed, a faint smile tugging at his lips.

“Linen closet stuff is in the boxes marked ‘Linen Closet’,” Shane instructed, sitting up cross-legged.

“There are three,” Ilya reported, examining the labels.

“The one with the blue tape on the side.”

“They all have blue tape.”

Shane paused, thinking. “Oh.”

After opening the second ‘Linen Closet’ box to find it full of towels, Ilya finally struck gold in the third. He made a triumphant sound and began hauling out armfuls of bedding: spare sheets still smelling faintly of lavender detergent, a lightweight summer duvet, several pillows, and, from the very bottom, the thick, soft fleece blanket that usually lived on their couch.

He marched back to the bed and dumped the entire haul unceremoniously onto the mattress. “There.”

Shane looked from the proud, expectant expression on Ilya’s face to the chaotic pile of fabric. “That’s... thank you, Ilya.” Shane said with a warm, goofy smile.

“Is not as nice as the ones you’ve made...,” Ilya said bashfully, pulling Shane into his arms again.

“It’s perfect.” Shane amended, a real smile breaking through. “It’s really good.” Then he pointed. “I want your hoodie.”

Ilya blinked. “My hoodie? Is in the laundry.”

“The one you wore yesterday. It’s on the chair.”

“It smells like airplane and arena.”

“I know. I want it.”

Without another question, Ilya retrieved the worn Centaurs hoodie and handed it over. Shane took it, his movements deliberate. He didn’t put it on. Instead, he folded it carefully and placed it among the nest’s pillows, near where his head would rest. Then he took Ilya’s pillow from his side of the bed and positioned it right next to his own. The message was clear- the nest needed Ilya’s scent woven into its fabric as much as it needed the physical barriers.

Ilya watched, something profound shifting in his eyes. This wasn’t just comfort. It was a biological imperative for safety, and he was being physically, olfactorily, integrated into that safe space. He was part of the architecture of Shane’s security.

When Shane finally nodded, satisfied, Ilya climbed carefully into the nest beside him.

The effect was instantaneous. Shane’s body, which had been taut with restless energy for hours, seemed to melt. He let out a long, shuddering sigh and curled himself into Ilya’s side, his head finding the hollow of his shoulder, his nose pressed to his throat. One leg hooked over Ilya’s. The restless searching was over. He was home.

Ilya held him, the realization settling deep. This hadn’t been fussiness, Shane’s body had been sounding an alarm, seeking a specific condition of safety it needed to truly rest. And

now, enveloped in softness and scent, it had found it.

After a long, quiet moment, Ilya's hand drifted down, his palm coming to rest, warm and heavy, over Shane's lower abdomen.

This time, everything was different. There was no secret, no unspoken suspicion hanging between them. Shane knew exactly why that hand was there, what it was meant to shelter. He slid his own hand down, covering Ilya's, lacing their fingers together over the place where their future slept.

"We're really having a baby," Shane whispered into the dark, the wonder still fresh.

"Da," Ilya breathed, his lips against Shane's hair. "We are."

They lay there, wrapped in the nest and each other, and let themselves imagine.

"Do you think it's a boy or a girl?" Shane asked.

"I do not care," Ilya said, and meant it. "I hope it has your freckles."

Shane snorted a soft laugh. "I hope it has your eyes."

"No," Ilya disagreed immediately. "Your eyes. They are... everything. My eyes are just blue."

"Your eyes are not 'just blue'," Shane argued sleepily. "They're like the lake under a storm. Or... when the light is just right, I see all the different blues and greens, a bit of gold. I love your eyes."

Ilya chuckled, the sound vibrating through his chest. “Hmm, stormy water? So romantic, Hollander. I don't care though, I just want all our babies healthy.”

“All our babies?!” Shane laughed, pulling back to be able to look at Ilya.

They lapsed into comfortable silence before Ilya spoke again, decisively. “Yes, I want a whole hockey team worth of babies. Would be best team in the league.”

“Obviously,” Shane agreed. “And if we have only girls?”

“Then they play too. Would be so good that they’d have to play mens teams.” Ilya paused.

Shane lifted his head slightly. “Really?”

“I know. Genetically inevitable.”

Shane laughed, the image forming in his mind: a small, determined figure tearing through the halls of their Ottawa house, issuing commands and questions in a chaotic blend of three languages. The house suddenly felt not just like a structure, but a stage waiting for a life to be lived upon it.

The conversation drifted, as light and meandering as smoke. They wondered about height, about whether the baby would be calm or fierce, about if it would love the lake like Shane or prefer the city bustle like Ilya once had.

Then, hockey surfaced. Ilya’s hand flexed slightly under Shane’s.

“How young can a child begin skating?” Ilya mused, his tone deliberately casual.

Shane's parental radar pinged instantly. "Ilya."

"Eighteen months, perhaps? For balance."

"Absolutely not."

"Two years?"

"No."

"Two and a half? With those tiny skates, the ones with double blades-"

"Ilya Rozanov, our child is not going to be a toddler on skates."

"But they will want to," Ilya insisted, as if this were a foregone conclusion. "Is in the blood."

"They might hate hockey," Shane pointed out, playing devil's advocate. "They might want to be a poet. Or a botanist."

Ilya fell silent for so long Shane thought he might have fallen asleep. Then, with grave seriousness, he said, "You would give them the boring genetics. Then we will have the most well-read, plant-loving poet in the NHL. But they will still know how to skate. For safety."

Shane shook with silent laughter against him. It was all so ridiculous and perfect. They weren't making real decisions; they were trying on parenthood like a new, outlandish suit, marveling at the fit.

As their laughter faded, a deeper quiet returned. The fears, held at bay by joy and humor, began to seep through the cracks.

Shane's voice was barely a whisper when he finally gave them voice. "What if I'm bad at this?"

He felt Ilya's chest rise and fall in a deep breath. Hockey, he understood. Parenthood was a vast, uncharted territory with no guaranteed outcomes, no scoreboard to tell him if he was winning.

Ilya's answer, when it came, was raw with its own vulnerability. "I have no fucking idea how to be a father. But we have David to use as a role model."

The weight of his own childhood, the ghost of the man who had been a source of fear rather than safety, lived in that admission. Shane tightened his arm around him. "You know how not to be one," Shane said softly. Ilya's arms tightened around him.

After a long moment, his voice thick with emotion, he made a promise into the dark. "Our baby will never be afraid of coming home."

The sentence held the entirety of their shared history- the surveillance, the control, the warehouse, the long road back to trust. It held Ilya's own childhood terrors. 'Home' had meant so many fraught things to both of them. Now, they had just legally bought one, and were creating a new life to fill it. The promise was a vow to break every chain that had bound them.

Shane pressed as close as physically possible, his answer wordless, written in the press of his body and the dampness of his eyes against Ilya's skin.

It was Ilya who eventually shifted them back to the practical, his protective instincts surging forward as a bulwark against the emotional tide. "We go to baby doctor tomorrow," he stated, his tone leaving no room for argument.

Shane started to protest out of habit, a reflex against being managed. "Ilya-"

“No.” The word was firm, but his hand on Shane’s stomach was infinitely gentle. “The tests tell us you are pregnant. They do not tell us you are healthy. They do not tell us the baby is well. They do not tell us how far. We need to know.”

Beneath the insistence was a bedrock of fear, the same fear Shane felt coiling in his own gut. The unknown was terrifying. For once, Shane didn’t fight him. He nodded against Ilya’s shoulder. “Ok. Tomorrow.”

He felt the tension bleed from Ilya’s muscles. Then, a new thought occurred to him. “I don’t even know how far along I am.”

Ilya was quiet for a beat, choosing his words with care. “I think I know. The second day of your heat.”

Shane simply nodded, too overwhelmed and exhausted to really analyze why Ilya was so sure of the answer. That analysis belonged to another day. Finally, nestled deep in the comforts of bedding and Ilya’s arms, their scent intermingled, Shane’s exhaustion claimed him. His breathing deepened, his grip on Ilya’s shirt loosening as sleep pulled him under.

Ilya remained awake a while longer. In the faint light from the window, he could see the silhouettes of moving boxes, ready to be moved. Shane was a warm, trusting weight against him, one hand still splayed over Ilya’s own where it rested on the subtle, unchanged plane of his abdomen.

His world, once so narrowly focused on possession and victory, had expanded in a single evening to terrifying, beautiful dimensions. A house. A family. A tiny, unseen life that was now the center of his universe.

He closed his eyes, breathing in the scent of his mate, his home, his future, all held safe within the circle of his arms.

Shane woke up before his usual alarm. He was encased, deliciously trapped in under his Alpha. Ilya had moved over the night and his upper body was on him and their legs were pretzeled together- somehow though he'd manage to only curl around his stomach and avoid the weight there. The nest, that Ilya had so longingly mad for them had molded around them perfectly. A pillow was wedged snugly under his cheek, the soft couch blanket was tangled around their legs, and Ilya's hoodie was a warm, scent-soaked bundle clutched in one hand. The other hand was splayed over his own lower abdomen, a subconscious, protective cradle.

The first conscious sensation was the scent. It wasn't just in the air; it was the air he breathed. It was deep, layered, and profoundly theirs, the clean cotton of the sheets, the lingering hint of his own honeysuckle sweetness, and the dominant, grounding leather and spice of Ilya, woven through it all. He took a slow, deep breath, and his body, even in its sleep-soft state, seemed to sigh in recognition. *Safe. Home.*

Ilya was woke up slowly and propped on an elbow beside him, not moving, just watching. His face was close, his blue eyes soft in the grey morning light filtering through the blinds. Shane blinked slowly, a lazy, contented smile touching his lips.

"Hi," he murmured, his voice rough with sleep.

Ilya didn't answer with words. He leaned in and pressed his nose gently against the pulse point on Shane's neck, inhaling slowly, deeply. It was the same meditative, communing scenting from the cottage, but now it carried a new layer of quiet awe. He was checking, confirming, worshipping. Shane tilted his head, granting him better access, a soft hum of pleasure vibrating in his throat.

"Dobroye utro, milyy moy." Ilya observed, his lips brushing Shane's skin.

"You're going to have to start teaching me Russian," Shane sighed, burrowing deeper into his pillow-wall. "I don't ever want to move from this spot. You smell so good."

Ilya chuckled, the sound a warm rumble. He finally pulled back, but his hand came to rest where Shane's still lay. "Nesting is good, but you need breakfast. And doctor is at ten."

Shane made a grumpy noise but didn't argue. As he reluctantly began to extricate himself from the bedding, he noticed the tablet on Ilya's nightstand, its screen dark but placed with deliberate care beside a half-empty glass of water. Ilya was already out of bed, moving towards the main part of the house.

In the kitchen, he found a large brown bag already there.

Shane reached for the coffee grinder, yawning. Ilya's hand gently intercepted his. "No coffee," he said, not looking up from where he was pulling out containers from the bag.

Shane stared at him. "What? Why?"

"I read that caffeine is not good for the baby." Ilya said it simply, holding out a to go cup with orange juice. He slid the eggs onto a plate and added a piece of whole-grain toast and a small container with yogurt and fruit. "Here, you need protein."

Shane took the plate, baffled. "Since when are you a nutritionist?"

Ilya just shrugged, turning to grab more food from the bag. "I read. Last night."

Later, as Shane was getting dressed, Ilya said, "The doctor we are seeing is Dr. Lisa Aris. She is an omega obstetrician, specialized in athletic pregnancies. Her clinic is in Westmount. She has a lot of experience and does a lot of athlete families.."

Shane paused, one leg in his jeans. "How do you know all that? I didn't even know what kind of doctor to call."

“I called Jackie. She has contacts, and I made appointment when the clinic opened this morning.” Ilya’s tone was matter-of-fact, but the speed and specificity of the arrangement was... notable.

Then, as Shane laced up his sneakers, Ilya leaned against the doorframe. “You will tell Dr. Aris about your training schedule. The skating, the weights, the contact drills. We need to know what is safe.”

A tiny, cold knot formed in Shane’s stomach, separate from the warm, fluttering anxiety about the appointment itself. It wasn’t Ilya’s care that felt odd, that was expected, especially now. It was the pre-emptive, meticulously researched nature of it. The coffee. The specific doctor type. The focus on athletic safety. He should have known all that. Would Ilya eventually think that he wasn’t capable of taking care of himself or their child? Would this become a problem in the future?

It felt like Ilya hadn’t just accepted the news last night. It felt like he’d been preparing for it.

The thought was a whisper at the back of his mind, easily drowned out by the louder, more immediate nerves about the upcoming appointment. He pushed it aside. Ilya was just being Ilya, hyper-competent, taking control of a situation. It was his way of loving. Shane told himself this, ignoring the self doubt. Most Alpha’s acted like that. The few times he’d been around Hayden and Scott while Jackie and Kip were pregnant gave him enough insight to confirm that Alpha’s became more overbearing while their mates were expecting.

The clinic was calm and modern, smelling of clean linen and faint antiseptic. Dr. Lisa Aris was a woman in her fifties with a brisk, kind demeanor and sharp eyes that missed nothing. She took Shane’s history, asked about his cycle, his heat, his symptoms. Ilya sat rigidly in the chair beside him, answering when asked, his gaze fixed on the doctor.

“Based on your last heat,” Dr. Aris said, tapping her stylus on her tablet, “we’re estimating you’re about seven weeks along. That’s early, but far enough along to see a few things with an internal ultrasound. That’s what I’d recommend today, to confirm placement and viability. How does that sound?”

Viability. The clinical word made Shane's heart stutter. He nodded, his throat dry. "Okay. Yes."

Ilya's hand found his, squeezing once, tight.

The ultrasound room was dim. Shane lay on the table, a paper sheet over his lap, his heart pounding a frantic rhythm against his ribs. Ilya stood beside him, his posture so tense he looked carved from stone. Dr. Aris prepared the wand, her movements efficient.

"This might feel a little cold, and some pressure," she said kindly.

Shane closed his eyes, focusing on the feel of Ilya's hand in his. There was a strange, intimate pressure, then the doctor's attention shifted to the monitor she'd angled toward them.

For a moment, there was only staticky grey and black, shifting forms. Shane had no idea what he was looking at. Then, Dr. Aris made a soft, satisfied sound. "There we are. Look."

She moved the wand slightly, and a shape coalesced on the screen. A small, oval, greyish circle. And within it, a smaller, pulsing, bright white flicker.

Thump-thump. Thump-thump. Thump-thump.

The sound erupted from the machine's speaker before Shane even fully processed the image, a rapid, rhythmic, galloping *whoosh* that filled the quiet room.

"That's the gestational sac," Dr. Aris said, her voice warm. "And that beautiful, strong flutter right there? That's your baby's heartbeat."

Shane's breath caught. All the abstract terror and wonder of the last day crystalized into that sound. That relentless, tiny, miraculous *whoosh-whoosh-whoosh*. It was real. It was alive. It was *theirs*. He turned his head to look at Ilya.

Ilya was staring at the screen, utterly transfixed. All the color had drained from his face, but his eyes were blazing. The fierce, protective intensity was there, but it was submerged in something far deeper, a raw, stunned reverence. Tears, silent and unchecked, traced paths down his cheeks. He wasn't even trying to hide them. His grip on Shane's hand was almost painful.

"Heartbeat is perfect," Dr. Aris continued, clicking a few measurements. "Measuring right at seven weeks. Everything looks exactly as it should."

The whooshing sound continued, the soundtrack to their shattered and remade world. Shane looked back at the flickering light on the screen, the tiny pulse that was proof of their future. The fear was still there, a constant undercurrent. But now, beneath his palm where Ilya's hand clutched his, and echoing in the dim room from the speaker, was something louder, something stronger.

Thump-thump. Thump-thump.

The sound of the heartbeat, that relentless, galloping whoosh-whoosh-whoosh, still seemed to echo in the dim room even after Dr. Aris turned the machine off. It was imprinted on Shane's soul. He sat up, adjusting his shirt, his movements slow, as if afraid to jostle the tiny, flickering universe now confirmed to be inside him.

Ilya hadn't moved. He stood frozen beside the examination table, his gaze locked on the now-dark screen. The tear tracks had dried on his cheeks, but his face was pale, his expression one of shell-shocked awe. His hand, which had been crushing Shane's, now hung limply at his side, trembling slightly.

The profound silence was broken by Shane. He cleared his throat, his voice surprisingly steady. "Dr. Aris."

She looked up from making notes on her tablet. “Yes?”

“My team’s training camp started. I’ve been skating. I have... a few weeks left before the season starts, but how long would I be able to play? Right now I’ve been attending practices.” He felt Ilya go rigid beside him, a new tension radiating from him like heat. Shane pressed on, his eyes earnest on the doctor’s. “Is that... is it okay for me to do that? For a little while longer?”

“Shane.” Ilya’s voice was a low, strained warning, a single cracked syllable.

Dr. Aris’s sharp eyes flicked between them, taking in Ilya’s palpable distress and Shane’s determined tone. She held up a calming hand. “It’s a very fair question.” She set her tablet down and leaned back against the counter, adopting a lecturing but kind tone. “Every pregnancy is different, and every athlete’s body is different. At seven weeks, the embryo is well-protected within the pelvis. The primary risks at this stage aren’t from the kind of controlled, skilled movement of a professional practice. They’re from extreme impact, severe abdominal trauma, or in you go into a state of pining.”

Shane nodded, listening with the focus he usually reserved for a coach’s whiteboard.

She held her hands up and interlocked her fingers tightly. “Right now, your abdomen muscles are forming a protective wall, given your elite fitness level and the fact you’re not taking contact, continuing to skate for a limited time is generally considered acceptable, *with* significant modifications,” she continued. She then loosened her fingers into a cupped form. “As your pregnancy moves further along, you’ll lose the protection of the abdominal wall so I would say you have about eight more weeks worth of time to play, as long as you’re careful. Hydration is non-negotiable. You must drink far more than you think you need, before, during, and after. You must listen to your body, if you feel dizzy, nauseated, or excessively fatigued, you stop. Immediately. No arguing. And,” she added, her gaze shifting meaningfully to Ilya, who was staring at her with desperate intensity, “you will wear additional protective padding. A specially fitted abdominal guard. Not for the baby, necessarily, but for your own muscle and tissue support, and for everyone’s peace of mind.”

“An abdominal guard,” Shane repeated, the term feeling strange on his tongue. He hadn’t told Ilya about his little meeting with the coach yet.

“Yes. I can recommend a sports medicine specialist who can fit you for one this week.” She looked back at Shane. “I’d say you’re ok to play for now while your body begins its transition. The moment it feels like work, or strain, you are done. Understood?”

“Understood,” Shane said, a wave of relief washing through him. It wasn’t a full stop, and he’d had to be careful but he could at least start the season.

Ilya was not relieved. The fear in his eyes had crystallized into something harder, darker. Shane recognized it- it was the same shadow that lived in his own memories of the cameras, the tracker, of helplessness. For Ilya, any risk, any potential for harm, was a direct trigger back to the moment he’d almost lost Shane forever.

“Mr. Rozanov?” Dr. Aris said gently, acknowledging him directly.

He dragged his gaze from some middle distance, focusing on her with effort. “You are certain?” The question was raw, stripped of his usual bravado. It was the plea of a man who had already burned the world once for the person in his care.

“I am certain of the medical guidelines for a healthy, early-term pregnancy in an elite athlete,” she said with professional empathy. “I cannot control what happens when you’re playing, but you are technically safe for a few weeks. It is up to Shane, and to the people around him to make sure rules are followed.” Her meaning was clear.

Ilya gave a sharp, stiff nod, his jaw clenched so tight a muscle jumped. He didn’t like it. Every instinct in him screamed against it. But he had promised, every day since Shane forgave him to try to love in a new way. To respect Shane’s autonomy, even when it terrified him. This was the first, brutal test of that promise.

The rest of the appointment passed in a blur of prescriptions for prenatal vitamins, a referral for the padding specialist, and instructions for the coming weeks. Ilya absorbed every word, his body still humming with tense energy.

In the car, the silence was thick. Shane watched Montreal pass by outside, his hand resting once more on his flat stomach. The world looked the same, but it was irrevocably different.

He was a hockey player. He was an omega. He was Ilya Rozanov's mate. And now, he was someone's sire. The layers of his identity had never felt so complex, or so heavy.

"I'll be careful," Shane said quietly, breaking the silence. "You heard her. It's just skating. Light drills. I'll have the padding."

Ilya's grip on the steering wheel was white-knuckled. He didn't speak for a full minute. When he did, his voice was rough, scraped raw from holding back a storm of protest. "I know you will." He took a shuddering breath. "The people on the ice with you... they will not be careful."

"Hayden will be there," Shane said, invoking the one name he knew would carry weight. "JJ. The guys who don't hate me yet, they'll run interference."

Ilya nodded again, that same stiff, controlled motion. He was trying. The effort was visible, a painful straining against the very wiring of his being. The obsession that had once manifested in trackers and surveillance now had nowhere to go but inward, transforming into a silent, agonizing vigil.

Later, back in the nest-like bed, the tension slowly seeped away, replaced by the renewed wonder from the ultrasound. Ilya's large hand found its way under Shane's shirt, his palm a warm brand on the skin of his lower abdomen. His touch was different now, not just possessive, but searching, reverent, as if trying to feel the echo of that tiny heartbeat through layers of flesh and muscle.

"Seven weeks," Shane murmured into the darkness.

"Da," Ilya whispered back. His thumb stroked a gentle, rhythmic arc. "I can't wait until you start to show. I think you will be so cute with a little bump." Ilya said with a smile, nuzzling into Shane's neck.

A few hours later after a light lunch, Ilya immediately got on the phone, his voice a low, commanding rumble in the hallway. Shane barely heard him. He drifted upstairs, settling into

the nest and grabbed his laptop from the floor by the bed. He sank down cross-legged, the device booting up as he shrugged off his jacket.

The search began simple enough, 'male omega pregnancy timeline.' Then 'Seven weeks gestation development.', 'Prenatal nutrition for athletes.' He opened tabs, his brow furrowed in concentration. He clicked on a medical diagram, zooming in on the intricate, alien formation of a seven-week embryo. Read about limb buds and heart chambers. They were facts, he could handle facts.

Then his searches grew more specific, more personal. 'Risks of male omega pregnancy.' 'Abdominal guard efficacy studies.' He fell down a rabbit hole of parenting forums, his eyes scanning anxious posts about morning sickness and fatigue, things he'd already been experiencing without a name. There wasn't much though, it seemed like most omega's just stopped even doing the few 'permissible' jobs while pregnant. He read about scent changes, about heightened instincts, about the nesting urge he'd already succumbed to. Every symptom was a checkmark, a piece of evidence locking into place. He was very surprised that he hadn't noticed his own scent change, but chalked that up to using scent patches for so long but *was* surprised that Ilya hadn't noticed.

A particularly stark line in a medical article made his breath catch: 'Male omegas may experience a more pronounced hormonal shift due to the body's adaptation to a non-typical gestational role, potentially leading to increased...'

He didn't finish reading. He highlighted it, copied it, pasted it into a new document he titled, 'Notes.'

He was so absorbed he didn't hear Ilya finish his calls and come upstairs. Ilya stood in the bedroom doorway, watching him. Shane's face was illuminated by the cool blue glow of the screen, his expression one of intense, worried focus. He was biting his lower lip, a habit he had when studying game tape for a weakness in an opponent's team.

Ilya's heart clenched. This was Shane's version of preparing for the upcoming changes. It was how he controlled the uncontrollable. He remembered the file he'd had pulled, the cold, invasive facts he'd once compiled to possess Shane. This was the mirror image, Shane gathering knowledge to understand, to prepare, to protect himself.

He walked over quietly and sat beside him, his back against the bed frame. He didn't look at the screen. He just waited. After a minute, Shane spoke without looking away from an article about omega prenatal vitamins. "Did you know male omegas have a thirty percent higher likelihood of certain nutrient deficiencies during the first three months? The studies are kind of all over the place, though. A lot of the data is old."

"We will get the best vitamins, anything you need." Ilya said, his voice soft. "The doctor will recommend."

"I'm looking at the athletic guidelines," Shane continued, his finger scrolling. "They say moderate exercise is beneficial. But 'moderate' isn't really defined for professional athletes."

"We will ask the specialist, I don't want you worrying about this."

Shane finally turned his head, his eyes wide and full of a swirling storm of fear and intellect. "I need to know what's happening. I need to know what to expect. Every step. I can't... I can't just be surprised by it."

"I know," Ilya said. He reached out and gently closed the laptop lid, cutting off the glow. "But you will not find all the answers today. And some answers... we find them together. As they come."

Ilya noticed how Shane relaxed once he took the laptop away. The frantic energy seemed to drain out of him, his shoulders loosening as he leaned sideways and let his weight fall against Ilya. It wasn't proof that Shane needed someone else to control him. Ilya had learned that lesson too painfully to misunderstand it now. Shane needed somewhere safe enough to occasionally put the weight down. There was a difference between taking control from him and having Shane willingly hand over some small burden because he trusted Ilya to carry it. That was the balance Ilya needed to learn. He suspected he would spend the rest of his life learning exactly where that line lived, because what Shane needed would change, and so would he.

"I'm scared," he whispered into Ilya's shoulder, the admission easier the second time.

Ilya wrapped an arm around him, pulling him closer. “I am also scared. But I am also excited, happy, hopeful.” He kissed the top of Shane’s head. “But we face everything together. And we are smart. And we have best doctor. And you,” he said, a thread of warm pride in his voice, “are already best sire, reading medical papers for our baby.”

A weak, wet laugh escaped Shane. “I’m just trying to feel like I have some control.”

“You have control,” Ilya assured him, his hand coming to rest on Shane’s stomach. “You have most important control. You listen to this.” He gave a gentle press. “It will tell you what it needs. And you tell me. And I will make it happen.” His thumb moved slowly over Shane’s stomach. “You do not have to figure out everything alone anymore. You can rely on me.”

Shane nodded, exhausted. “I’m trying. I know that you’re with me, but its hard.” The emotional and mental toll of the day crashed over him. He let Ilya guide him to lay down and settle into his arms. This time, as he curled into the scent-soaked blankets.

Ilya slid in behind him, his body a solid wall of heat. His arm settled over Shane’s waist, his palm once again a warm, steady weight over the life growing within. Outside, the last lights of Montreal winked through the blinds. Tomorrow, movers would come to pack away the remnants of Shane’s old life.

The morning after the ultrasound dawned with a new, shimmering quality to the air in the half-packed house. Shane felt as if he was floating, his memory was frozen at the whoosh-whoosh-whoosh sound they’d heard of their baby’s heartbeat. The fear was still there, a low hum beneath everything, but it was now joined by a giddy, almost disbelieving joy.

Shane stood in the kitchen, holding the single, precious ultrasound printout. It was grainy, mostly grey static with a small, ovalish smudge and a tiny, bright flicker pointed out by an arrow and the text ‘CRL: 1.2cm’. To anyone else, it might look like a blurry picture of a bean. But it was *their* bean.

“Your parents will be here in twenty minutes,” he said, his voice carefully even. “The plan is: we have breakfast. We talk. We give them this.” He held up the image.

Ilya, who had been vibrating with barely-contained energy since waking up, nodded so vigorously his hair flopped. “Yes. Good plan.”

Shane fixed him with a look. “The most important part of the plan is- you do not tell them.”

“I would never!” Ilya said, placing a hand over his heart.

Shane just stared.

Ilya considered. “...Recently, I would not. I do have what is word,” he frowned and thought for a few seconds. “Self control. Yes, I have excellent self control.”

“Ilya.”

“Shane,” Ilya countered, moving closer. He rested his hands on Shane’s hips, his expression turning earnest. “I promise. This is your moment. You tell them. I will be silent as...” He searched for a metaphor. “...As very quiet mouse. A Russian mouse. They are exceptionally quiet.”

“Just be a normal person,” Shane pleaded with a small laugh.

“I am excellent at normal,” Ilya declared, with the confidence of a man who had never been normal a day in his life.

The doorbell rang. Shane took a deep, steadying breath, tucked the ultrasound into the back pocket of his jeans, and went to answer it.

Yuna and David arrived bearing bags from Shane's favorite bakery and a carafe of premium coffee. "Morning boys!" Yuna announced, stepping inside and going straight to hug her son.

It was a normal, maternal hug. But as her arms went around him, Ilya, who had positioned himself as a sentinel by the kitchen archway, instinctively said, "Careful."

The word landed in the foyer like a dropped pin. Yuna froze, her arms still around Shane. She pulled back, looking first at Ilya, then at Shane. "Careful of what?"

Ilya's eyes went wide. Oops. "...His shoulder," he finished weakly.

Shane slowly turned his head to look at him, his expression flat. "His shoulder is fine. Shane, did you get hurt at camp?"

David, setting down the coffee, looked puzzled. "Did you injure it packing?"

"No," Shane said, his voice a study in forced calm. He shot Ilya a warning look that promised later retribution.

Ilya attempted an innocent smile. It looked more like a grimace.

They migrated to the kitchen table, the atmosphere now lightly charged. Yuna's sharp eyes, which missed nothing, were actively scanning. She poured coffee and handed a mug to Shane.

Before Shane's fingers could close around the handle, Ilya said, "Not too much."

Shane closed his eyes, summoning patience.

“Why?” Yuna asked, her gaze darting between them.

“I’m just... cutting back,” Shane said quickly.

“Caffeine,” Ilya added, helpfully and disastrously.

Under the table, Shane’s foot connected sharply with Ilya’s shin. Ilya winced.

“Everything okay?” David asked, looking at Ilya’s pained expression.

“Perfect,” Shane said, through a clenched smile.

“Wonderful,” Ilya said at exactly the same time, rubbing his leg.

Yuna’s eyebrows inched upward. She began unpacking the pastries: fruit and yogurt parfaits, croissants, a danish, a breakfast sandwich. She picked up the sandwich, a delicious-looking creation with sausage, egg, and cheese, and offered it to Ilya. “Here, I read you liked these.”

Ilya’s hand reached up and grabbed the wrapped sandwich. When he opened it, he inhaled the smell and groaned. “I think I love you, Yuna. you are a goddess.”

“Ilya!.”

“What?” Ilya said, defensive. “You are my first love, but you don’t give me bacon.”

Yuna gave a girlish giggle that Shane had never heard and blushed as she handed out the rest of the food.

Shane put his face in his hands.

David, ever pragmatic, looked concerned. “Shane? Keep your mate in check- no flirting with my wife.”

Shane groaned into his palms.

Across the table, Yuna was now suspicious. Shane’s yogurt sat in front of him and he was staring at Ilya’s sandwich. Her eyes had narrowed, her head tilted. She was looking at Shane, at the way he was sitting, at the lack of coffee, at Ilya’s palpable, vibrating energy. She was connecting dots at lightning speed.

Shane peeked through his fingers. He saw his mother’s expression shift from confusion to dawning, stunned comprehension. He saw the exact moment her eyes dropped to his midsection, then flew back to his face, wide and questioning. He sighed, a long, suffering sound.

“Shane?” She asked with a awed tone.

“Okay,” Shane said, dropping his hands. “Yeah. Um, well...” He reached into his back pocket, pulled out the now slightly-crumpled ultrasound printout, and slid it across the table toward his parents.

David, ever the calm one, picked it up first. He held it at various angles, his brow furrowed in concentration.

Yuna leaned over, her breath catching. Her hand flew to her mouth. “David!”

“What?”

She pointed a trembling finger at the little grey smudge, then at the text that clearly read ‘OB/GYN Imaging Center.’

David looked again. Then at Shane. Then at Ilya, who was now beaming with pride and relief. Then back at the grainy image.

A beat of pure, uncomprehending silence.

“Oh,” David said. “Oh!”

Shane started to laugh. It was a helpless, relieved sound, bubbling up from the tension of the last twenty minutes. His father’s utterly baffled, slowly dawning realization was worth every second of Ilya’s blundering.

Yuna’s eyes were glued to Shane, shining with tears. “You’re pregnant?” she whispered, as if saying it too loud might break the spell.

Suddenly, Shane was nervous. This was the moment. After a lifetime where his omega biology was a secret to be guarded, a vulnerability to be managed, a fact that had caused them all so much fear and planning... now he was announcing it as the source of something miraculous. He nodded, his throat tight. “Yeah Mama. Seven weeks.”

Yuna made a tiny, broken sound- a half sob, half laugh and was out of her chair in an instant. She wrapped Shane in a hug that was fierce and trembling all at once. For Shane, pressed against his mother’s shoulder, the emotion was unexpectedly overwhelming. This hug was different. It wasn’t protection from a threatening world. The part of him they’d once hidden was now giving them this.

She pulled back, holding his face in her hands, her thumbs wiping at the tears she’d left on his cheeks. “Are you happy?” she asked, the same question Ilya had asked, the only question that truly mattered.

Shane's gaze instinctively found Ilya's across the table. Ilya was watching them, his own eyes suspiciously bright, a soft, unwavering smile on his face. Shane looked back at his mother. "Yeah," he said, his voice cracking just once. "So happy."

That was all Yuna needed. She hugged him again, crying properly now, murmuring "My baby," in a mix of English and Japanese that made Shane's own eyes well up.

David came around the table. His hug was comically, painfully gentle, his arms barely applying pressure as if Shane were made of spun glass.

"Dad," Shane complained, laughing wetly into his shoulder. "You can hug me normally."

"I'm being careful," David said, his voice thick.

"I'm pregnant, not injured."

From behind them, Ilya immediately chimed in, "Exactly! David has the right idea. We need to be careful."

Shane pointed blindly in Ilya's direction without breaking the hug. "You stay out of this."

Once his parents had finished fussing over him, Shane noticed Ilya had taken a small step back. He was smiling, radiating happiness, but there was a subtle hesitation in his posture, as if he felt this intimate family circle was for the Hollanders alone. He was the mate, the other father, but in this raw, joyful moment, he instinctively deferred.

Yuna noticed. She always noticed. She released Shane, wiped her eyes decisively, and walked straight to Ilya. Before he could process it, she pulled him into a tight hug.

Ilya stiffened, utterly surprised. Then, his arms came up slowly to wrap around her. He bent his head, his face hidden for a second in her hair.

“Congratulations, Papa,” Yuna said softly, her voice meant only for him.

The word, *Papa*, made Ilya’s chest tighten. It was a title of such simple, domestic warmth, so utterly foreign to the cold, achievement-based dynamics of his own childhood. No one had ever celebrated a future role for him with such uncomplicated love. He held onto Yuna, his broad shoulders shaking once, silently. When he pulled back, his eyes were glistening.

“Thank you,” he managed, the words rough.

Yuna cupped his cheek, her expression fierce with maternal certainty. “You’re going to be wonderful.”

Ilya swallowed hard, nodding, unable to speak. He wasn’t sure he believed her yet, but hearing it from her, from Shane’s *mother*, felt like a blessing he hadn’t known he needed.

Shane watched from across the room, his heart so full it ached. Seeing his mother love on Ilya so easily, so completely, bridged a final, invisible gap between the life he’d come from and the life he was building.

The solemnity was broken by David, who was still squinting at the ultrasound. “So this little... shape... is my grandchild?”

“That’s the baby, yes,” Shane confirmed, walking over.

David shook his head in wonder. “It looks like a bean.”

Ilya, emotionally wrung out but instantly defensive, was at his side in two strides. “Is beautiful.”

“I didn’t say it wasn’t beautiful,” David protested, holding the picture up to the light. “It’s a very… well-formed bean.”

“You called our baby bean,” Ilya said, scandalized.

Shane peered at the image. “It… does kind of look like a bean.”

Ilya turned to him, betrayed. “You also? Such a traitor.”

Yuna started laughing, the sound rich and warm. “It’s a beautiful bean, David. Our beautiful grand-bean.”

Ilya looked between the three of them, realizing he was outnumbered. “This is not respectful,” he muttered, but he was fighting a smile.

“Wait!” Ilya said, his excitement bubbling over again. He fumbled for his phone. “We have recording. From yesterday. The heartbeat.”

“You recorded it?” Shane asked, though he wasn’t surprised.

“Of course.” Ilya found the file, a short video clip with the whooshing sound dominating the audio. The four of them crowded around the small screen.

Ilya pressed play.

The rapid, rhythmic *whoosh-whoosh-whoosh* filled the kitchen. All chatter ceased. Yuna’s hand crept to her mouth again, fresh tears spilling over. David slid an arm around her shoulders, his own eyes looking suspiciously damp. Ilya, without looking, reached for Shane. Shane leaned into his side, listening to the sound of their child’s relentless, tiny life.

For those few seconds, there were no jokes, no boxes, no moving chaos. Just the four of them, bound together by the most primal proof of love and future.

When it ended, Yuna sniffled, wiped her eyes with a determined swipe, and immediately shifted into mother-hen mode. “Have you eaten properly today?” she demanded, eyeing the mostly-untouched pastries.

Shane groaned. “Mom.”

Ilya, however, nodded gratefully. “Thank you.”

“Don’t encourage her,” Shane sighed.

But Yuna was already in motion, mentally compiling lists. Vitamins? Doctor’s advice? Next appointment? Rest? She fired questions, and Shane answered, letting the familiar, loving interrogation wash over him.

Then she turned her laser focus on Ilya. “And you,” she said, pointing a finger. “Don’t smother him.”

Shane pointed at his mother in triumphant vindication. “Thank you.”

Ilya looked genuinely wounded. “Why does everyone assume I will smother?”

Yuna, David, and Shane all simply stared at him, their expressions identical in their flat disbelief.

Ilya looked from one face to the next. A long, silent pause stretched out. He deflated, just a little. “...Fine,” he grumbled.

The shared laughter this time was easy, full of affection. The conversation dissolved into the warm chaos of family planning. Yuna was already debating nursery colors. David was committed to the “bean” nickname. Ilya was insisting the baby would be trilingual, a genius, and probably an early skater - “Eighteen months is not too young!”. Shane sat back in his chair, listening to the three most important people in his life enthusiastically, chaotically map out a future centered on a being no bigger than a blueberry.

For so long, other people’s plans for him had felt like cages, the league’s, the media’s, even the well-intentioned plans to protect his secret. Now, sitting amid the boxes of his old, solitary life, hearing his parents and his mate dream aloud about playrooms and first words and tiny skates, he didn’t feel trapped. He felt anchored. He felt loved. Under the table, Ilya’s hand found his. Their fingers laced together, a silent, steady connection.

The afternoon melted away in a blur of cardboard, packing tape, and the low rumble of the movers’ voices. Shane’s Montreal house, was being invaded by a large group of movers and Shane, Ilya, Yuna, and David found themselves increasingly superfluous, standing in doorways as strangers wrapped Shane’s things and moved them out and loaded into one of three large trucks.

Shane was a nervous wreck. He knew that the movers were doing a great job, but it made his skin crawl watching strangers touching his things, getting their scents all over their things. Ilya and Yuna watched a mover carefully swaddle the armchair Shane had fallen asleep in countless times after brutal road trips, and noticed Shane pinching his eyelashes. Ilya grabbed his hand and kissed his palm and she shook her head, a decisive gesture. “We should go celebrate instead of watching these gentlemen work. Lets go out for a few hours.”

Shane didn’t argue. He looked at Ilya, who was hovering again. “She’s right. There’s nothing for us to do here but get in the way.”

Ilya’s gaze swept the emptying living room, his instincts clearly warring between guarding their possessions and guarding Shane from the melancholy of it all. The promise of a celebration, a real one, for their house, for their baby, won out. “Da. Okay. We celebrate.”

They chose a restaurant in Old Montreal, a place with exposed brick and soft lighting where Shane had celebrated past contract signings and awards. It felt fitting, a bridge between his old life and his new one. The hostess led them to their quiet corner table that helped hide them away from the other patrons with a wall of climbing ivy, the buzz of the evening crowd a pleasant hum around them.

The celebratory mood was immediate and warm. Yuna's eyes still sparkled with the residual joy of her earlier tears. David, sipping his wine, looked across the table at Shane and Ilya with a fond, slightly dazed expression, as if still adjusting to the reality of the ultrasound picture now safely tucked in Ilya's wallet.

"So," David said, raising his glass. "To the new homeowners. Congratulations!"

They clinked glasses. Ilya, after a swift, assessing glance at Shane's mineral water, took a long drink of his own wine. "And may the neighbors be quiet," he added.

"And may we find a way to not get lost," Shane said, earning a laugh.

The server came for their orders. When Shane perused the menu, his eyes lingered on a dish featuring seared tuna.

Ilya, who had been studying the menu with a frown at all the french words. "The tuna," he murmured, his voice low.

"What about it?" Shane asked, already knowing.

"It is... perhaps not ideal."

“Ilya.”

“What?” Ilya asked, all innocence.

“I can order my own dinner.”

“I said nothing.”

“You made a face.” Shane glared at him, but there was no heat in it. He ordered the steak instead, and Ilya’s subtle nod of approval was so blatant Yuna had to hide a smile behind her napkin.

When the server returned with their appetizers, she smiled warmly at the table’s obvious good mood. “Hello Hollanders! I haven’t seen you all in a long time! Celebrating something special tonight?”

Four pairs of eyes locked on Shane. He felt the blush start up his face from the attention, the precious secret buzzing just beneath the surface of the conversation. For a split second, he remembered a lifetime of deflection, of carefully constructed answers designed to reveal nothing. This was different. This was a secret they chose to keep, for now, because it belonged to them.

He smiled back at the server, easy and genuine. “We bought a house.”

“Oh, congratulations!” she said, beaming before moving on.

Ilya, across the table, looked as if he might spontaneously combust from the effort of not adding, ‘And we’re having a baby!’ His knuckles were white where he gripped his fork. Shane caught his eye and gave a slight, warning shake of his head, kicking Ilya’s foot gently under the table. Ilya took a deep, deliberate breath and reached for his wine glass again.

As their main courses arrived, David pulled out his phone, frowning slightly. “Stuck on 23-across,” he muttered to no one in particular.

Ilya, ever-observant, tilted his head. “You are doing crossword from today? What is clue?”

““Former UN Secretary-General whose memoir is titled ‘My House is the Whole World.’ Twelve letters.”

Ilya didn’t even blink. “Hammarskjöld.”

David stared at him, then down at his phone. He typed in the letters. The puzzle accepted it. He looked back at Ilya, impressed. “How did you know that?”

Ilya shrugged one shoulder, as if recalling obscure diplomatic history was commonplace. “He was interesting man. Very philosophical. Also Swedish.” He said the last part as if it explained everything.

This sparked an unexpected alliance. Within minutes, David had slid his phone to the center of space between them, and he and Ilya were hunched over it, their collaboration was intense and instantly combative.

“16-down. ‘Mideast ruler, familiarly.’ Six letters.”

“Sheikh,” Ilya offered.

“Can’t be. The third letter has to be an ‘I’ from 12-across.”

“Then puzzle is wrong.”

“The puzzle isn’t wrong, Ilya.”

“How do you know this?”

“Because it’s the New Yorker. Think like an American!”

“This means nothing to me.”

Shane watched, a soft, bewildered affection spreading through him. His father, so much calmer compared to his mother and himself, and his mate, the intense hockey superstar, were arguing over vowel placements and definitions. It was absurd but perfect at the same time.

While the crossword war raged on one side of the table, the conversation between Shane and Yuna drifted into calmer waters. They talked about Ottawa, about the layout of the new house, about which pieces of furniture from the Montreal place would work.

Eventually, naturally, the talk turned to work. “How did things feel at camp?” Yuna asked, her voice carefully neutral.

Shane took a sip of his water. He didn’t want to relive the confrontation with Schneider, not tonight. “I handled it,” he said, his tone leaving no room for doubt. “It’s done.”

Yuna nodded, accepting his boundary. She swirled her wine, her next question more thoughtful than probing. “And your contract? What happens now, with... everything?” Her gaze dipped meaningfully for a fraction of a second.

Shane understood. The question had been hovering in the back of his own mind since the doctor’s appointment, a practical counterpoint to the joy. His circumstances and priorities had shifted seismically since the summer, his whole life had. Publicly out as an omega, publicly bonded to Ilya, visibly at odds with a faction of his own team, and now pregnant. For the first time in his life, he was putting himself and his new little family first before his hockey interests.

“I’m not completely sure,” he admitted, his voice low. He felt no panic, only a cool, analytical focus. “I should probably get my lawyers and accountant on the phone this week. Find out exactly where I stand legally before the season starts. What my options are.”

Yuna nodded again, her expression one of professional agreement. “That’s smart. Get the facts first.”

Across the table, David and Ilya were now in a heated, whispered debate. “It cannot be ‘obelisk’! The clue is ‘Giant pencil?’ That’s ‘monolith’!”

“Obelisk is giant pencil!”

“It is a stone pillar!”

“Pencil-shaped stone pillar!”

Shane and Yuna shared a look, the tension of the hockey discussion broken by the sheer ridiculousness of the other conversation.

Yuna leaned forward slightly. “Has the team said anything to you? Since camp?”

Shane opened his mouth to give his standard, reassuring answer. Then he stopped.

He replayed the last few weeks in his mind. Hayden’s support, JJ’s loyalty, Schneider’s hostility... but from management? From the front office? When was the last time he’d received a call, an email, any communication from the Voyageurs’ brass about his contract, his future, the public relations whirlwind, anything?

He couldn’t immediately pinpoint it.

That was unusual. Deeply unusual. He was Shane Hollander. Their star player, the Captain. He'd spent his entire career with Montreal. Even in a normal off-season, there would be check-ins, discussions about community appearances, planning for the upcoming year. After the summer they'd had? There should have been... something.

A cold, quiet realization settled in his stomach. He and Ilya had just made a multi-million-dollar real estate purchase in another province, and somehow that was only the latest enormous change in Shane's life that had happened without so much as a check-in from Montreal. Publicly revealing himself as an omega. Ilya. The fallout. Training camp. His future with the organization. Any one of those things should have warranted a conversation. Taken together, the silence was glaring now that he'd finally noticed it.

While Yuna waited for his answer, Shane subtly pulled his phone from his pocket. He opened his email, quickly searching for correspondence from the team's GM, the owner's office, anyone in authority. He scrolled, his thumb moving faster. The most recent official communication was a generic season ticket holder newsletter from three weeks ago. Before that, a perfunctory 'congratulations on the Cup' email from the owner in June. Seems like communication stopped that day.

His stomach tightened. He locked the phone and set it face-down on the table.

Yuna noticed the shift in his posture, the slight tightening around his eyes. "What?"

"Nothing," Shane said automatically, then sighed at her pointed look. "It's fine. I just realized I haven't heard from management in a while."

"How long?"

Shane thought about it. Long enough that he *should* have noticed sooner. That bothered him almost as much as the silence itself. Hockey had always occupied such immense mental real space that he could have recited his last ten interactions with management. But his life had been... full. Overflowing. With Ilya, with the cottage, with buying a house, and now with the baby. For the first time, the sport had not been the absolute center of his gravitational pull.

He felt the old, familiar itch to solve the problem. To call his agent right now, to fire off emails, to dissect his contract clause by clause, to *know*. The anxiety was a live wire, urging him to action.

But then he looked around the table.

His mother watched him with warm, worried eyes, her joy at becoming a grandmother still lighting her face from within. His father and Ilya were now shoulder-to-shoulder, focused on his dad's phone. Ilya glanced up, caught Shane looking, and offered a quick, private smile that was pure, unguarded happiness.

Shane was seven weeks pregnant. Yesterday, they'd heard a heartbeat. They owned a home together. Tonight was a celebration.

The Voyaguers did not get tonight.

He made the decision consciously, firmly. "I'll deal with it tomorrow," he told Yuna, his voice calm.

She studied him, her sharp eyes missing nothing. She knew her son. The Shane of a year ago would already have been constructing spreadsheets in his head. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," Shane said, and he meant it. This wasn't avoidance. It was prioritization. "I have lawyers for a reason. I'll call them tomorrow."

Just then, David slapped the table. "Got it! 34-across! 'Nietzsche's eternal recurrence,' it's 'eternal return'!"

Ilya looked outraged. "You cheated."

“I did not cheat!”

“You looked at answer online.”

“I figured it out. The crossing letters from ‘Hammar skjöld’ made it obvious!”

“Suspicious!” Ilya declared, but he was fighting a grin.

Shane started laughing, the sound genuine and relieving. The coiled tension in his chest loosened. Yuna caught his eye again, and in her look, he saw understanding. She knew he was worried. He knew she knew. No more needed to be said.

She reached across the table and plucked a tomato from David’s plate while he was distracted.

“Hey!” David protested.

The dinner wound down in a comfortable bubble of familial teasing and plans for the next day. Throughout it, Shane was aware of the undercurrent but put the thoughts to the side, the professional uncertainty waiting for him like a shadow just outside the restaurant’s warm light. But for once, the shadow didn’t feel all-consuming.

His father and his mate were debating the merits of various- actually he didn’t know about what. The conversation was fast and seemed very random and Ilya had his phone out a few times to use his translator. His mother kept smiling at him every time she thought he wasn’t looking. Ilya’s knee remained a steady, warm pressure against his own beneath the table, and every so often, Ilya’s hand would find Shane’s thigh, or Shane would catch him gazing at his stomach with that same awed, reverent expression.

Hockey had defined Shane Hollander for nearly his entire life. But as he deliberately slid his phone back into his pocket and turned his full attention to the people laughing and arguing

around him, he understood with a quiet shock that whatever happened in Montreal, he had a life, a rich, complicated, beautiful life- waiting for him outside the rink.

Tomorrow, he would call his lawyers and accountant. Tonight, he was celebrating.

The silence in the foyer after Ilya's car turned the corner was a physical thing. It pressed in on Shane, amplified by the hollow echo of the nearly empty house. He stood in the doorway for another minute, the morning chill seeping through his thin shirt, his hand resting unconsciously on his stomach. The instinct to call Ilya back, to delay the separation, was strong. But he closed the door, turning to face the skeleton of his old life.

Without Ilya's vibrant, anxious energy filling the space, the emptiness was profound. The movers had been brutally efficient. The living room was a cavern of ghostly rectangles on the walls and faint scuff marks on the hardwood where furniture legs had lived for years. The kitchen counters were bare, save for the coffee maker he'd kept out for this final morning. His footsteps echoed as he walked to the center of the great room, the space that had once held his couch, his books, the careful, curated evidence of a life built alone and then, secretly, shared.

He was thrilled about Ottawa. He ached for it, for their home, for the nursery that he'd create now, for the life they would build there. But this... this was a tangible ending. This was the place where he'd learned to be an adult, where he'd hidden his dynamic from the world, where he'd first kissed Ilya in desperate secrecy and later screamed at him in betrayed fury. It held the ghost of his loneliness and the fragile, precious beginnings of everything that came after.

"It's weird," he said aloud, his voice swallowed by the bare walls.

Last night, after they'd returned from dinner, Ilya had simply taken his hand and led him through the echoing rooms. They hadn't tried to fill the silence with chatter, they'd just been in it together. Their bed, slated for disassembly in the morning, was one of the last pieces of furniture left. They'd lain on the near stripped-down bed, the room feeling too big without the familiar clutter of nightstands and lamps.

Ilya had been restless, his fingers tracing patterns on Shane's arm.

"What?" Shane had finally asked, tilting his head back to look at him.

"Nothing."

"Ilya."

"I am thinking."

"Okay. Tell me."

Ilya had given him a searching look, but the worry in his eyes was plain. He'd propped himself up on an elbow. "You have two more days before you return to camp. You will be dealing with the move, ordering people around for how you'd like to unpack. What happens while I'm at the arena?" He'd paused, choosing his words with visible care. "I will be at training all day. I cannot leave."

"I'm a big boy. I can manage a phone call and a moving truck."

"I know." Ilya's jaw had tightened. "I would feel better... if you let me put someone with you."

The old, familiar tension had snapped into place. "No."

"Sweetheart."

“No security detail.”

“A very small security detail. Not for me. For you. For my sanity.”

“Ilya- please don’t do this again.”

Ilya had taken a deep breath, his gaze earnest. “I am not suggesting surveillance. I do not want reports. No trackers. I am *asking* you. There’s so much that can happen when I’m not around.” The distinction, given the history that lived between them, the investigators, the monitors, the trackers, was everything. “One or two people. Trusted. Discreet. Only for a couple of days, while everything is unsettled. They do not follow you into private spaces. They do not tell me where you go. They are only there to intervene if there is a threat. They are gone when I get home.”

Shane had studied his face, seeing the fear beneath the controlled request. “So you don’t think I can protect myself or our child?”

Ilya’s composure had cracked, just a little. “Everything has changed so fast. You are public. *We* are public. You are pregnant. There is hostility in your own locker room. And I have to leave you tomorrow.” He’d looked down, his voice dropping. “I know you do not need me to protect you every second. But sometimes... I need to know someone is there when I cannot be.”

The raw honesty had disarmed Shane’s automatic resistance. This wasn’t the obsessed control of before. It was a vulnerability, an admission of fear. Shane had negotiated, laying down clear rules: one person, no tracking. No reports on his movements or conversations. No entering the house uninvited. No interference with hockey. And it ended once he was settled in Ottawa.

Ilya had agreed to every condition, almost too quickly.

“You already have people picked out,” Shane had accused.

Ilya had paused. "...Perhaps."

"Ilya."

"I was hoping." Ilya had winced, and Shane had kissed him, soft and forgiving, to erase the sting. The moment had been a quiet testament to how far they'd come: Ilya asked, Shane chose.

Later, Shane had realized Ilya's anxiety wasn't just about external threats. He was nervous about returning to the Centaurs camp carrying the colossal secret of their baby, about leaving Shane during this fragile, early time. Shane had teased him, reassured him, and finally fallen asleep curled into Ilya's side, their joined hands a warm weight on his abdomen, in the last night the Montreal house would ever feel like home.

Now, alone with the echo, Shane made himself a cup of tea and carried it to a lone cardboard box in the living room, using it as a makeshift chair. The silence was a vacuum, and into it rushed the practical concerns he'd held at bay.

He took out his phone. First, his legal team. The call went to voicemail; he left a calm, precise message requesting a callback to discuss his contractual position with the Voyageurs following the public developments of the summer.

Next, his accountant, Martin. This call he expected to be routine, a financial overview before speaking with the lawyers, a check on liquidity post-house purchase. They usually had a routine call every month to check on his investments too.

"Shane, good to hear from you," Martin's familiar, brisk voice came through. "What can I do for you?"

“I need a current snapshot ahead of some legal conversations. And I wanted to confirm the liquidity impact after the Ottawa property purchase. Can you give me a ballpark on what’s left accessible?”

There was a pause on the line. A faint rustle of papers. “The Ottawa property?” Martin asked, his tone shifting to one of polite confusion.

“Yes. The house. We closed a couple of days ago.”

Another pause, longer this time. “Shane, I... I don’t see a major property transaction on the accounts I manage.”

A cold trickle, like the first drop of ice water, traced down Shane’s spine. “It might not have posted yet. The transfer could still be processing.”

“It’s not that,” Martin said, his confusion giving way to professional caution. “Since you and Mr. Rozanov formally bonded, there was a... restructuring of financial administration. My access permissions changed. Management of several of your core asset accounts was transferred. I assumed you were aware. It’s not uncommon with a bond of this nature, especially with the significant combined assets involved.”

Shane went very still. The hollow echo of the house seemed to grow louder. “Transferred to who?”

He heard the click of a keyboard. “To the financial team Mr. Rozanov uses. Belov & Associates. They have administrative control now. I retained visibility on some investment portfolios and reporting, but not the day-to-day or transactional authority I had before.”

He assumed you were aware.

Shane’s mind, trained for pattern recognition, began firing, assembling disjointed facts. Ilya handling all communication with Anna. Ilya’s casual disregard for the house’s staggering

price tag. *'Do not worry about cost.'*, he'd said. The paperwork he'd signed in a blur of excitement.

"When did this happen?" Shane asked, his voice dangerously calm.

Martin gave him a date. Months ago. "What accounts can you still see?"

Martin outlined them, a few investment funds, a small trust from his grandparents that he liked to use for charities. The balances, he noted, were healthy. Growing, even. "Nothing looks amiss, Shane. From what I can see, your assets are performing normally. There's no evidence of unusual withdrawals or depletion."

"What about the house?" Shane pressed, the ice water now a steady stream in his veins. "You said you don't see the purchase. So from the accounts you can see, where did the money come from?"

"That's just it," Martin said, sounding genuinely perplexed. "I don't see a transaction of that magnitude originating from any of the accounts I have visibility into. Rozanov's team have made deposits into your accounts for months, those have been covering the usual expenses and property taxes."

Shane's grip tightened on the phone. He opened his banking app on his tablet, his eyes scanning the numbers. His balances were high. Not suspiciously, astronomically high, but higher than they should be if he'd just liquidated several million dollars for a real estate purchase.

"Are you telling me," Shane said slowly, each word precise, "that I didn't pay for my house?"

Martin hesitated. "I'm telling you that I don't see evidence the purchase came from the accounts I still manage. The transaction, or the funding for it, appears to have been handled through a different structure, one I'm not privy to."

The pieces clicked together with a quiet, terrifying finality. The restructured control, Ilya's team in charge. The missing multi-million-dollar withdrawal. His own untouched, growing balances.

You have control, Ilya had said last night, his hand warm over Shane's stomach.

A cold, sickening sense of disorientation washed over him. This wasn't the hot, blind rage of past betrayals. This was deeper, quieter- the chilling realization that once again, his own life had been quietly rearranged while he wasn't looking. He thought of Ilya's awed tears at the ultrasound, his negotiated plea for security, his promise that things were different now. That man loved him. That man had also, it seemed, seamlessly assumed control of the very resources that guaranteed Shane's independence.

"Martin," Shane said, his voice stripped of all emotion. "I need you to send me everything. Every statement, every record of the permission changes, every communication you have about the transfer of authority. Dates, names, everything."

"Of course. I'll compile it and send it over as soon as I can."

"Thank you."

Shane ended the call. The silence in the empty house was no longer just empty; it was cold. He sat on the kitchen counter, his tea gone cold beside him, and stared at the faded rectangle on the wall where a photograph of him and his parents had once hung.

His thumb hovered over Ilya's name on his phone screen. He could call him. Demand an explanation right now. But the old, reactive impulse was tempered by a new, grim discipline. He needed facts. He needed to see the paperwork.

The phone buzzed in his hand, making him jump. For a wild second, he thought it was Ilya, as if summoned by his turmoil.

It wasn't.

It was the first email from Martin, the subject line reading: "Requested Documents - Account History & Authorization Records."

Shane looked from the glowing screen to the stark, empty shell of the home he was leaving, to the hand resting on his abdomen, protecting the future they had created.

Chapter End Notes

See? I was nice.

I gave you nesting. I gave you Ilya crying at the heartbeat. I gave you Yuna calling him Papa. I gave you David naming the baby Bean. I gave you family dinner and crossword bonding and Shane finally realizing that hockey does not get to own every single piece of his life.

That is a LOT of kindness from me.

So naturally...

I'm going to have some fun soon. I have been very gentle with these boys for the past few chapters and apparently my brain took that personally.

And before anyone starts sharpening pitchforks for Ilya just yet...

Most love a slightly unhinged Ilya...

Thank you so much for reading, commenting, and all the things. Please tell me what you think happened with the house because I am extremely curious to see where everyone's theories go and if they match what I have planned ❤️

Chapter 41: Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

Okay, remember when I said I'd been too nice to the boys lately and it was time to start throwing bricks?

Apparently I skipped the bricks and went straight for demolition. 💣💥
We have a bit of twisted love. We have a bit of hockey. We have a tiny bean. We have Ilya being very Ilya. We have Shane making ✨choices✨.

Everything is fine.

Absolutely fine.

Enjoy! 😊❤️

Chapter Notes

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

The email from Martin contained a PDF that was ninety-seven pages long.

Shane downloaded it to his tablet, made a fresh cup of tea he knew he wouldn't drink, and retreated to the empty bedroom, sitting on the bare mattress with his back against the wall. The morning sun cast long, stark rectangles of light across the floor, illuminating dust motes stirred up by the movers. He opened the document.

For the next hour, he read with detached, analytical focus. It was all there, in cold, precise legalese and bank statements.

First, the confirmation of what Martin had said: a series of authorization updates and administrative change orders, dated a week and two days after their bonding became public. Signatory authority for liquid asset accounts, investment portfolios, even the deeds to his few speculative real estate holdings, had been transferred to "Belov & Associates, acting under power of attorney for Ilya G. Rozanov, bonded alpha of record."

His accounts hadn't been emptied. They'd been reassigned to the management of others. The statements showed healthy growth. In some cases, significant deposits from external sources, likely dividends or returns from investments he'd long forgotten he had. His spending accounts still had a high limit, and he'd used his cards normally, for groceries, gas, the occasional dinner. No red flags, no alarms. It had gone on for months. He had stupidly believed they were different. Not that the laws were different for him, he wasn't that naive. He had believed *Ilya* was different. That Ilya understood exactly what those laws meant to Shane and would never let them quietly swallow pieces of his life just because the rest of the world considered it normal. That in the privacy of their home, things would be equal.

The second document was from his lawyer, forwarded by Martin. It was a summary memo from the firm's estate and family law division, sent to Shane's primary attorney two days *after* the bonding was made public. The subject line: "Post-Bonding Financial Structuring - Hollander/Rozanov."

Shane's heart thudded dully against his ribs as he read.

...standard practice following a formal alpha-omega bond of this nature, particularly where significantly large sums of independent assets exist on both sides...

...primary financial administration typically consolidates under the bonded alpha's oversight, in accordance with law 392991 of provision...

...omega's assets are not forfeited; they are integrated into the bonded household's financial architecture for streamlined management and long-term planning...

...the omega retains beneficiary status and customary access to funds for living expenses and discretionary spending allowed by mated alpha...

For most omegas, this was just a fact of life. A formality. A shift from their own management to shared, or more accurately, alpha-managed, finances. For some, it was a relief. For others, it was just how things were inevitably done.

For Shane Hollander, who had built a fortune through his own talent, who had fiercely guarded his independence through secrecy and sheer force of will, who had equated financial control with survival- it was the systematic dismantling of a core pillar of his autonomy. And he had just not been focusing on anything financial for months.

He scrolled further, to the transaction logs. Most of the transactions were blacked out, and he did not have access to several other accounts. The final piece was a property record, emailed separately by his lawyer's assistant in response to his earlier query. The title deed for the Ottawa house. He zoomed in on the ownership section.

Grantees: Ilya G. Rozanov and Shane Hollander

His name was there. They owned it jointly. But the financing statement, the record of how the purchase was funded, listed a single entity: a holding company named "Proskovo Holdings, LLC." A quick search of the documents revealed its registration: wholly purchased by Ilya G. Rozanov.

The tea was ice-cold beside him. The dust motes danced in the silent sunbeam.

His phone rang. It was his lead attorney, Rachel.

"Shane, I got your message and Martin's heads-up. You've seen the documents?"

"Yes." His voice sounded flat, even to himself.

"Alright. Look, I need to be candid. We advised on the bonding agreement from a liability and privacy standpoint. Financial restructuring is a standard concomitant of a bond. We included the memos for your review. I'm... a bit surprised this is coming as news to you now. Didn't you and Mr. Rozanov discuss how you wanted to handle asset management after the bond?"

Shane closed his eyes. The humiliation was a slow, cold seep, filling the hollows his shock had carved out. He remembered sitting at his dining table, the next day, bite still fresh, as happy as he thought he could be. They'd spoken about the future, of plans to be made and how they'd handle everything if the news came out before they were ready.

"We discussed it in... general terms," Shane said, the lie automatic. They hadn't. Ilya had said, "Let me handle the details. You have enough to think about." And Shane, drowning in the relief of being loved, of finally being safe, had nodded and unknowingly handed what seemed to be all decision making.

"I see," Rachel said, her tone carefully neutral. "Well, the structure is legally sound. Your assets are secure, albeit under a different administrative umbrella. You're not without recourse, you're still a beneficiary and your alpha is extremely generous in allowing you so much access in such an unrestricted way. But for major transactions, capital decisions, rebalancing... that authority now rests with Rozanov's appointed administrators, acting in the interest of the bonded household."

Once the bond was formally recognized, Mr. Rozanov became your bonded alpha of record. You should have known that it carries legal authority beyond ordinary marriage, Shane. Financial administration, medical standing in certain circumstances, property decisions, household representation..."

Shane's stomach turned.

"So legally, what am I?"

Rachel paused. "You're a mated omega, Shane."

The pause before the answer told him more than the answer itself.

"The house," Shane said. "I didn't pay for it."

A pause. "Correct. The purchase was made through an entity controlled by Mr. Rozanov. Your name is on the title as a joint owner. You have equitable interest, but the capital outlay was his."

You have control, Ilya had whispered in the dark. What a cruel joke that had been.

Shane ended the call with promises to follow up, his mind already clicking forward, past the shame, to the next necessary step. The final document in the chain was the power of attorney

itself. He tried to skim over the other documents but a migraine was growing and he didn't understand a lot of the legal jargon.

Every act could be framed as protection, as his new leaf, as love. Now with his eyes wide open, each could also be framed as another form of control.

Shane's thumb hovered over Ilya's contact. His heart wasn't pounding with fury. It was a heavy, weary beat. He thought his heart might be breaking. This wasn't a tracker, this was the legal, financial, and social infrastructure of their bonded life, built around him while he was looking the other way, grateful just to be loved.

He needed to talk to Ilya. But not yet. Not on the phone, not while Ilya was at practice, not while Shane's voice might break and show how truly hurt he was.

He had the facts now. A life where, by default, the man who he was expecting a child with, who he'd risk his career for, had hidden from him.

He stood up, his body stiff from sitting on the floor. The empty room seemed to watch him. Downstairs, the doorbell rang, jolting him out of his self pity.

He walked downstairs, each step echoing in the hollow house, to answer the door.

The sharp, cheerful ring of the doorbell cut through the heavy silence. Shane flinched, pulled from the tablet and cold, humiliating realizations. He drew in a steadying breath and walked towards the door, each footstep echoing through the empty house.

He expected a mover with a question, another delivery for the house, maybe one of the dozen people who had been in and out over the past few days.

He opened the door.

A delivery driver stood on the step, holding a drink carrier with a large smoothie and a small paper bag from Shane's favorite place downtown. The guy looked bored, shifting his weight as he checked something on his phone.

"Shane?"

“Yeah.”

“Cool. Here.”

He thrust the order forward.

Shane stared at it. “I didn’t order anything.”

The driver shrugged, already backing away. “It’s your name, your address. Says leave at the door, but you answered. Have a good one.”

“Thanks.”

The guy was halfway down the walkway before Shane closed the door.

He carried the drinks into the kitchen, the crinkle of the paper bag absurdly loud in the empty space. A receipt had been stapled to the top. Shane pulled it free.

There, beneath the order information, was a message typed into the special instructions box in all caps.

DRINK ALL OF IT. YOU ARE GROWING MY VERY ENORMOUS RUSSIAN BABY AND THE NEED CALORIES. – I

Shane almost smiled.

It happened before he could stop it, the corner of his mouth twitching upward at the ridiculous message before the weight in his chest dragged it back down.

“Asshole,” he muttered. Of course it was from Ilya. Shane pulled the smoothie from the carrier.

Of course it was the right one too.

Green Machine. Extra protein. Almond milk instead of dairy. No banana because Shane hated the texture. Even the fucking wheatgrass he’d ordered a few times on a whim and hadn’t hated enough to remove the next time.

Shane stared at the label for several seconds before pushing the straw through the lid harder than necessary.

He took a sip. It was perfect. Shane hated that too. Hated that Ilya knew him enough to get everything he liked right but not enough to know that this betrayal would hurt so much.

He leaned against the bare kitchen island and took another sip, staring across what was left of the room.

Ilya was in Ottawa. He’d been at practice all morning. New coach, new teammates, he had been so excited, hopeful that this new team would be his until he retired, that he’d be able to

shape it himself. They had been supposed to go over to the new house together that night. What would happen now?

Shane looked toward the stairs, thinking about the mug of tea sitting untouched and probably ice-cold beside the bare mattress. His stomach felt hollow now that he was paying attention to it. He hadn't eaten anything since he'd gotten up that morning.

His throat tightened.

This would have been easier if Ilya were an asshole. Shane could have understood an asshole. Instead, Ilya remembered his fucking wheatgrass, Shane missed his scent like crazy, and was so tempted to just play ignorance and pretend none of this knowledge had reached him yet.

Twenty minutes ago he'd been reading paperwork that said Ilya's people controlled financial decisions Shane had spent his entire adult life making for himself.

Now Ilya was making sure he ate lunch. Neither fact cancelled out the other and Shane wished one of them would.

That was always the answer with Ilya, wasn't it? Have a part of him so perfectly aligned with Shane but also the ability to destroy his free will.

Feed him. Scent him. Make him fall deeply and truly in love. Buy him a house. Make whatever was upsetting him disappear before Shane even had to ask.

Most of the time, Shane loved it if he dug deep, he almost felt cherished over Ilya's jealousy. He felt safe in knowing that Ilya would protect him from any threat. But at the same time he could defend himself and he'd wish Ilya would see that. He loved being known that well. He loved the relief of letting someone else worry about him occasionally after a lifetime of taking care of everything himself.

He looked down at the smoothie.

For the first time, Shane wondered what would happen if Ilya couldn't fix all the problems. If he beat him to it? His phone buzzed against the countertop. Shane glanced at it.

IGR- You get smoothies?

Shane stared at the words.

For one petty second, he considered not answering. Let Ilya wonder. Let him sit with even a fraction of the uncertainty Shane had been drowning in all morning.

But that wasn't how they operated anymore. Or at least Shane had thought it wasn't. He typed back.

SHANE: Yes.

The response came almost immediately.

IGR- Good. Another bubble appeared.

IGR- I need to make sure my mate is eating enough. Big Russian babies take a lot of energy.
Despite everything, a wet, humorless snort escaped him.

SHANE: I am.

IGR- Send me a picture? I miss you already.

Shane actually rolled his eyes.

SHANE: Fuck off.

A smiling devil appeared on the screen. Shane shook his head and took another drink.

A minute passed. Then his phone buzzed again.

IGR- Love you. The bed was delivered this morning. I will carry you across threshold tonight and I was told we need to christian every room for luck.

Shane stopped.

He stared at the first three words.

There wasn't a single cell in his body that doubted them and that somehow made everything worse.

If Shane could convince himself Ilya didn't love him, this would be easy. He could be furious. He could call his lawyer. He could pack his shit. He could turn what he'd learned into something simple and ugly and understandable and start the process of having the bond revoked.

But Ilya did love him. Shane knew he did.

Which meant love hadn't stopped any of this from happening and that maybe love was not enough.

His thumbs hovered over the screen.

The answer came anyway, a reflex so deeply ingrained that withholding it would have felt like its own kind of lie. A tear slipped his eye when he typed out:

SHANE: I love you too.

He put the phone facedown on the countertop.

He didn't call. He knew what would happen if he did. Ilya would hear it.

Shane could say he was fine. He could tell him everything was okay. He could keep his voice perfectly level, and somehow Ilya would hear the tiny difference Shane hadn't even realized

was there.

Practice wouldn't matter anymore. The Centaurs wouldn't matter. Whatever Ilya was supposed to be doing would cease to exist.

He'd come home.

And Shane couldn't let him do that yet.

Because Ilya would walk through the door, see him, and know. He'd wrap himself around Shane. He'd scent him until the tightness in Shane's chest eased. He'd call him *sweetheart* and *solnyshko* or some other Russian word. He'd tell him not to worry. Whatever was wrong, Ilya would fix it.

Shane wanted that so badly his eyes burned. He wanted Ilya's arms around him. He wanted to bury his face against his neck and breathe until the world felt manageable again. But not yet.

Not before Shane understood what the fuck had happened. Shane finished the smoothie. Then he went back upstairs.

Shane sat down on the bed and he opened a new note in the table app.

For a few seconds, the cursor blinked against the blank screen.

Then Shane started typing.

1. Did you know about the automatic transfer of financial authority upon bonding?

He stared at the question.

Added another.

2. When did you know?

His fingers moved faster.

3. Did you know that I didn't understand what would happen?
4. If you knew, why didn't you tell me?
5. What exactly can your financial team do with my assets without my direct consent?
6. What financial decisions can I no longer make independently?
7. What else changed when the bond was registered? Medical? Legal? Property?

Shane stopped. Seven questions. He needed information, facts. He could deal with facts.

He'd built his entire career around taking something enormous and frightening and reducing it to manageable pieces. One problem, one game, one season at a time.

His finger hovered over the screen.

There was another question.

He didn't want to type it.

Because unlike the others, Shane wasn't sure he wanted the answer.

He typed anyway.

8. Were you planning on telling me before I found out?

Shane stared at it. Then underlined it. The echo of the empty house was his only answer.

He spent the rest of the afternoon like that, working his way through documents until the words began swimming in front of him. Rachel called again to clarify several points. Martin sent more records but everything was so heavily redacted now that he just gave up. Each answer led to another question, another document, another legal term Shane had apparently allowed other people to understand for him.

He just laid back and stared at the ceiling, trying to make sense of where they could go moving forward. The silence was startling. Shane laid alone in the master bedroom.

The house didn't look like his anymore.

Bare walls showed pale rectangles where photographs had hung. The living room echoed. The dining room where he'd sat across from Ilya so many times was empty except for a few flattened boxes waiting to be recycled.

The place looked finished with them. Shane rubbed at the ache building behind his eyes.

His body was exhausted. Not game-seven exhausted or a skate-until-his-legs-stop-working exhausted. Something deeper.

He checked the time. Ilya would be leaving Ottawa soon.

For the first time all day, Shane considered calling him and getting it over with, but he didn't. He needed to see his face. That mattered. Shane needed to see Ilya when he asked the questions. Needed to know whether there was surprise there, maybe confusion or guilt.

So Shane waited.

The afternoon light disappeared gradually, leaving the empty rooms washed in blue-grey shadows.

At some point he turned on the kitchen light.

At some point he drank water because Ilya would ask later and Shane didn't want to lie or hurt their baby. At some point he found himself rubbing his palm absently over his stomach.

"It's okay," he whispered. "We'll be just fine no matter what." He wasn't sure whether he was talking to the baby or himself. Maybe both. Then, finally, the familiar scrape of a key sounded in the lock.

Shane's hand stilled. The front door opened. He heard Ilya's bag hit the floor with a heavy thump, followed by the rustle of his jacket.

“Sweetheart?” Warm. Tired, but excited and expectant. Shane didn't answer.

After a few seconds, he called out again. “Shane?”

Footsteps approached the kitchen, quicker now.

Ilya appeared in the doorway a few seconds later, his hair still slightly damp from his post-practice shower, his Centaurs jacket unzipped over a dark shirt. He looked exhausted but still smiling.

The smile disappeared almost immediately.

Ilya's eyes moved over Shane's face, dropped to the tablet on the island and came back up.

His posture changed.

“What happened?”

Shane looked at him. For a moment, every question he'd carefully written disappeared.

There was only one.

“Did you know?”

Ilya's brow furrowed. “Know what?”

Shane turned the tablet around. The financial authorization page was still open.

“That when we bonded, I stopped controlling my own money. That I was giving up a lot of my rights.”

Ilya's eyes lowered to the screen.

Shane watched his face.

That should have been the moment Ilya looked confused. It should have been the moment he frowned and reached for the tablet and asked Shane what the hell he was talking about.

He didn't.

Something inside Shane went very still.

Ilya lifted his eyes.

“Yes. Of course” No confusion, no surprise.

Shane's stomach dropped.

He knew.

The silence in the empty kitchen was absolute. Shane stared at Ilya, waiting for the rest of the sentence, the explanation, the *something* that would make this make sense.

It didn't come.

"Yes," Ilya repeated, as if confirming the weather. His gaze was steady, watchful, but there was no guilt in it. Only a wary caution, as if he'd been waiting for this conversation and was now bracing for impact.

Shane's mind, so full of furious, whirling questions, went blank for a second. Then one surfaced, cold and clear. "How long?"

Ilya's brow furrowed slightly. "How long what?"

"How long did you know this was going to happen?" Shane's voice was dangerously quiet. "That your people would get control of my money. That I'd stop being the one who decided what happened to it."

Ilya's shoulders shifted, a minute adjustment. "I knew before we bonded. Of course. This is what happens when an alpha and omega bond. It is the law."

"You knew your financial team would get authority over my assets."

"Yes."

"Martin would be cut out."

"His role changed, yes."

"That you'd have final say on major purchases."

"What's with all the questions? This is the law. Do you need more money for expenses? I made sure to put enough to cover the usual amount you spend a month but if you need more just say."

"The house." Shane's hand slapped against the tablet screen. "You knew you'd be paying for it. That I wouldn't be contributing anything!"

"Of course." Ilya said it with the patience of someone explaining a simple concept to a child.

Each 'yes' was a hammer blow, driving the reality deeper. Shane had expected denial, deflection, maybe even anger. Not this calm, utter certainty.

Then Shane asked the question that mattered. "Did you know I didn't understand?"

That finally made Ilya hesitate. A fraction of a second. A flicker in his blue eyes before his expression smoothed over again. But Shane saw it.

“The attorneys provided documents,” Ilya said, his tone shifting to something more careful. “The law is public. You had representation.”

“That’s not an answer.” Shane took a step forward, the space between them crackling. “Did you know I had no idea what I was getting into?”

Ilya’s jaw tightened. “I knew you would not... like it.”

“Like it?” A harsh, disbelieving laugh escaped Shane. “You knew I would hate it. You knew I’d spent my whole life making sure nobody could ever have this kind of control over me. And you let me walk into it blind.”

“I did not *let* you walk into anything blind!” Ilya’s voice rose, frustration breaking through his calm. “The system same for every omega. I did not create it. We bonded. Is what part of bonding means.” He spread his hands, as if appealing to reason. “And I made sure it changed nothing for you. Your accounts are accessible. Martin still sees some things. I instructed my people never to restrict your spending. You never have to ask me for money or permission to buy the things I haven’t bought for you already. I have continued putting money into your accounts. I paid for our home. Nothing was taken from you. I provide for you as is my right to do.”

Shane stared at him, the words landing like physical blows. “Nothing was- are you listening to yourself? My free will was taken from me.”

“You have everything you had before!”

“Except the right to decide what happens to it!” Shane shot back, his own voice climbing. “The house. You paid for all of it. Why?”

Ilya looked genuinely confused by the question. “Because is our home.”

“That’s not an answer! Why did you pay? It’s not our house anymore. It’s yours.”

“Because you are my omega,” Ilya said, as if it were the most obvious truth in the world.

“Why would you pay? Is my responsibility- to provide. Especially now.” His eyes dropped to Shane’s stomach.

The phrase ‘*my omega*’ hit Shane like a slap. It wasn’t said possessively, but factually. A category, a role. “I have thirty million fucking dollars, Ilya. I could have provided my half.”

“Good,” Ilya said, completely sincere. “Keep it.”

The simplicity of it, the utter lack of understanding, made Shane’s vision swim with fury. He gripped the edge of the counter. “Did you know I would hate this?”

“Yes.”

“Then why didn’t you tell me? So I could have been prepared? You had me believing that we were partners.”

“Because it would not change the law!” Ilya exploded, throwing his hands up. “We were bonding. I wanted to bond with you. You wanted to bond with me. Telling you would only make you upset about something we could not change! I thought the kinder thing was to make sure your life felt the same! What difference does it make how the house is paid for? What’s mine is yours.”

The final piece clicked into place with devastating clarity. Shane’s anger cooled into something sharper, more terrible. “You didn’t give me independence.”

“Of course I did. I told you-

“No. You gave me permission to keep pretending I had it.”

Ilya flinched as if struck. “*Permission*,” he repeated, the word sour on his tongue. “This is not about permission. I would never stop you from doing anything you wanted.”

“That’s not the point!”

“Then what is point?” Ilya roared, his composure finally shattering.

“The point is that you fucking could!” Shane yelled back, the sound echoing off the bare walls. “I don’t want access because you permit it! I don’t want my accounts full because you’re generous! I don’t want to own half a house because you bought it and graciously put my name on the deed! I want something to be mine because it is. Not because my alpha claims to loves me enough to let me have it!”

The silence that followed was deafening, choked with the bitter scent of their distress.

Shane looked at Ilya’s face, saw the confusion and the dawning hurt, and asked the question that had been burning in his gut all afternoon. “What happens if you stop loving me?”

Ilya recoiled. “I will not.”

“You don’t know that!”

“I do. We are mated for life, Shane. No one but me will ever have you. I’ll make sure of that.”

“Who are you?” Shane’s voice broke. “I can’t be with you if this is what you think I’d accept. My entire life cannot depend on you always!”

Ilya stared at him, his chest heaving. For the first time, Shane saw something like fear in his eyes, not of Shane, but of the chasm opening between them.

“How am I supposed to know where your line is?” Shane pressed, his voice dropping to a ragged whisper. “How do I know what you’ll decide is ‘for my own good’ next?”

“This is not the same,” Ilya said, but his voice lacked its earlier conviction.

“The tracker,” Shane said softly.

Ilya’s face went pale. “Do not compare this to that.”

“I’m not saying they’re the same. I’m saying the reason is.” Shane took a shuddering breath. “With the tracker, you decided violating my privacy was okay because my safety mattered more. With this, you decided I didn’t need to understand what was happening because you would provide for me anyway. In both cases, you looked at me and thought: I know what’s best for Shane. So what happens,” Shane asked, his eyes locked on Ilya’s, “the next time you decide something is more important than what I want?”

Ilya had no answer. He just stood there, his expression stricken.

The dam broke. The controlled fury Shane had maintained all day, through the documents, the calls, the waiting, finally fractured. A wave of pure, overwhelming emotion crashed over him- betrayal, fear, exhaustion, the hormonal storm of early pregnancy, the migraine pounding behind his eyes. His scent spiked, sharp and distressed. Their bond was stretched thin and coiling.

Ilya noticed instantly. His own posture changed, his alpha instincts rising to the scent of his omega in distress. “Shane,” he said, his voice lowering, trying to project calm. “Enough. You need to sit down.”

“Don’t tell me what to fucking do.” Shane took a step back, his legs trembling.

“Sweetheart, you need to calm down.” Ilya took a step forward, his hands coming up, placating.

“Stop.” Shane backed away until his shoulders hit the cold stainless steel of the refrigerator.

Ilya kept approaching, his focus entirely on Shane’s trembling form, his too-rapid breaths. “You are making yourself sick.”

Then Shane felt it. A subtle, heavy warmth beginning to seep into the air, pushing against the sharp edges of his panic. It was a chemical blanket, soft and insistent, seeking to smooth out his frayed nerves, to slow his heart. His omega biology recognized it immediately: his bonded alpha’s calming pheromones. His body, starved for comfort and wired to respond, instinctively began to relax. His shoulders dropped a fraction. His next breath hitched, trying to deepen.

And the sheer, terrifying irony of it ignited a new kind of fire in Shane’s gut.

“Don’t,” he gritted out, fighting the drugging warmth. “Don’t you fucking dare.”

“You need to breathe,” Ilya murmured, the pheromones thickening.

“Turn it off.”

“Shane-”

“Turn it the *fuck* off!”

But Ilya didn't. Shane could see it in his face, the fear for him, for the baby, the alpha's primal need to soothe his distressed mate overriding everything else. The pheromones intensified, becoming a tangible pressure. Shane's muscles unlocked against his will. A fog tried to cloud his fury.

“You're doing it,” Shane gasped, pushing back against the chemical tide with sheer will.

“You're doing it right fucking now!”

“Doing what?” Ilya asked, his own anxiety making the pheromones pulse.

“Deciding for me!” Shane shoved away from the refrigerator, stumbling. His legs were leaden. “You decided I'm too upset. You decided to make me calm. My body... my choice...” He was panting, every breath fighting the instinct to submit, to let the alpha fix it.

Ilya saw him sway. “Stop fighting me,” he said, the command laced with panic.

The words hung in the pheromone-heavy air.

Stop fighting me.

Shane looked at him, and the last of his anger was washed away by a cold, pure fear. It wasn't fear of violence. It was fear of this- of his own biology being used as a leash. His vision began to tunnel, dark spots dancing at the edges. The ringing in his ears drowned out everything but the frantic beat of his own heart. He felt his knees buckle, the signal to surrender his body was screaming at him.

No. He locked his legs. The effort was immense. A white-hot pain spiked behind his eyes.

“Shane?” Ilya's voice sounded far away. The pheromones suddenly vanished, yanked back as Ilya realized what was happening.

But it was too late. Shane's body, pushed past its limit, had nothing left. The world tilted on its axis. He saw Ilya's horrified face rushing toward him, heard a raw, guttural “Nyet!*” that seemed to come from another room.

Then nothing.

Consciousness returned in fractured, disorienting pieces. The hard, cool press of tile against his cheek.

A desperate, rhythmic shaking, Ilya's hand, checking his heartbeat.

The rich, cloying scent of alpha fear, sour and overwhelming.

A stream of Russian, too fast and choked to understand, just the cadence of pure terror.

“- Shane, *prosnis*, please, open eyes, sweetheart, please-”

Fingers on his throat, on his wrist.

Then, the world lurched. He was being lifted, gathered against a solid, shaking chest. He tried to form a word, don't, but his tongue was too heavy.

“I have you. I have you. It's okay. Let's get you home, you'll rest in a proper nest and see things my way.”

He was moving. Through the hollow house. The front door opened, cool night air hitting his face. Then the softer confines of a car seat being reclined. The click of a seatbelt. A large, warm hand cupping his cheek, his forehead.

“Breathe. Just breathe. You are okay.”

The engine roared to life.

The world began to move, the vibration of the road humming through him.

Darkness pressed in again, but he fought it, clinging to the sound of the tires on asphalt, the shaky rhythm of Ilya's breathing from the driver's seat.

A long stretch of silence, broken only by the road.

Then, a voice, low and ragged, meant for no one, or perhaps for the unconscious form beside him.

“I am sorry.”

A pause, filled with the whisper of the highway.

“I am sorry, *sladkiy*.”

The hand returned, brushing his hair back, then retreating as if burned.

Another mile.

“I just need you safe. Even if its from yourself right now, you'll see that I'm right, my love.”

In the dark, drifting between worlds, Shane heard the words. The final, devastating proof. The reason that justified everything. The pheromones coming from Ilya didn't let him focus

on one thing, he had tried to fight it but failed.

I just need you safe.

And as the car carried him further from the empty shell of his old life and toward the new home he hadn't bought, Shane understood, with a clarity that felt like dying, that Ilya's definition of safe might be the very thing he needed to escape.

The car stopped. The engine cut off, leaving a ringing silence that made the air feel heavy and uncomfortable. Shane blinked, his vision swimming as he registered the shape of a garage wall, unfamiliar in the dim light from the fixture overhead. The new house. Ilya's house.

The driver's door opened and closed. Footsteps crunched on concrete, coming around to his side. The door opened, letting in a rush of cool, unfamiliar air. Ilya stood there, his face pale and etched with a tension that made him look older. His eyes scanned Shane, checking, assessing.

"We're home," Ilya said, his voice hoarse. He reached into the car and started to help Shane out.

Shane's own voice felt rusted shut. He fumbled for the seatbelt release, his fingers clumsy. "I can walk," he managed, the words slurred.

Ilya didn't argue. He didn't say a word. He simply leaned in, one arm sliding behind Shane's back, the other under his knees, and lifted him from the seat as if he weighed nothing.

A spark of anger tried to ignite in Shane's chest, but it fizzled, drowned by a wave of dizzying exhaustion. "Ilya," he protested, his voice thin. "Put me down."

"No." It wasn't a snap. It wasn't the furious command from the kitchen. It was calm, final. As if he already knew that Shane was fighting the alpha's command and would fail no matter how hard he tried.

Shane pushed against the solid wall of his chest, but his strength was gone, siphoned away by the collapse and the lingering, heavy aftermath of Ilya's pheromones. The bond between them ached, like a raw, overstimulated nerve. "I can fucking walk."

Ilya shifted his grip, securing him closer, and pressed his lips to Shane's temple in a kiss that was heartbreakingly gentle. "I know," he murmured against his skin.

Then he turned and carried him into the house.

That was it. The distinction was perfectly, terribly clear. He wasn't carrying him because Shane was incapable. He was carrying him because he had decided it would be so. The rebellion was over. He couldn't risk it when he didn't know how far Ilya would take this. He'd never really been frightened of Ilya, even from before, but this was different.

Shane let his head fall against Ilya's shoulder, too weary to hold it up. He was carried through a dark, high-ceilinged space, the mudroom, then a hallway. The house smelled of new paint, clean carpet, and the faint, sharp scent of what must have been the movers. Beneath it all, layered into the very fabric of the place already, was Ilya. His scent was everywhere, as if he'd already marked it, claimed it. *Provided* it.

Ilya's scent wasn't just present in the new house; it was a tidal wave, thick and cloying, saturated with alpha distress and a possessiveness that had sharpened into something singular and absolute. As he carried Shane up the stairs, his hold was impossibly secure, not painful, but unbreakable, a cage crafted from desperation. Shane could feel the rigid tension in the arms beneath him, see the tight line of Ilya's jaw, the dark, blown-wide pupils that fixed on the hallway ahead with terrifying focus.

They entered the master bedroom. It was mostly empty, but the king-sized bed he'd chosen was there, made up with plain grey sheets. A single lamp on the floor cast a soft, low pool of light. On the bed, Shane saw with a sinking heart, was a nest. It wasn't the haphazard, collaboratively built one from Montreal. Fluffy duvets formed high walls. Several pillows were stacked strategically. One of Ilya's Centaurs hoodies lay in the center, a blatant scent anchor just like Shane preferred.

Ilya laid him down in the center of it with exquisite care, as if he were placing a fragile artifact on a pedestal. The fabrics were soft, but they felt like a trap. Shane stared up at the

ceiling, a blank expanse of white.

“You need to sleep,” Ilya said, his voice low. He knelt beside the bed and began removing Shane’s shoes, then his socks, his movements methodical. His fingers were warm against Shane’s chilled skin.

“I’m not tired,” Shane whispered, the lie pathetic.

Ilya didn’t dignify it with a response. He stood and went into the adjoining bathroom. Shane heard water running. He returned with a warm, damp cloth and, without asking, began to wipe Shane’s face, his hands. The touch was tender, wiping away the dried salt of his earlier tears, the clamminess of sweat. It was the care Shane had always craved, but now felt claustrophobic. Each gentle stroke felt like a brand, a claim being reinforced.

“Ilya, stop,” Shane said, but it came out as a plea.

“Shhh,” Ilya soothed, brushing the cloth over his forehead. “Almost done.” He worked in silence for another minute, then disappeared again to rinse the cloth. When he returned, he had a glass of water and Shane’s prenatal vitamin. “Sit up a little. Drink.”

Shane turned his face away.

A beat of silence. Then, Ilya’s voice, still soft but edged with something steely. “Shane. You will drink the water. You will take the vitamin. It’s for the baby.”

The invocation of the baby was a low blow, a trump card Ilya knew Shane couldn’t resist. A fresh wave of helpless anger brought hot tears to his eyes. He blinked them back, refusing to let them fall. He pushed himself up on trembling arms and took the pill and the glass. The water was cool and hurt his throat.

“Good,” Ilya said, and the approval in the word made Shane feel sick.

He watched as Ilya moved around the room. He checked the temperature, adjusted the nest around Shane, filled a water bottle and placed it on the floor within reach. Each action was a brick in the wall of this new, quiet captivity.

Finally, Ilya began to undress himself, stripping down to his boxer briefs. In the lamplight, the lines of his body were all stark muscle and bruises from practice. He didn't ask. He simply lifted the duvet and slid into the nest beside Shane, his body a furnace, proving physically how on edge he was. He didn't try to pull Shane into an embrace. He just lay on his side, facing him, one arm draped over Shane's waist, his palm settling possessively over his lower abdomen. His nose nuzzled into the space behind Shane's ear, and he inhaled deeply, a long, shuddering breath.

The bond, stretched thin and painful, pulsed at the contact. A confusing mix of solace and suffocation washed through Shane. His omega instincts, battered and confused, sighed at the proximity of his alpha, the scent-marked nest, the protective hand on their child. The rest of him screamed.

"I'm not a thing you can fix by putting me in a box," Shane whispered into the dark.

Ilya's arm tightened, just for a second. "This is not a box," he murmured, his lips moving against Shane's skin. "This is our nest, in our home. Where you are safe."

"Safe from what?" The question was barely audible.

Ilya was silent for so long Shane thought he wouldn't answer. Then, the words came, a raw confession in the dark. "From the world. From your team. From your own stubbornness that makes you run until you break." His hand spread over Shane's stomach. "From anything that would hurt you."

"You hurt me," Shane said.

Ilya flinched as if struck. His breath hitched. Their connection twisted with a sharp spike of anguish so profound it stole the air from Shane's lungs. For a moment, the controlling alpha was gone, and there was only a shattered man clinging to him.

"I know," Ilya choked out, the words thick. "Bozhe moi, I know, but it was for the best. And I will come to see that it's not that bad. But I cannot... I will not apologize for providing for you. This," his hand pressed down gently, "is my reason. My only reason. You and the baby are mine, I'll take care of everything and you'll be happy when you get settled in the right frame of mind."

The next words that Ilya said, so soft and tenderly made Shane freeze. "The world is not safe for you," Ilya said, his voice a low, fervent vow. "Not for my omega. Not for the life we made. I see it now. I was blind before, trying to share you, trying to be... civil." He said the word like a curse, the same way he had when dreading Shane's friends at the cottage. "But this- this changes everything. You are carrying my child. My family. There is no room for error. No room for... for your pride, or your independence, if it risks this. You need to follow my rules from now on. Once I know that you can obey, I can let you, we can be like before. When you give birth, you can play some more before we have another baby...we can have everything you've ever dreamed of."

The deceptively tender trap was complete. Woven from love, from fear, from a possessiveness that saw no boundary between protection and possession. Ilya believed every word. He believed this nest, this house, this control, was the ultimate act of his love. When Shane finally reconciled to how things would be, he can loosen the restrictions and they could go back to normal again.

Shane lay still, enveloped in the warmth, the scent, the unbearable tenderness of the man who held him. The man who had, in one day, become his warden. He stared at the unfamiliar ceiling of their new home, and the terrifying understanding crystallized.

His thumb swept over Shane's bottom lip. The touch was possessive, reverent. "You will be safe here. I will make sure of it. You will rest. You will eat what is good for you. You will not worry about money, or contracts, or anything that is not here, in this house, with me. I will handle everything. I will build a world for you where nothing can touch you."

He leaned down and kissed Shane, not with passion, but with a solemn, sealing finality. Then he settled back, pulling Shane tightly against him, his body a shelter that felt more like a

funeral shroud.

“Listen to me, sweetheart,” Ilya said, his voice a low, deliberate rumble against Shane’s ear. He was trying for calm, the way one might speak to a spooked animal. “I know you are angry. You have every right to be angry. I should have told you. I understand this now.”

Shane remained silent, his head throbbing in time with his heartbeat.

Ilya continued, each step up the staircase measured and sure. “Tomorrow. Tomorrow we call the lawyers. We call Martin. We change whatever you want changed. You want separate accounts? You have them. You want your money completely removed from my people’s access? We remove it. You want papers saying I cannot touch one fucking dollar of yours without your signature first? I will sign them. Anything.”

That made Shane listen. His breath caught. It was everything he’d wanted to hear, the capitulation he’d fought for.

Then came the *but*. “But not tonight.”

Shane stiffened in his arms.

Ilya felt it, his grip adjusting minutely. “Tonight you are done.”

“Excuse me?” The words were a weak scrape.

“You passed out.”

“Because of what *you* did.”

Ilya placed him in the center of the vast mattress with the reverence of laying down something sacred. The moment Shane's weight settled, a bolt of pure defiance shot through him. He pushed himself up, swinging his legs toward the edge.

A hand settled against his chest, not shoving, but an immovable barrier. "Stay."

The word was low, guttural. An alpha command. It vibrated in the air between them. Shane froze, his breath catching. Ilya's eyes widened a fraction, as if he'd heard the tone himself and was startled by it. But he didn't retract it. The command hung there, and the line was crossed.

Shane watched, silent, the cold understanding seeping deeper.

Finally, his voice hollow, Shane asked, "What happens if I want to leave?"

Ilya stopped. He was across the room, holding a blanket. He turned slowly. "Tonight?" he asked, as if clarifying the terms.

"Yes."

Ilya's expression shifted, the frantic energy solidifying into something grim and absolute. "You are not leaving tonight."

"That's not what I asked."

Ilya knew. He placed the blanket carefully on the bed and approached, stopping a few feet away. Then, deliberately, he knelt on the hardwood floor, putting himself below Shane's eye

level. The gesture was meant to be non-threatening, but it felt like a siege tactic. “You passed out less than an hour ago,” he said, his voice painfully reasonable. “You are pregnant. You are exhausted. You are in no state to make that decision.”

“Would you let me leave?” Shane pressed, his own voice quiet.

The silence stretched. Ilya’s jaw worked. “No.”

No shout. No threat. Just a fact, clean and devastating as a scalpel.

Something brittle snapped inside Shane. He slid off the bed, his legs only slightly unsteady. Ilya rose to his feet in one fluid motion but didn’t advance. Shane walked toward the bedroom door, each step echoing in the barren room. He put his hand on the cool brass knob.

“Sweetheart.” Ilya’s voice was a ruined thing behind him.

Shane turned.

Ilya looked utterly devastated, his eyes bright with unshed tears. “Please,” he whispered, “don’t make me stop you.”

The words hung in the air, more confession than plea.

“*Make* you?” Shane echoed.

Ilya flinched, realizing what he’d said, but he was in too deep. The spiral had him. “You are not safe to drive.”

“I’ll call a cab.”

“No.”

“I’ll call my mother.”

That stopped Ilya. Shane saw the visceral pain it caused. But Ilya only shook his head, a man holding fast to a cliff edge. “Tomorrow. You can call anyone tomorrow.”

“So I’m a prisoner.” The word was flat.

“*No!*” The denial was explosive, anguished. “This is not a prison! This is... this is making sure you are *here* tomorrow!”

“Then open the door.”

Ilya didn’t move. He stood between Shane and the hallway, a wall of terrified love. His silence was the answer.

Shane’s laugh was a bitter, broken sound. Ilya flinched again but didn’t yield.

“Tomorrow,” Ilya whispered into the dark, his lips moving against Shane’s skin, “we start to fix everything.”

Shane lay awake in the circle of his arms, staring at the shadowy outline of a half-unpacked box against the far wall. The love that surrounded him was real, and it was the most dangerous thing he’d ever known.

No, he thought, the plan already forming in the cold, clear space behind his eyes. Tomorrow, I start making sure I can leave.

The first sensation was warmth. A solid, encompassing heat along his back, the familiar weight of an arm draped over his ribs, a large hand splayed possessively over the lower part of his stomach. For three blissful, disoriented seconds, Shane floated in the hazy comfort of it, his body instinctively arching into the touch, his omega humming with contented recognition. Alpha. Mate. Safe.

Then memories returned, as cold and precise as a surgical blade.

The documents. The calm, devastating yes to admit what he'd done. The pheromones thickening the air, the fight against his own biology, the world tilting away. The carry into the house. The commands.

His entire body went rigid. The instinct to shove the arm away, to roll out of bed and put distance between them, was like a physical jolt. He didn't. He couldn't.

He made himself breathe. In. Out. He forced his muscles to unlock, one by one, willing his body to soften back against Ilya's chest. The movement was slight, but it was enough.

Ilya stirred immediately, his nose nuzzling into the nape of Shane's neck. "You okay?" The words were sleep-rough, thick with concern.

Shane hesitated. The truth was a boulder in his throat. He swallowed it. "Yeah."

He felt the minute tension that entered Ilya's body. He didn't believe him. Shane could feel the disbelief through the bond, a skeptical, worried pulse. So Shane turned his head, found Ilya's lips in the dim morning light, and kissed him. It was soft, a barely there press of mouth against mouth. And then, because his traitorous omega instincts craved it, needed the

reassurance of scent more than his pride needed distance, he tilted his head and rubbed his cheek against Ilya's stubbled jaw in a slow, deliberate scenting.

Ilya melted. A shuddering sigh escaped him, and his arm tightened, pulling Shane closer. The bond flooded with a dizzying wave of relief and desperate love. Shane closed his eyes against it. It felt so wrong, so dishonest but it was a necessary evil.

Ilya tried harder. It was written in every gesture. Breakfast appeared on a tray: oatmeal with the berries Shane liked, toast cut into triangles. The prenatal vitamin was beside a full glass of green juice. "Did you sleep? Is your head better? Any nausea?" His touch was constant, a hand on Shane's lower back as he passed, fingers brushing his hair back, lips against his temple. "I spoke to my attorneys this morning," he said, watching Shane eat. "The opened debit cards for all the accounts with no limits. Whatever you want, solnyshko. We fix it."

The guilt was a live wire in Shane's gut. He nodded, pushing oatmeal around the bowl. "Okay."

Later, looking out the front window of their still-barren living room, Shane saw it: a sleek, black SUV parked discreetly but unmistakably at the curb. A man in dark clothing leaned against it, talking quietly into a phone.

"Why is there a car outside?" Shane asked, his voice carefully neutral.

Ilya didn't look up from the box he was unpacking. "For you."

"I have a car."

"You passed out yesterday." Finally, Ilya met his gaze. His expression was open, reasonable. "You're pregnant. The media attention since the bond... it's a lot. Cromwell already threatened us. Is sensible."

“I’m fine today.”

“Good,” Ilya said, a faint, relieved smile touching his lips. “Then the driver will have a very easy job.”

The old Shane would have erupted. Would have demanded, argued, seen the unspoken control in the gesture. The new Shane calculated, he saw the watchful set of Ilya’s shoulders, the way his eyes tracked Shane’s reaction. He forced his own shoulders to relax into a shrug. “Fine.”

The effect was instantaneous. Ilya’s entire posture softened. He walked over and kissed Shane, deep and grateful. “Thank you,” he murmured against his mouth.

I could do this, get him comfortable enough to give me the space to find a flaw in the plan, Shane thought, the lesson etching itself coldly into his mind.

Over the following days, a new normal quietly cemented itself. When Shane left for Voyageurs practice, the driver, Leo, was waiting. “Morning, Mr. Hollander.” Another car, less conspicuous, would follow or be waiting nearby. When Shane stopped at the little coffee spot Hayden had found years ago, Leo stayed with the car, but the other security detail, a woman named Sofia, would enter, order her own drink, and position herself where she had a clear line of sight. When Shane returned home, Ilya would ask, “How was practice?” and then, casually, “Did you get that matcha from that place on Elgin? You liked it last time.”

Of course he knew.

Shane studied it. He learned that Leo reported directly to Ilya, primarily about route safety and schedule adherence. Sofia was more observant; she noted interactions, crowds, potential “anomalies.” Ilya knew where Shane was within fifteen minutes of him arriving anywhere.

Shane tested it once, telling Leo he was going to a specific hardware store, then they were stuck in traffic a block away, he got out of the car and started walking. His phone rang before he'd even crossed the street.

“Solnyshko, Leo says you are walking. Everything alright?”

“Fine. The other place is a block away.”

A pause. “Okay. Just... let him know next time. So he or Sofia can walk with you.”

‘So he can plan the route.’ Not *‘so I know where you are.’* Such a lie.

They had domestic moments that hurt because they felt genuine. Unpacking boxes, bickering over where to put a funny looking ceramic vase Yuna had gifted them. “It is crime against eyes,” Ilya declared, holding it like a bomb.

“It’s from my mom!”

“This does not make it less ugly.”

Shane laughed, and for a few minutes that afternoon, he forgot. They painted the room that would be the nursery a soft, neutral green. Ilya pressed his palm to the dried paint and smiled, “This is where Bean will sleep, Shane. Is perfect.” Shane’s heart clenched so hard he couldn’t breathe.

Then he’d walk outside to get the mail and see Sofia giving him a polite nod from her post. The walls telescoped inward again.

“You are still angry,” Ilya said one night a week later, his fingers tracing the line of Shane’s spine in bed.

Shane didn't deny it. "Yeah."

"At me."

Shane shrugged, knowing that no matter the answer, it would be upsetting.

Ilya was quiet for a long time. "What do you need from me? Tell me."

Shane rolled over to face him. In the dark, Ilya's features were all vulnerable lines and shadows.

He gave him a piece of the truth, the only safe piece. "I'm trying, Ilya."

The words devastated him. Shane saw it in the way his eyes closed, in the pained breath he drew. Ilya desperately wanted him to try. He surged forward, kissing him, a hungry, sorrowful kiss. "I will try harder, too," he vowed against his lips.

Shane closed his eyes. That was exactly what he was afraid of.

Trying harder meant Ilya was more attentive, more affectionate. It also meant the circle tightened. Calls between his practices. Texts if Shane was five minutes later than expected. Instructions to the security team: "Don't hover. He hates it." They didn't hover. They were just there, a constant, polite perimeter.

The money was the hardest part. They had legitimate expenses, furniture, appliances, things for the baby. Shane started withdrawing cash when he bought groceries, adding fifty dollars here, a hundred there to the total. He opened a new, online-only account with a credit union he'd see one of the rookies using. After another week without being found out, he started funding it with small transfers from a personal investment account Martin still managed. Every transaction made him feel sick, deceitful. He'd stare at the cash hidden in a closet shelf, or the new account balance on his phone, and his stomach would turn.

It's my fucking money, he'd remind himself, the thought reinforcing his nerve. He didn't need millions. He needed enough to make sure he could survive on with a new baby and not be found.

Ilya was thrilled to introduce him to the Centaurs. "They will love you," he said, almost nervously, as they drove to a casual team BBQ. "Bood is a great cook. Barrett is... loud. Do not let Dykstra talk to you about music."

For a few hours, the weight lifted. Ilya was in his element, proud and slightly ridiculous. "This is my Shane," he announced to the group in the backyard, as if presenting a treasure.

Zane Boodram didn't look up from the grill. "Yeah, Roz. We know."

Ilya glared. Shane laughed, a real, unforced sound that made Ilya's eyes light up. Troy Barrett was genuinely friendly, pulling Shane into a debate about playoff predictions. Luca Haas, the rookie, followed them with wide, awestruck eyes, tripping over his words until Shane put him out of his misery by asking about his slap shot.

Shane smiled up at him, and for a perfect, suspended hour, it felt normal. It felt like the future he'd dreamed of. He saw a place for himself here, in this city, with this man who was trying, with these people who teased Ilya without fear. They were a great group, already seeming to be enmeshed together.

He missed that with his team. Even though he'd always had to hold himself apart from them for obvious reasons, they had all been friends once.

When it was time to leave, Ilya got pulled into a conversation with the goalie coach. Shane, still buoyed by the ease of the afternoon, instinctively walked toward the driveway where Leo would be waiting.

A different security guard, Micha, fell into step beside him. “Car’s just over here, Mr. Hollander.”

Shane stopped. The good mood evaporated, replaced by a cold hollowness. He’d forgotten. For one entire hour, he’d forgotten the invisible lines around him.

Ilya caught up, his hand settling at the small of Shane’s back. “What?” he asked, sensing the shift.

Shane made his face smooth. “Nothing. Just tired.”

Ilya’s gaze searched his, but Shane leaned into the touch at his back, and Ilya, desperate for any sign of connection, accepted the lie.

That night, Shane lay awake, Ilya’s hand a warm weight under his shirt, skin to skin over his stomach. He stared at the ceiling and thought of Crowell. He hated him. He didn’t trust him an inch. But Crowell wanted something: Shane Hollander, one of the most valuable assets in hockey, back on the ice and useful to the league’s narrative. That made him not trustworthy, but useful.

The next day, when Ilya was at practice, Shane sat at the kitchen table with his laptop. He read his contract until his eyes burned. He combed through league regulations. The provision was clear: if placed on Injured Reserve that would give him up to a year off. A promise to come back would be worth negotiations, especially since he was an omega. If he told Crowell that he just wanted to spend the next 10 years having a baby one right after the other, there was nothing that they could do. It was leverage. Crowell wanted control; Shane could dangle the promise of future cooperation.

He opened a new email. Typed Crowell’s address. His finger hovered over the trackpad.

This was the man who’d tried to manipulate him into leaving Ilya. Getting this email, Crowell would think he’d won. The shame was acidic. He typed anyway.

Commissioner,

You told me once that if I ever needed a way out, I had one.

I'm asking what that means.

I need information, not intervention. Do not contact Montreal, my parents, or Rozanov.

If I stop reporting and Montreal places me on IR, I could be away for up to a year, correct?

If that's correct, I may be willing to cooperate with whatever reasonable publicity obligations are necessary later.

In exchange, I need discrete help with something now.

If you contact Ilya before speaking to me, this conversation ends.

Shane Hollander

He read it three times, his heart hammering against his ribs. He hit send.

Fuck.

Immediate, nauseating regret swamped him. He slammed the laptop shut. Opened it again. It was gone. He stood up, pacing the empty kitchen, running his hands through his hair. What had he just done?

Footsteps on the stairs. Ilya, hair damp from a post-practice shower, wearing only low-slung sweats, his brow furrowed. "Why are you awake? It's late."

Shane's heart tried to crawl out of his throat. "Couldn't sleep."

Ilya walked to him, no suspicion in his tired eyes, just concern. He wrapped his arms around Shane from behind, his chin resting on Shane's shoulder, his clean, familiar scent enveloping him. "Come back to bed," he murmured, nuzzling his neck.

The confession bubbled up, a desperate need to come clean, to shed the terrifying weight of his own plan. He almost did it.

Instead, he let his body go pliant in Ilya's arms. "Okay."

The next morning, he checked his email on his phone while Ilya showered. One new message. The sender made his blood run cold.

Hollander,

Your understanding is substantially correct.

I will not contact Rozanov.

Tell me what you need.

Shane stared at the screen until the words blurred. The plan had been abstract, money, observation, options. If this worked it could be real.

He might actually be able to leave. The thought wasn't a liberation. It was a different kind of prison sentence, and the man singing softly off-key in the shower on the upper floor was both his jailer and the love of his life. Ilya loved him with a ferocity that was building the walls higher every day. And Shane loved him enough that the only way to survive it might be to break his heart.

The text from his mother came through just as Shane was forcing down a piece of toast, his stomach churning with nausea that had nothing to do with morning sickness.

Mama- Your father and I haven't seen you boys in forever. We're going to Ilya's opener and we can go to yours too a few days later.

Shane stared at the message, a strange lump forming in his throat. He showed the phone to Ilya, who was vibrating with pre-game energy as he packed his gear bag.

Ilya took the phone, his eyes scanning the words. He went very still. "They are coming here?" he asked, his voice oddly careful.

“Yes, they want to see you play,” Shane said, watching him.

“Both of them?”

“Yes, Ilya. Both of my parents.”

For three full seconds, Ilya just stood there, holding Shane’s phone. Then, a transformation. The focused, intensity melted into something boyish and utterly transparent. “Where will they sit? The family box is good, but sightlines from section 108 are better for watching breakouts. Do they need a car from their house? I will arrange it. Does David have Centaurs gear? I have extra. Should we get dinner after? The Italian place, but maybe steakhouse, David likes steak-”

“Ilya.” Shane reached out and took his hand, stopping the torrent. “Breathe. I’ll handle it. They just want to see you play next week.”

Ilya’s fingers tightened around his. He looked down at their joined hands, then back at Shane, his blue eyes shining with an emotion so raw it made Shane’s carefully constructed walls tremble. “I have never had family come watch me play before, at least not since I was drafted.” he said quietly, the confession slipping out.

Everyone. Svetlana was already in Ottawa. Yuna and David were coming. Shane was here, carrying their child. His family. All of them, in one place, for him.

Shane’s exit plan, the hidden money, the burner phone charging silently in his bedside drawer, the email to Cromwell, all of it curdled in his gut, suddenly feeling like an act of profound, premeditated cruelty. He squeezed Ilya’s hand, a reflex. “You do now,” he said, and hated how true it was, and how much of a lie he was living. “But maybe we should put them in hotels? The house is pretty empty still.”

“No, no. why don't you go out tomorrow and finish getting everything?”

“I guess. But the nice store I found with Rose that time was better with cash. Remember the one I told you that was run by the older couple?”

“No worries, my love. I’ll have cash here waiting in the morning then. Lets get enough of the bedrooms furnished for them to stay a few days and maybe we can all drive over to your opener.

The arena thrummed with a different energy than the Bell Centre. It was newer, brighter, the Centaurs’ deep red and black, a stark contrast to Montreal’s rouge, blanc, et bleu. In the family box, Yuna was a vision in a tasteful Centaurs scarf, while David sported a brand-new #81 jersey that was so obviously fresh from the team store it still had creases. He looked happy.

“He insisted,” Yuna said, rolling her eyes as David puffed out his chest.

“Gotta support our boy,” David said, entirely serious.

Ilya found them before warm-ups, a bolt of focused energy in his suit. He kissed Yuna on the cheek, shook David’s hand with a firm, “Thank you for coming, sir,” then pulled Shane into a hard, brief kiss that tasted of anticipation. His hand, as always, found its home on Shane’s stomach through his sweater. “Both watch me score,” he murmured, his lips against Shane’s ear.

“The baby’s the size of a blueberry, Ilya.”

“My blueberry will still be impressed.” He winked, a flash of the old, cocky Ilya. He pulled Shane a few feet away from the group. “I got you all seats down by the center line. If you want to come down and see the game closer, you can but there will be cameras.” Ilya traced his freckles softly. “Thank you for being her, Shane. I know it hasn’t been easy for you but I love you so much.”

“I know you do, Ilya.” Shane said, not being able to look at him.

“Is the jersey a piece offering? Did you see how your life isn’t much different then before? I let you go to practices, you can spend whatever you want, I’m not keeping you in bed the whole day.”

Shane had pulled on one of Ilya’s old jerseys that morning and he saw that it had affected the alpha in a positive way. He had even given him the keys to his car so that he could review game tape while driving to the arena. Security had followed behind, but a duffell and briefcase were shoved in the trunk of the car for later.

“If I score hat trick, will you let me make love to you? I miss you.” He whispered into Shane’s neck. Shane inhaled his scent for the last time, nozzling into the scent gland.

“Okay.” Shane whispered and Ilya pulled back and gave him a soft kiss, then was gone, disappearing into the bowels of the arena.

Shane watched him go, the familiar swagger in his step, and for a handful of heartbeats, he wanted nothing more than to chase after him, to forget the secrets and the spreadsheets and just be the proud partner in the stands. The desire was so sharp it was a physical ache.

Svetlana arrived just before puck drop, elegant despite being in what must have been a personally altered Rozanov jersey that was cut to expose her stomach, her smile not quite reaching her eyes. She hugged Shane, exchanged pleasantries with Yuna and David, but Shane noticed it immediately, the way her gaze kept scanning the crowd behind them, the subtle tension in her shoulders. She was looking for something. Or someone.

“What’s wrong?” Shane asked under the cover of the arena’s rising pre-game roar.

“Nothing.”

“You’re a terrible liar.”

“I am an excellent liar,” she said, her eyes tracking a movement in the lower bowl. “Come, let’s go see face-off up close. I need people to see my hard work with kitchen scissors and glitter glue.” She brushed a piece of lint from his shoulder, a dismissive gesture.

The game began, and with it, the performance. Shane felt the cameras like a physical touch, the red lights of the broadcast units swiveling toward their box or seats like hungry eyes. This was the narrative the league loved: the bonded rivals, the public romance, the family support. He saw himself appear on the jumbotron, Yuna waving enthusiastically beside him, David looking happy in his jersey, turning around to the cheers of the crowd to display the jersey name, Svetlana offering a regal smile. Shane smiled back at the giant version of himself, the picture of a supportive mate. Inside, he felt hollow, a carefully painted egg.

Then Ilya scored.

It was a classic Rozanov goal- a blistering wrist shot from the high slot that caught the top corner before the goalie finished his slide. The arena erupted. Yuna screamed, David leapt to his feet with a roar that sounded decades younger, and Svetlana clapped, her face alight with fierce pride.

And Shane forgot. For one glorious, unguarded moment, he was just a fan, just a partner. He was on his feet, laughing, the sound ripped from him by pure, uncomplicated joy. *That’s my Ilya.*

On the ice, Ilya was swallowed by his new teammates, but he broke free almost immediately, his helmeted head turning unerringly toward their box. He found Shane. He didn’t point or make a show. He just looked, and tapped his gloved fist twice over his heart. The camera caught it, and then it caught Shane’s face, lit up with a real, breathtaking smile.

The moment was theirs. In a packed arena- a first for this team, perfect and crystalline. Then it shattered when Shane remembered what he was going to do before the night was over.

During the first intermission, as Shane fetched drinks just to test the security range, he saw Svetlana go rigid. Her eyes were locked on a man weaving through the crowd with the easy

confidence of a predator moving through familiar territory. He was slender, handsome in a sharp, European way, dressed in a suit that probably cost more than Shane's first car.

Svetlana muttered something in Russian that sounded like a curse.

"Friend of yours?" Shane asked, returning to her side.

"Unfortunately."

The man arrived. "Svetlana," he said, his voice a smooth baritone. He kissed her on both cheeks. She tolerated it like it was a medical procedure.

"Sasha."

He glanced past her to Shane, his gaze assessing, appreciative, and utterly calculating. "You are not going to introduce us?"

"I was hoping not."

David chuckled nearby, misreading the tension as old friends' banter.

Sasha Volkov smiled, a charming, white flash. "Ah, Svetlana. Always so protective." He turned the full force of his attention on Shane. "You must be Shane. I am Sasha Volkov. I'm sure you've heard of me?"

"Shane Hollander," Shane said, shaking the offered hand. The grip was firm, dry.

"Yes, I know." Sasha's eyes crinkled. "The whole world knows. Congratulations on your Cup. And," his gaze dipped, just for a fraction, "on your bonding. Ilya finally settling down. I

admit, I never thought I would see it.”

Shane nodded, unsure why Svetlana was so tense.

Sasha laughed, a rich, practiced sound. He looked out at the ice, where the Zamboni was making its rounds. “He looks good.”

“He is.” Shane said guardedly.

“Happy.” Sasha’s eyes slid back to Shane. “You must be very special.”

Shane felt himself being weighed and measured against some private, internal standard. “He seems to think so,” Shane replied, refusing to blink.

Sasha’s smile didn’t falter. He began to reminisce, dropping vague, polished anecdotes about Moscow, about youth hockey, about “wild times” that required no specifics to paint a vivid picture of a past from which Shane was permanently excluded. Svetlana’s interjections grew sharper, her attempts to steer the conversation more blatant.

“It has been a very long time since I’ve seen him,” Sasha said, almost wistfully.

“And perhaps we can make it longer,” Svetlana snapped.

Sasha laughed again, unoffended. “So protective! I should say hello after the game. For old times’ sake.”

“Ilya will be busy,” Svetlana said, her voice glacial.

Sasha looked directly at Shane, his smile taking on a conspiratorial edge. “Not all night.”

The insinuation was like a slap to the face, clear and dirty. Shane's stomach tightened, but he kept his expression pleasantly neutral. He was a master of this. He'd been performing for cameras and hostile reporters since he was eighteen. This was one of Ilya's past hookups.

"After so many years," Sasha continued, his tone deceptively light, "I'm sure Ilya and I will want some time alone to catch up properly."

"Sasha." Svetlana's voice was a warning whip-crack.

He raised his hands, the picture of innocence. "What? We are old friends. There is much to discuss."

Shane felt Yuna and David's confused attention on them. He couldn't afford a scene. He summoned every ounce of his Captain Hollander poise. "I'm sure Ilya can decide who he wants to spend his time with," he said, his voice calm and clear. "He's pretty good at making his preferences obvious."

Sasha's eyebrows lifted a millimeter. He'd expected jealousy, insecurity, a crack in the perfect facade. He hadn't expected this cool, unshakable front. A flicker of surprise, then renewed interest, crossed his features. Svetlana's lips twitched in what might have been approval.

But inside, Shane was crumbling. It wasn't that he believed Ilya would choose Sasha. It was the casual way Sasha spoke of claiming Ilya's time, as if Shane's presence was a temporary obstacle to a more natural order. It was the reminder that Ilya had a whole history, a whole self, that existed before mortgages and bonding paperwork and prenatal vitamins. A self that might, one day, find Shane's complicated fear and his secret escape funds to be exhausting. A self that might look back on a man like Sasha, who represented a simpler, less encumbered past, with nostalgia.

Just before he left, Sasha turned for a final look at the ice. "He was always so intense," he mused, almost to himself. "When Ilya wants something, there is nothing else in the world." He glanced at Shane. "Being wanted by him... it can make you feel like the only person alive." He paused, letting the words hang. "Enjoy it."

Then he was gone, melting back into the crowd.

The second period was a blur. Svetlana immediately tried to damage-control. “Shane, *listen to me-*”

“Don’t,” Shane cut her off, his eyes fixed on the resumed play below. Ilya was everywhere, a force of nature, setting up a goal for Boodram with a no-look pass that brought the house down again.

“He is an asshole. A spoiled, jealous little boy who cannot stand that Ilya moved on and found something real. Ilya has not spoken to him in years. He had tried to trick Ilya to bite him, but Ilya always refused. He would not-”

“Svetlana.” Shane’s voice was flat, final. “Please.”

She fell silent, because she heard it. Not anger, not heartbreak. Shutdown. The emotional retreat into a fortified position. It was far more frightening. “Did Ilya meet with him after our rookie season?” He couldn’t help but ask.

As the clock wound down on a Centaurs victory, Svetlana leaned close, her voice barely audible over the celebrating crowd. “He loves you, Shane.”

Shane watched Ilya embrace his goalie, his face alight with pure, unshadowed joy. The happiest hockey night of his life. “I know,” Shane said.

And he did. That was the terrible, beautiful, imprisoning truth. He didn’t doubt Ilya’s love. He was trapped by it. Sasha hadn’t created a new fear; he’d simply given a face and a name to the oldest one: What happens when this isn’t enough? What happens when the love that builds the walls becomes the reason you need to climb them?

The cameras found them again as the final horn blew. Ilya, sweaty and triumphant, looked up and blew a kiss toward the box. Yuna blew one back. David gave a thumbs-up. Svetlana waved.

And Shane smiled. He smiled wide and bright, the perfect mate, the supportive partner, the happy omega. He let the camera capture it, let the league and Crowell and the world see it.

His right hand was in his pocket, his fingers curled around the cold, sleek shape of the burner phone, fully charged.

On the ice, Ilya skated a victory lap, soaking in the adoration of his new home, believing his entire world was safe in the stands, waiting to go home with him.

In the stands, Shane Hollander held the means of his own escape, and if could actually do it.

The game is over.

The Centaurs have won their opener, and the arena is still buzzing around Shane, a current of joy he floats in but cannot feel. Music plays, fans laugh, take selfies with the scoreboard in the background, reluctant to let the night end. He knows the drill. Ilya won't be out for a while. Media scrums. Team meetings. A long shower.

Normally, Shane would complain about the wait and then plant himself stubbornly to wait anyway. Tonight, he is a clock, counting down his window.

And the decision- the real, irreversible one, wasn't made in this buzzing hallway. It was made days ago, when a manila envelope arrived at a PO box he'd rented under a false name. Inside was a driver's license. He'd stared at the stranger's name, the photograph of his own face looking back with unfamiliar coldness, for a full hour at a quiet library table. He didn't tear it up. He put it in the bag.

The bag had been waiting, too. A simple black duffel, stashed while Ilya was showering this morning into the trunk. Inside, a few changes of plain clothes, the rolled-up cash he'd slowly withdrawn over months, prepaid credit cards, three burner phones, basic toiletries. And now, the ID, the briefcase with about \$300,000 in Canadian and American money and a few of Ilya's worn outfits. His escape plan, and a letter each to his parents and Ilya.

He *was* ready. So why did his hands feel like ice?

His mother's laughter pulled him back. Yuna, David, and Svetlana were clustered nearby, radiating post-game warmth. Yuna was ecstatic, replaying Ilya's goals with her hands. David was nodding along, agreeing and happy. Svetlana participated, but her eyes kept flicking to Shane, worried after the tense encounter with Sasha earlier.

Shane barely heard them. He looked at his mother. Really looked. The way her eyes crinkled with her smile, the familiar scent of her perfume cutting through the stale arena air.

Yuna caught him staring. "What?"

Shane shook his head, his throat tight. "Nothing. I just..." His voice caught, wavered. It wasn't entirely an act; the grief was real, a live wire in his chest.

Yuna's face immediately softened. She'd gotten used to this over the past weeks. The pregnancy had made him emotional sometimes. He got sentimental over commercials, cried into his oatmeal once for no reason. So when Shane said, "I love you, Momma," all she heard was hormones.

She smiled, reaching to squeeze his arm. "I love you too, honey."

Shane moved into the hug, wrapping his arms around her. He held on longer than normal, closing his eyes, pressing his face into her shoulder. For one catastrophic second, the truth screamed in his head- *Tell her. She would help you. She would hide you.* But Yuna loved Ilya, too. She believed in the fairytale. He couldn't make her choose. So he let go, the phantom warmth of her embrace already a memory he was collecting.

Then he turned to his father. David noticed the weight of his gaze.

“What?”

Shane gave him a watery, forced smile. “Nothing.”

David grinned, used to his son's recent mood swings. “Oh God. Not me too.” He opened his arms. “Come here, then.”

Shane leaned in, the hug familiar and solid. “Love you, Dad.”

David patted his back. “Love you too, kiddo.”

“Thanks for coming tonight,” Shane added, the words thick.

David pulled back, confused by the solemnity. “Of course we came.” As if it were the simplest thing in the world. The sheer, uncomplicated normality of it almost shattered Shane's resolve.

He cleared his throat, taking a subtle step back. “I need the bathroom.”

Yuna, ever the mother hen, asked, “Want me to come?”

His pulse spiked. “Mom.” He forced a laugh, and it sounded almost real.

Yuna held up her hands, laughing. “Okay, okay.”

“I’ll be back,” he said. That was the lie that burned the most, a final, quiet betrayal. He turned and walked away before he could see if they were watching. He knew if he saw their faces, he would crumble.

Once he pushed through the doors into the main concourse, the shift was internal and immediate. Externally, he was still Shane Hollander: a tired athlete, maybe a little emotional after a big night. He moved with relaxed purpose.

Internally, he was a radar. He watched reflections in the glossy concession stands, scanned the moving river of jerseys and hats. There. Near the premium lounge entrance. One of Ilya’s security detail, a man named Roy, stood with his back to a pillar, eyes passively scanning the crowd. A good man, doing his job. Protecting what Ilya loved.

Shane’s stomach twisted. This was the betrayal of trust that would haunt him. He kept walking, blending into a large group of laughing fans moving toward the bathroom near the east exits.

He pushed into a large, tiled restroom. It was busy, loud with the echo of flushing toilets and running sinks. His heart hammered against his ribs, a frantic drum counting down the point of no return.

He spotted him near the sinks: a man roughly his height and build. Similar hair color. Not a double, but from behind, in a crowd, wearing Shane’s distinctive team-issued jacket and cap? It might buy three minutes of confusion.

Shane approached, lowering his voice. “This is going to sound really fucking weird.”

The guy turned, wiping his hands. His eyes widened. “Holy shit. You’re-”

“Yeah.” Shane pulled a folded wad of cash from his pocket. “I need your jacket. And your hat.”

The man stared. “What?”

Despite the terror, a hysterical laugh almost bubbled up. “I’m pranking Ilya. Switch clothes with me and I’ll pay you. A lot.” He named a figure that made the guy’s eyebrows disappear into his hairline. “You put on my stuff. You go back out there, walk around, have a great night. No questions. We’ll give you autographs when he thinks he’s got me.”

The man looked from the money to Shane’s face, evidently deciding that Shane Hollander was either brilliantly eccentric or having a psychotic break. But the money was real. He shrugged, a slow grin spreading. “Okay, man. Your funeral.”

They did a quick, awkward swap in a stall. Shane handed over his Centaurs jersey and his cap. The man handed Shane his worn leather jacket and a plain black beanie. He looked passable. Shane’s gear, from behind, in a moving crowd, it might work.

Shane waited, listening to the man leave. His hands trembled as he pulled the beanie low over his brow, shoved his hands into the pockets of the unfamiliar leather jacket. He had no idea if it was working. Roy could have already spotted the impostor. Security could be flooding the restroom any second. He couldn’t wait to find out.

He exited, merging into the flow of people. He didn’t run. Running attracted eyes. He walked with the brisk, focused pace of someone who’d just remembered they left the oven on.

His heart was a trapped bird. Someone brushed his shoulder and he nearly jumped out of his skin. A pack of drunk, elated fans in Centaurs jerseys surged past him, chanting, “ROZ-A-NOV! ROZ-A-NOV!” Their voices were a physical blow. He was fleeing through a celebration of the man he was leaving, his name a weapon of pure irony. He kept moving, his eyes burning.

Near the final set of doors to the parking garages, he passed a wall-mounted television. Post-game coverage. And there he was.

Ilya. Hair still damp from the shower, face glowing with the high of the win. A reporter was asking him a question. Shane saw the moment Ilya understood it was about family. His whole face transformed, that beautiful, ridiculous, private smile breaking through, the one that had always felt like it belonged only to Shane. The closed-captioning scrolled at the bottom: 'First time I have whole family at game. Means everything.'

Shane stopped. The world narrowed to the screen. The noise of the exiting crowd faded. This was the most dangerous pause. He could turn around. Go back upstairs. Wait. Ilya would come out, sweaty and triumphant, and pull him close. They'd go home. Ilya would hold him, and the terrifying, yawning future would shrink back into the familiar, difficult, loving present.

His hand moved unconsciously, splaying over the not-quite-as-flat plane of his stomach beneath the borrowed jacket. *I don't want to leave him. Just turn around and hope things get better.*

He wrenched his gaze from the screen and pushed through the heavy doors.

The cold night air hit him like a slap. It was silent out here, relative to the arena's roar. No cheering. No family. No Ilya.

For a few seconds, he just stood, stunned by his own audacity. He was outside. He'd done it.

Then, the panic, not of regret, but of he needed to move quickly. *Move.*

He walked fast, getting to his car in under 10 minutes. He pulled out his regular cell phone and called for an Uber while getting his bags out and leaving the letters in the front seat. The directions etched in his mind. Two blocks north, a left. The bus stop was a bland, fluorescent-

lit concrete box. The bus was pulling up and in less than 15 minutes, he'd be at the train station.

Before he moved toward the platforms, he felt the two phones in his pocket. The burner. And his own.

He pulled out his real phone. The screen lit up with notifications: a few generic alerts. And the last message from Ilya, sent just after the final buzzer.

IGR- You see goals?

A sob clawed its way up his throat. He pressed the power button, holding it down. His thumb hovered as the screen prompted him to confirm.

He turned the phone off after making sure he'd uploaded everything to the cloud.

He whispered to the glowing screen, his voice raw in the empty corridor, "Yeah." A tear finally spilled over, tracing a hot path down his cheek. "I saw."

The screen went black.

He tossed the phone into the nearest trash can. He adjusted the strap on his shoulder, took a breath that did nothing to fill the hollow in his chest, and walked toward the platforms, where trains were being boarded.

The roar of the crowd was still a physical vibration in Ilya's bones as he finished with the media, a bright, buzzing energy that had nothing to do with the arena lights and everything to do with the knowledge of who had been watching. The Centaurs had won. He had won. He'd played a perfect game for his new team, scored, dominated, and every time he'd looked up into Section 114, row five, they'd been there. Shane, Yuna, David, Svetlana. His family. Not spectators, but anchors. And beneath Shane's jersey, their child. Their little bean.

The locker room was chaos, all backslaps and laughter. Bood shoved his shoulder. "Jesus Christ, Roz. We won one game. You look like you just won the Cup."

"Was excellent game," Ilya said, unable to wipe the grin from his face. It felt permanent.

Troy chuckled from his stall. "He looks like that because his boyfriend was watching."

"Mate," Ilya corrected automatically, the word rolling out with a possessiveness that was pure, unadulterated joy. He didn't even care about the groans that followed. He was already mentally upstairs, already feeling the phantom press of Shane against him, the promise of a reward whispered that morning. Dinner with everyone. Then home. *Home*. With his mate, his family, his future all under one roof, safe and his.

Finally free, he pulled out his phone as he headed for the family lounge. No messages yet. Not unusual. Shane was probably caught up with his parents.

***IGR-** Media finally done.

***IGR-** You see goal?

***IGR-** I believe you owe me something, sweetheart.

He pocketed the phone, the grin returning. He'd collect. Thoroughly.

He found them near the lounge entrance: Yuna, David, and Svetlana, chatting animatedly. His eyes scanned past them, searching automatically for the familiar slope of Shane's shoulders, the particular shade of his hair under the lights.

Nothing.

His smile didn't falter. Not yet. "Where is Shane?"

Yuna glanced up, smiling. "Bathroom. He escaped before you could gloat, I think. Good game, honey." She pulled him down to her level to kiss his cheek.

Ilya laughed, a real, easy sound. "He escaped before I could collect my prize." He accepted David's handshake and praise, beaming under it. But his attention kept drifting to the hallway. A minute passed. Two.

He checked his phone. No answer. He called. It rang once, then went straight to voicemail.

A faint thread of unease pulled taut in his gut. "His phone is off."

Yuna waved a hand. "Maybe the battery died. It was a long night."

But Ilya knew Shane's phone had been at ninety percent when they'd left the house. Ilya noticed these things. He always noticed things about Shane. "How long ago did he leave?"

Yuna thought. "Ten minutes? Maybe fifteen."

Something shifted in the air. Ilya felt it in his own posture first- a subtle stiffening of his spine, a sharpening of his focus. Svetlana saw it, her own smile fading. "Ilya?"

He ignored her. “Which bathroom?”

He moved through the crowded concourse, his pace quickening from a walk to something just shy of a run. The happiness was still there, but it was now ringed with a cold, paranoid urgency. He pushed into the nearest men’s room. It was emptying out, just a few stragglers. No Shane. He inhaled deeply, sorting through the cacophony of scents- urinal cakes, sweat, cheap soap, beer. And there, faint but unmistakable, was the warm vanilla-honeysuckle sweetness of Shane. It trailed toward the stalls, then... stopped. As if he’d vanished.

His pulse, already elevated from the game, spiked into something frantic. He checked an adjacent hallway. Nothing. Called again. Voicemail.

Then the thought arrived, fully formed and detonative: *My pregnant omega is missing.*

The word pregnant acted like a trigger, bypassing all higher reasoning. Rational Ilya began to recede, buried under a wave of primordial, protective fury.

He found an arena security guard. His voice was low, terrifyingly calm. “I need exits monitored. Camera footage from the last twenty minutes on the east concourse. All parking areas checked. Find anyone who saw Shane Hollander. Now.”

The guard blinked. “Sir, what’s the- ”

“Find the security detail assigned to him. The man named Roy. Bring him to me.”

Svetlana caught up to him, grabbing his arm. “Ilya, slow down. He’s probably just- ”

He turned on her, and she flinched at the emptiness in his eyes. “My pregnant mate is missing,” he said, each word a chip of ice. “I am not slowing down.”

Roy appeared, his face pale. “Mr. Rozanov. He went toward the restroom. We saw someone in his jacket and hat leave a few minutes later. Something was off- the posture, the gait. By the time we confirmed it wasn’t him, he was gone from the area.”

Ilya went perfectly still. The stillness was worse than any outburst. “Someone stole his clothes?”

Roy shook his head. “We asked. Mr. Hollander said it was a prank and that you’d find it funny.”

And with those words, the last vestige of hope- that this was a misunderstanding, a dead phone, a trip to the restroom- evaporated. This was planned.

“Who helped him?” The calm was cracking, a razor edge showing beneath.

“A fan, we think. A random guy.”

“Find him. Now.”

They located the car Shane had driven, still in its VIP spot. Ilya was almost running now. He yanked the driver’s door open.

Empty, scent still fresh.

The passenger seat held Shane’s necklace, the little charm glinting in the street light in mockery, Ilya’s gaze swept the interior, and that’s when he saw them, placed carefully on the center console.

Two envelopes. One labeled Ilya. The other, Mama & Dad.

The world narrowed to those two rectangles of paper. Ilya stared at his name, written in Shane's neat, familiar script. His hand, when he reached for it, trembled violently.

Svetlana came up behind him, her breath catching. "Ilya..."

A desperate, clawing denial offered one last possibility: Forced. Someone made him write it. Someone took him and left this as a decoy.

But he knew the fold of the paper. Knew the slight pressure Shane used on the pen. Knew the meticulous planning of the clothing switch, the disabled phone, the missing bag.

This was not a kidnapping.

Svetlana voiced the truth softly, terribly. "He left."

Ilya turned on her, a snarl in his throat. "No." It wasn't denial. It was a warning, a command to unsay the unbearable.

He tore the envelope open. The letter was a single page. His eyes skittered over the words, not comprehending at first.

Ilya,

If you're reading this, I'm already gone. And you're probably already calling someone to find me.

A cold fist clenched around his heart. He read on.

You knew me. You saw the parts of me I kept hidden from everyone else, and you loved them anyway.

His breath hitched. Loved. Past tense.

Then, further down:

And I still ended up afraid of you.

Everything inside him went silent. A hollow, ringing silence. He read the line again. And again. The ink blurred slightly. His thumb came away damp; he was sweating.

He couldn't breathe. Shane was afraid of *him*. Not of external threats, not of the past, but of Ilya himself.

His first response was a furious, wounded rejection. "No," he whispered to the empty car. Then louder, to the universe, "NO!"

Svetlana tried to approach, to touch his arm. He jerked away as if burned. "He is not afraid of me!" But the proof was in his shaking hand, the words searing themselves onto his soul.

The bond between them, that intangible connection he'd come to rely on, felt wrong. Not severed, but stretched thin, a wire humming with distance and pain. And the alpha in him, the part that was all instinct and possession, lost its final restraint.

He pulled out his phone, his movements frantic. He called a number he hadn't thought to use ever again. Anatoly who asked no questions and got results. His Russian was rapid-fire, stripped of all pleasantries.

"Anatoly. Ilya Rozanov. I need you to find someone. Immediately. Shane Hollander. He left the Centaurs arena approximately thirty minutes ago. I want cameras. Transit records. Hotels.

Airports. Credit cards. Everything. Use whatever resources. I don't care about cost. I don't care about the method. Find him."

As he spat details- license plate, phone IMEI number, bank accounts- his eyes fell back to the letter in his other hand.

Please don't take that choice away from me too.

He stopped speaking mid-sentence.

"Mr. Rozanov?" Anatoly's voice came through the phone.

Ilya stared at the line of text. Shane had known. He had predicted this exact phone call, this exact train of thought, before Ilya had even conceived of it. The realization was like a wave of nausea crashing into him.

Svetlana's voice cut through. "Ilya. Did you read the fucking letter?"

He jerked the phone back to his ear, his instincts warring with the devastating clarity of Shane's foresight. "Find him," he repeated, but the command was hollow.

His scent flooded the space, a blistering wave of alpha distress- panic, rage, territorial fury. People nearby, security, staff, instinctively backed away.

He began to pace, a caged animal, one hand tearing at his own hair. He called Shane's number again. And again. And again. Each trip to voicemail was a twist of the knife. "Answer, damn you!"

Then he remembered. Sasha. The smirk, the proximity before the game. He wheeled on Svetlana. "What did he say to Shane? "

She hesitated, and that was the wrong answer. He closed the distance between them, his gaze pinning her. “WHAT DID HE SAY TO SHANE?”

She told him, quickly, the gist of it: the insinuations about Ilya wanting private time, the comments about his intensity, the veiled threat wrapped in nostalgia.

Ilya’s expression darkened into something murderous. “Where is he?”

“Ilya, no.”

“WHERE?”

He found Sasha near a service elevator, laughing with a group of arena staff. Sasha’s smirk returned when he saw Ilya. “Rozanov. Congratulations on the win.”

Ilya grabbed him by the front of his expensive shirt and slammed him against the wall. The laughter died instantly.

“What did you say to him?” Ilya’s voice was a low, dangerous grind.

Sasha’s eyes widened, the smirk faltering. He tried to shrug it off. “We just talked. A little of the old times, I congratulated him on getting you to settle down. Is that a crime?”

Ilya’s control, already hanging by a thread, snapped. He shook him, hard. “WHAT DID YOU SAY TO MY MATE?”

Security moved in, Svetlana shouting, hands pulling at Ilya. Finally, sputtering, Sasha told him. The taunts, the implications, the psychological poison. And then, with a spiteful gleam,

he delivered the killing blow: “I didn’t make him leave you, Ilya. You did that all by yourself.”

The sentence landed with the force of a physical blow. Because it was true. Sasha was a parasite, a nuisance, but he wasn’t the cause. Crowell, the money, the pressure- they weren’t the cause. Ilya himself, his love, his fear, his overwhelming need to possess and protect, was the cause.

He released Sasha with a shove of disgust.

Even with that horrifying glimpse, the compulsion didn’t stop. Anatoly called back with preliminary information: Shane had been seen leaving the arena on foot, stopped at the car and left with a large bag, heading toward the transit terminal. They were pulling camera feeds from the station.

“Continue,” Ilya ordered, the word tasting like ash.

Yuna had heard enough. She stepped forward, her face pale but set, her own letter in her hand. “He told you not to follow him.”

“He is your pregnant son,” Ilya shot back, desperate for an ally. “And you want me to do nothing?”

“I want you to listen to him- what’s been going on with you two?” she cried, tears in her eyes. “I thought you boys were okay? What happened?”

“It’s private-you wouldn’t understand.”

“Then make me understand!” Yuna shouted. “My son is missing and I need to know why!”

Svetlana finally snapped. “Ilya! Shane survived his entire life before he ever met you! He is capable! I say we let him cool off and get in touch with us when he’s calmed down.”

“HE WAS NOT PREGNANT!” Ilya roared, the biological imperative a fortress he couldn’t escape.

Svetlana met his fury head-on. “He’s still Shane! Pregnancy didn’t erase him! You treating him like a helpless incubator could be why he left!”

It hit the core of his irrational fear. Ilya looked down at the letter again. *Don’t track me. Don’t send people after me. Don’t take this choice away.*

And he had done all of it, immediately, exactly as Shane feared. He wasn’t protecting Shane; he was proving Shane right. He felt physically ill. He stumbled to the side of the garage and dry-heaved, bracing himself against a cold concrete pillar.

With a hand that felt numb, he pulled out his phone and called Anatoly.

“Anything?”

“Mr. Rozanov?”

“Shane’s smart. He could be shown getting on a bus or buy a ticket to somewhere and not get on it to throw us off.”

“We have people at the bus station now. We can have a location within the hour.”

“Fine.” The words were agony.

The silence on the line was profound. His alpha instincts screamed in rebellion, a howl of protest in his blood.

“We’ll find him, Mr. Rozanov.” Anatoly said, ever the pragmatist.

Ilya squeezed his eyes shut. One compromise. One thread. “Check the hospitals in the area. See who he’s been talking to on the phone for the past few weeks. Anything, call me immediately.” He swallowed the bile rising in his throat.

He ended the call before he could rescind the order. The physical toll was immediate. He sagged against the pillar, a wave of dizziness washing over him. His pregnant mate was missing. Just gone. For a man like Ilya, it was like an amputation of all his limbs.

He couldn’t stop himself from calling Shane’s number one more time. When the voicemail picked up, his voice broke.

“Shane... please. Solnyshko... pozhaluysta. Just tell me you are safe. You can hate me. I don’t care. Just... please just come back. I can’t be without you.”

He hung up, the admission hanging in the stale garage air. Ilya Rozanov, who always had a plan, who always seized control, did not know how to do this.

Svetlana took him home. The house he had been so proud to provide, was just now empty and cold. It felt like a museum of a life that had just evaporated.

He walked past the half-finished nursery. The soft green walls Shane had started to paint himself. A single, unpacked box of onesies sat in the corner. Ilya stood in the doorway, his hand braced against the frame.

“I scared him away,” he whispered to the empty room. Ilya stopped in the nursery doorway.

The cheerful green walls seemed almost obscene now. A box of tiny clothes sat open near the wall. He stared at it. “What if he doesn’t come back?”

Svetlana said nothing and Ilya turned towards her.

His face had crumpled. “Sveta?” His voice sounded frighteningly young.

“What if Shane doesn’t come back?”

Svetlana didn’t try to comfort him. There was no comfort.

He finally collapsed in their bedroom. Not in a rage, but in utter defeat. He gathered Shane’s pillow, then found a worn t-shirt from the hamper, one that carried the full, sleeping scent of him- vanilla, honeysuckle, *home*. He sank to the floor, back against the bed, and pressed the fabric to his face.

The sobs that wracked him were silent at first, then grew into great, heaving gasps that stole his breath. He cried for the trust he’d shattered, for the fear he’d inspired, for the terrifying void of not knowing. He cried until the shirt was damp and scentless, and the silence of the house was absolute.

“I loved him,” he choked out to the darkness.

“You still love him,” Svetlana said quietly from the doorway.

“No,” Ilya gasped. “I mean... I thought if I loved him enough... if I made everything safe, perfect, he would never need to leave.” It was the tragic flaw in his grand design.

Svetlana’s voice was gentle but unsparing. “That’s the problem, Ilya. You made it impossible for him to prove he wanted to stay.”

The truth of it lanced through him. He had built a gilded cage, convinced himself it was a palace, and then wondered why his bird felt trapped.

Later, deep in the night, his phone rang. An unknown number. His heart seized. He fumbled for it, answering before the first ring finished. “Shane?!”

It was Troy. Apparently rumors were starting but no one had a confirmed story to what happened.

He hung up after telling him that he'd be in touch soon. The crash of disappointment was like a physical ache.

He sat in the center of the living room, in the home he'd planned for them. His pregnant mate was somewhere in the world, carrying their child, afraid of him. How did they get this low after being on such a good run?

He picked up the letter, the paper now soft and creased. His eyes found the closing lines.

I don't know what will happen after this. I wish I did. I love you. I'm furious with you. I'm afraid of you. I know I'm missing you already.

He brought the paper to his lips, then to his cheek, a pathetic attempt to feel a connection to the man who wrote it.

"I miss you too," he whispered into the empty house. Then, with a resolve that felt frail and new, he added the only promise he could make that wouldn't betray that love all over again: "I will find you."

Chapter End Notes

DON'T KILL ME. 😊 I promised you a HEA, and I stand by that promise.

I just never promised I wouldn't make everyone suffer horribly on the way there.

Ilya and Shane are going to be okay. Eventually. Probably. I mean... HEA. I SAID HEA. PUT THE PITCHFORKS DOWN. 😊😭

In the meantime, enjoy- I'm off to do back to school shopping for my mini and will be writing on Sunday. 😊

See you next chapter. ❤️

Chapter 42: Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

I am still kind of floored by the response to the last chapter. 😭❤️ I hoped it was going to be an emotional one, but I genuinely was not prepared for how many of you would show up in the comments and generally losing your minds with me.

Thank you so, so much for every kudos, comment, bookmark, message. I read everything, and seeing you all are in these two and their very complicated little family makes writing this story so much fun. 🥺

This chapter is a little quieter in some ways, but there is a lot happening underneath the surface.

Thank you Lisa, Anna, B and Tony. I promise I am holding your hands while I hurt you.
❤️

Chapter Notes

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

The train wheels clicked, a steady, metallic rhythm against the tracks, a sound so different from the roar of the arena or the tense silence of the garage. Shane sat rigid beside the window, a stranger in his own skin, watching the familiar skyline of Ottawa shrink into a cluster of distant, glowing points of light against the skyline. He wore jeans and a grey hoodie now, the leather jacket and beanie stuffed deep into his duffel. The bag was wedged securely between his feet, he had managed to condense his most important material possessions in one duffel bag. One hand kept drifting from his knee, to his lap, to rest on the faint, firm curve of his stomach, a new feature that he'd noticed that morning. He had almost called out to Ilya to come check, but stopped himself.

He'd expected... something. A surge of triumph. The dizzy euphoria of a prison break. Instead, as the last recognizable landmark slipped from view, all he felt was hollow. A vast, echoing quiet where the constant hum of Ilya's presence, his mother's worry, his father's calm or the constant chatter of their group of friends had once been.

For the first time in years, nobody who loved him knew exactly where he was. He had no schedule, no one waiting with an agenda for him.

The thought settled into his mind and made him a bit lightheaded. He was untraceable. For these few hours, he belonged only to himself and his little seedling riding low in his belly.

Then the guilt came after the first disembarkment. As passengers came in and out, he lowered his face, shame hot and immediate, twisting the relief into nausea. He'd done it. He'd orchestrated this silence. And Ilya... The nausea intensified, a rolling wave that had his throat tightening. He pressed his palm harder against his stomach, as if he could communicate through skin and muscle.

"We're okay," he whispered, the words swallowed by the rumble of the train. He had prepared for this feeling. Enough omega blogs and articles to know that separating from an alpha, especially while pregnant would not be easy, but it was survivable.

He received no kick, no flutter. "Very helpful," he muttered, dropping his forehead against the cool glass.

With nothing left to do but sit, his brain, ever his enemy, turned its full, unsparing focus to the man he'd left behind. It began without his permission, like a cruel, detailed simulation.

Ilya is hopefully still doing interviews. He could see it: the bright lights, Ilya's post-game glow, that particular smile he used for the media- charming, a little cocky, a little flirty but not his 'real' smile. The real one was reserved for later. For Shane.

He's showering now. The team showers, steam and the smell of soap, his teammates chirping him about the win, about his performance. Ilya would be grinning, smug, already thinking of his reward.

Shane wondered what he'd do after, how long would it take for it to be noticed that he was missing. Ilya, dressed in his perfect, casual clothes, hair still damp, smelling like his expensive sandalwood shampoo. His eyes would scan the family lounge, find his parents, Svetlana... and then flicker, once, twice. A slight frown.

He'd look for me.

Shane closed his eyes, squeezing them shut against the image. He knew, with a bone-deep certainty that was its own kind of torture, what happened next. The calm question. The check of the phone. The second, sharper question. The walk to the bathroom that would become a jog, then something faster. The way Ilya's scent would change, the warm amber and cedar sharpening into something acrid, alarmed. The controlled voice giving orders that were not requests. The stillness that was more frightening than any shout.

He hated it. A physical ache bloomed behind his breastbone, so acute he had to press a fist there. *But he'll find the letters*, Shane reminded himself, the rational part clawing for air. *He'll know I wasn't taken. He'll know I left. Maybe he'd listen this time and not search for him.*

The thought brought no comfort. It simply replaced the image of a panicked Ilya with the image of a still one, Ilya standing in that concrete garage, a single sheet of paper in his hand, his face emptying of all its victorious light as he understood.

The train slowed slightly, approaching a station. Brockville, the sign said. A middle-of-nowhere stop. The doors would open. He could stand up. Gather his bag. Step onto that platform. He could call his mother, his voice shaky. 'Mom, I'm at the Brockville station. I panicked. I'm sorry.'

Yuna would cry, but they would be tears of relief. She'd tell him to stay right there.

He could call Ilya.

His thumb hovered over the powered-off phone in his pocket. In a few minutes he could undo the whole night and go back. Just turning it on would and dialing the number. Ilya would have someone here within twenty minutes. Probably Ilya himself would come, driving like a man possessed, ignoring every speed limit.

There would be a security detail, ridiculous and overwhelming. Yuna would hug him and not let go. David would clap his shoulder, his eyes saying *It's okay, son*, calm and reassuring. Svetlana would yell- at Shane for the scare, at Ilya for whatever she'd already seen him do in response. And then... then he could go home. To their beautiful, silent house. To their absurdly large bed where Ilya would curl around him, a possessive, trembling bracket of

warmth, and never let him out of his sight again. To the nursery with the soft green walls he'd painted himself.

Everything he actually wanted.

His eyes filled, hot and blurring the passing dark trees into streaks of charcoal. A tear escaped, tracing a path down his cheek. He was so tired. The weight of being alone, of being responsible for this fragile, new little life, felt colossal.

Then, clear as a bell in the quiet of his mind, he heard Ilya's voice. Not the sweet one, not the teasing one. The other one. The one that left no room for argument. The one that had spoken from the doorway of their bedroom, a physical barrier as much as a vocal one.

You are not leaving tonight. With all the things that had happened throughout the years, both good and bad, it terrified Shane to really think back and see what he had forgiven Ilya for out of love. He remembered the solid wall of Ilya's chest. The implicit threat in his stillness. The way his own instincts had recoiled, then submitted, leaving him feeling small and trapped.

Security details that were guards. Drivers who were chaperones. Money that was his, filtered through Ilya's accounts, "for legal reasons." Decisions about travel, about publicity, about his own body, made for him and explained afterward as protection. As love.

His palm settled over Bean once more, a silent apology for the chaos. He didn't need to stop loving Ilya. The love was a fact, as vital and stubborn as his own heartbeat. He needed to know that loving Ilya didn't require the surrender of everything else. That he could be loved and be free. That he could be carrying Ilya's child and still belong to himself.

"That's why," he whispered to the window, to his reflection, to the tiny life inside him.

He stayed in his seat as the Brockville station platform slid into view and away. A teenager a few rows up kept glancing his way. Shane's pulse, which had just begun to settle, spiked again. He pulled the baseball cap lower, turning his face toward the window. Was it recognition? Had someone posted something? Was Ilya's frantic search already public? The kid stood, and Shane's muscles coiled, ready to bolt for a different car.

The teenager ambled over. “Hey.”

Shane managed a tight, “Hey.”

“Is anyone sitting here?” The kid pointed to the empty seat beside Shane.

Shane stared at the vacant space, then back at the kid’s expectant face. There was no flicker of recognition, no double-take. Just a teenager looking for a better seat. “No,” Shane said, the word breathless.

“Cool, thanks.” The kid dropped into the seat, plugged in headphones, and stared at his phone.

Shane slowly released the breath he’d been holding. The relief was tinged with a bizarre, petty offense. Years of international hockey. Millions of fans. Magazine covers. A fucking lifetime in the spotlight. And it could all be undone by a baseball cap, a grey hoodie, and a the weird situation of him being on a train, late at night right after TV cameras were pointed towards him.

Clark Kent was onto something, the thought, a dry, cracked piece of humor surfacing through the panic.

As the train carried him further into the anonymous night, he reached into the inner pocket of his duffel. He pulled out the journal he started when he found out he was pregnant. He had a few pages filled already and he wanted to start writing more. He might need it in the years to come to explain to their child why he was a single parent.

At the next stop, more people got off than on. The seat beside him emptied again. With the coast clear, he finally reached into his bag again and drew out a plain wallet, keeping it low in his lap.

A New Hampshire driver's license. His own face looked back at him. They had given him a five a clock shadow and lighter brown hair. He had the dye in his bag but he didn't want to use the chemicals while pregnant. It looked like him enough, but the expression was all wrong, neutral, detached, a stranger's gaze. The name beside it: Evan James Mercer. Birthdate: April 12th. An address in Concord he'd memorized but had never seen.

He ran his thumb over the laminated surface. This was real. Evan Mercer, from a small town, nothing extraordinary. Nobody to look twice at.

"Evan," he whispered, testing the shape of it. It felt foreign.

A wave of surreal dizziness washed over him. "I'm definitely getting arrested," he mumbled to his stomach. The sheer absurdity of it, of him, a rule-follower by nature, attempting subterfuge. "Your daddy is so bad at this baby."

He paused, the next thought arriving with a painful, unwelcome twitch of his lips.

"Your other papa is unfortunately much better. He knows how to lie. We'll be fine though," he said, trying to reassure himself.

The joke escaped before he could censor it, his faint smile died instantly, smothered by the fresh grief. Everything, even his attempts at bleak humor, led back to Ilya. The man was a gravity source, and Shane had spent years in happy orbit. Now he was testing the velocity of his own escape.

The train's rhythm changed again, slowing with a long, sighing squeal of brakes. His transfer point. A smaller, dimmer station in a town whose name he'd already forgotten. He watched the other passengers begin to stir, gathering their things, putting on coats.

For one last, suspended moment, he remained seated. If he just stayed here, let the train carry him to its final destination, his fate would be decided by a schedule, by a conductor, by inertia. The temptation was profound. To let go. To have the choice taken from him.

But that was the whole goddamn point.

So Shane Holl-Evan Mercer, stood up. He hefted his single duffel, stood and walked behind the man ahead of him. He touched a hand to his stomach, a silent pact. Then he stepped off the train and onto the cold, empty platform.

The night air was sharp, smelling of diesel and damp concrete. The train hissed and began to pull away, leaving him standing alone under a flickering fluorescent light.

For once, no one had chosen this destination for him. No security team had vetted it. No driver was waiting. No alpha was anticipating his arrival with a mix of desire and suffocating concern.

He adjusted the strap on his shoulder, the new ID a secret weight in his pocket. He looked left, then right. Two exits.

He picked the one on the left and started walking.

The station exit Shane chose led not to a narrow sidewalk bordering a service road. The air was cold and carried the damp, oily smell of train brakes and distant rain. To his left, the road curved away toward what looked like the faint glow of a town center. To his right, it dwindled into darkness, broken only by the occasional security light from a warehouse parking lot. He stood for a full minute under the flickering fluorescence, the duffel strap digging into his shoulder, feeling the vast, terrifying weight of the choice, where would Ilya not think to look? He turned right and started walking.

For the next thirty-six hours, Shane discovered that disappearing was not like the action movies, but a tedious, expensive, and profoundly uncomfortable state of being. It was a series of small, anxious transactions. It was the sticky vinyl seat of a bus that smelled of old coffee and disinfectant. It was the calculated purchase of a train ticket to a city he had no intention of visiting, only to disembark three stops early at a junction town whose name he forgot as soon as he saw it. It was handing cash to a cab driver with a muttered “just drive for

a bit,” then watching the meter tick upward with a kind of detachment. It was walking several blocks in the drizzle after the cab dropped him off, his duffel feeling heavier with each step, his lower back beginning a dull, familiar protest. It was sitting on a hard plastic bench in another anonymous station, eating a dry turkey sandwich from a small corner diner because it was the only thing that seemed safe, while he watched the faces of everyone who passed.

He wasn't sure any of this circuitous travel was necessary. He'd watched enough movies to know that predictable routes were apparently bad, but most of those movies involved Matt Damon and international conspiracies, not a pregnant omega with a duffel bag and a desperate need for a bathroom. He kept imagining what an actual private investigator would think if they could see his meandering, cash-based path across the northeastern United States. Probably that he was a panicked amateur. Unfortunately, Shane knew one actual private investigator, the man Ilya used before, and the thought of those calm, assessing eyes tracking these clumsy movements scared the shit out of him. He didn't know if Ilya had contacted him, but he knew Ilya well enough to assume the possibility was high. So Shane tried to think like Ilya, to anticipate the moves of a mind that was both brilliantly strategic and brutally direct when threatened.

This became a problem because thinking like Ilya mostly resulted in thinking *about* Ilya. The specific way his brow would furrow in concentration. The low, pleased hum he made when a plan came together. The absolute, terrifying stillness that preceded action. Whenever that happened, whenever the memory of Ilya's warmth or the sound of his voice threatened to swamp him, Shane would deliberately yank his focus to the next immediate decision. Which platform? Which bus? Should he get off here or go one more stop? Where could he find a bathroom that wasn't disgusting? These decisions were small, insignificant in the grand scheme, but they were all his. He clung to that.

Pregnancy kept inserting its mundane, urgent needs into Shane's attempts to become invisible. He had to pee constantly, which meant exposing himself in public restrooms, head down, hat pulled low. He got ravenously hungry at inconvenient times, his stomach turning sharply if he waited too long to eat, a reminder that this wasn't just about him anymore. The exhaustion from carrying the duffel, from the constant low-grade alarm, was like a physical weight. At one larger station, Shane became convinced a man in a grey coat had been watching him for several minutes from near a newsstand. His heart hammered against his ribs. He started mentally plotting which exit would offer the best cover, his muscles coiling.

Then Bean decided, with perfect timing, that Shane needed to find the nearest restroom. A sharp, insistent pressure bloomed low in his abdomen, immediate and non-negotiable. Shane abandoned his counter-surveillance operation, his paranoia instantly overridden by necessity. He hurried to the men's room, and afterward, leaning against the sink, he muttered to his stomach, “You are terrible at this.” He paused, splashing cold water on his face. “We're

trying to be inconspicuous.” Bean offered no apology, just a soft, rolling flutter that Shane thought might be in his mind- should he be feeling movements already?

He kept eating properly despite everything. It felt absurd, buying bananas, granola bars, a small tub of yogurt, and bottled water at overpriced station kiosks. He took his prenatal vitamin every morning with strict precision, swallowing it down in a motel bathroom or with a gulp of water on a moving bus. His fugitive diet was unglamorous, focused on folate and protein and steady blood sugar like he read he should from the blogs. Once, looking down at the sad, meal he’d collected in his lap, an apple, a bag of almonds, a cheese stick. What would his friends and family think if they saw him like this?

The first night, he stopped at a cheap motel on the outskirts of a town he’d arrived in by chance. The sign flickered a sickly orange, and the office smelled of stale cigarettes and lemon cleaner. Using the Evan Mercer identity for the first time should have been a moment of high tension. He’d memorized the birthday, rehearsed the fake address in Concord, practiced the loopy signature until his hand ached. The desk clerk, a teenager with earbuds in, barely glanced at him or the ID. Shane pushed a stack of cash across the counter. The clerk handed him a key attached to a large, green plastic diamond. “Ice machines around back if it’s working,” he mumbled, already looking back at his phone. Shane walked away almost offended by how little his elaborate fake persona had mattered.

Once inside the room, however, the paranoia returned in a wave. He locked the door. Engaged the deadbolt, though the mechanism felt loose. He checked the flimsy curtains, ensuring they covered the window completely. He peered into the bathroom, opened the shower curtain. He got down on his knees and lifted the dusty bedskirt to look underneath. He stopped halfway, his knees aching, his forehead pressed against the scratchy bedspread. “What the fuck am I looking for?” he whispered to the carpet. A GPS tracker? A Russian spy, folded somehow beneath the box spring? Ilya, waiting in the closet? He was losing his mind. He hauled himself up, brushed off his jeans, and went to shower simply to feel clean.

Afterward, he crawled into the bed. It was a full, not a king. For a moment, he lay directly in the middle, arms and legs spread. He could. The entire bed was his. Nobody was taking up seventy percent of the mattress. Nobody was cocooning himself in all the blankets. Nobody was wrapping an enormous, heavy arm around his waist in the night and dragging him backward until his spine was firmly nestled against a solid, warm chest. He lasted about thirty seconds in the middle before the emptiness of it became unbearable. He rolled onto his right side, his usual side, the side he slept on when Ilya was wrapped around him. His body settled, then waited. Nothing happened. No arm snaked over his ribs. No warm breath puffed against the nape of his neck. No sleepy, nonsense Russian words were mumbled into his skin. No large, gentle hand settled automatically, possessively, over the tiny curve where Bean slept.

Shane cried then, quietly, into the stiff motel pillow. He could finally let his emotions out. He was simply exhausted and lonely. The tears were a slow leak, a release of pressure. He didn't regret leaving. He wished, with a pain that felt like a fresh bruise over his heart, that leaving hadn't been necessary. He held those two truths together in the dark until he fell asleep.

The next day was more of the same, just with a deeper layer of fatigue. Another bus. Another transfer. Another station where he bought a ticket he didn't use. By mid-afternoon, he was completely fucking done with public transportation. Every terminal was a gauntlet of cameras he couldn't avoid. Every seat put him near someone with a phone that could capture his image. Every stop was another opportunity, however slim, for recognition. More than that, he was just tired. The constant movement with no destination was draining the last of his resolve. He needed control. He needed to point himself in a single direction and go, without consulting schedules or drivers. He needed a car. Not a rental, which would leave a digital paper trail, or a dealership, which required more identification and questions. Something old, forgettable, bought with cash from a private seller. The problem was finding one in what looked like a small town.

The solution presented itself later that afternoon, almost by accident. He'd gotten off a local bus in the next town, deciding to walk a while to clear his head. He'd make his way to New York and call his mother just to let her know he was okay. The cell towers in the city would be enough cover for him to disappear again and he wouldn't stay after of course. He passed a shabby convenience store, its windows plastered with ads for lottery tickets and energy drinks. Parked beside a dented dumpster was an aging Honda Civic, a color that might have once been silver but was now a dull, mottled grey. An older man with a grizzled beard was carefully taping a piece of cardboard to the inside of the driver's side window. In shaky block letters, it read: FOR SALE - RUNS GOOD.

Shane stopped walking. He stared. The universe, it seemed, had a sense of irony. He hesitated for a full minute, arguing with himself. It was too convenient. It was probably a deathtrap. It was exactly what he needed. Finally, he approached.

"How much?" he asked.

The older man turned, squinting. "The car has a clean title and just needs a slap of paint."

Shane nodded. "I can give you cash for it- maybe some extra if you can keep it under your name for a while."

The man looked at the sign, then back at Shane. "I don't need any trouble, kid."

"I know," Shane said. "I won't cause trouble, sir. I just need to get to make it out of state."

The man studied him, his eyes taking in the baseball cap, the hoodie, the single duffel. Suspicion tightened his features. "You in some kind of trouble, son?"

Shane's heart lurched. He forced his shoulders to stay loose. "Just need a car. Mine died. Yours runs good, right? Says so on the sign."

A grunt. "Course it runs. Wouldn't sell it if it didn't." He thought about it for a few minutes. "Give me three grand and I'll leave it under my name for a year." It was reasonable, for a beater.

Shane walked around the Civic. There was a dent in the rear passenger door. The tires were worn but had tread. One of the hubcaps was missing. "Can I see it run?" he asked.

The man stared at him again, then a slow smile broke through the beard. "Fair enough." He fished keys from his pocket, got in, and started the engine. It coughed once, then settled into a ragged but steady idle. The radio blasted to life, a tinny burst of classic rock. The man quickly turned it down. "She's got personality," he yelled over the noise.

Shane nodded. He had his father to thank for the next part. David Hollander had believed every man should know enough about cars not to get completely swindled. Shane pointed to the tires. "These gonna last me awhile?" He listened to the engine, hearing a faint tap he didn't like. "Timing belt ever been changed?" He didn't know exactly what he was listening for, but he knew the questions to ask. The man's answers were evasive but not outright lies. They haggled. Shane came down a few hundred dollars, not because he needed the money, but because the act of negotiating felt weirdly, blessedly normal. It was a transaction between two people, not a strategic maneuver in a silent war.

Finally, they settled on a price. Shane said, "I'll pay cash."

The man looked at him again, his gaze lingering on the duffel. "You running from somebody?" he asked, his tone lighter now, almost joking.

Everything inside Shane froze. His breath caught. He managed a weak, forced laugh. "Right." A beat of silence hung between them. Shane met his eyes. "Nothing like that, Sir."

The man's smile returned, wider this time, and he clapped Shane on the shoulder. "Alright then, Evan." He'd seen the ID.

The paperwork was minimal, a handwritten receipt on a piece of notebook paper. Shane signed it Evan J. Mercer, his practiced loops feeling alien. The man handed him the keys, a single key and a fob for the door locks that looked like it had seen better days. "Good luck," the man said, and without another word, he walked into the convenience store.

Shane got into the driver's seat. He closed the door. The interior smelled of old coffee, gasoline, and something sweetly chemical, like an air freshener that had given up long ago. The steering wheel was worn smooth in places. The upholstery on the seats was cracked, revealing yellowish foam underneath. He put the key in the ignition, turned it. The engine sputtered, then caught with the same ragged idle. Something in the dashboard rattled softly in sympathy. He found the radio knob and turned it on. He found the sports news station so turned it down until it was just background noise.

And suddenly, sitting alone in the convenience store parking lot, he began to feel hopeful. A feeling bubbled up in his chest, warm and startling. It wasn't joy, not exactly. It was the absence of dread. It was a fragile, tentative pride. His hand drifted from the wheel to rest over Bean. "Look at that," he whispered, a real smile touching his lips for the first time in days. He glanced around the worn-out interior. "Daddy bought us a car."

As if on cue, when he went to roll down the driver's side window for some air, the mechanism made a grinding sound and the window descended in slow, jerky increments. Shane stared at it, then let out a short, surprised laugh. "Daddy may have bought us a shitty car, but it's all ours," he amended. And then he was really laughing, a quiet, breathless sound

that shook his shoulders and made his eyes sting. He laughed at the absurdity of it, at the sheer mundanity of his great escape vehicle, at the fact that he was sitting in a dying Honda Civic and it felt like a goddamn triumph.

He started driving using the new smart phones gps, choosing smaller state roads that wound through hills and past frozen fields. He avoided major interstates, skirting around cities. The landscape slowly changed, becoming more rural, more open. Barns with faded advertisements dotted the rolling hills. Silos stood like sentinels against a grey sky. Eventually, a sign welcomed him to New York.

It took him seven hours of on and off driving to reach just outside of New York City. He parked at the nearest train station and paid extra for the secure parking, withdrawing some extra money and one of the prepaid cards. During one of his food stops, he managed to find a smaller bag and had transferred his cash, phones and ID's to carry around for this very reason. At the last second he dug out one of Ilya's old shirts that he'd taken and locked the car, making his way to the subway train.

He sat down and grabbed a large slice of pizza, something that he previously would have refused to eat, but there was no point to keep a diet anymore. In fact, that might help him if he gained a few pounds. On the drive, he had heard the news that he'd be on IR for the season, the commentary taught him that it had been announced literally just hours after he'd run and at least it seemed like Crowell was keeping his promise so far.

After eating, he took the can of ginger ale out to sit on the bench in front of a quiet park. The street was busy enough, his toque and glasses were working to hide him but he didn't want to test the limits of the poor disguise.

The line rang twice before his mother's tense voice came on the line. "Momma?"

"Oh my God! Sh-."

"Mom, stop. I need you to just listen. I'm okay. The baby is fine and I just need you to know that and I'm sorry with how I left. Take care of Ilya. He doesn't have anyone and he's not going to be okay, so take care of him. I'll call you again soon. Love you." He quickly hung up, 28 seconds. He quickly got up and turned the phone off and took out the sim card as he walked back to the subway to make his way back to the car.

Once back in the car, he pulled out another phone and drank another water bottle while he googled different small towns. After about an hour, he decided to head towards Strasburg, Pennsylvania. He'd only found a few details on the town but it was small, full of farms and local businesses and quiet.

He drove for what seemed like days, the towns getting smaller, the traffic thinning. Hotel stops came fewer and he relied on small signs with 'Room for board' to stay a few hours to rest.

At one point, on a narrow two-lane road, he came up behind a horse-drawn buggy, its black wheels crunching on the gravel shoulder. An Amish man in a broad-brimmed hat sat upright at the reins. Shane slowed, dropping to a crawl. He stared through the windshield at the clopping horse, the simple buggy, the timeless scene. And immediately, helplessly, he thought: *Ilya would be losing his fucking mind right now. It's been a week.*

A few hours later, physically and emotionally drained, he pulled into the parking lot of a small general store. It was outside a small rural town, a single-story L-shape with doors painted a fading blue. He paid for three nights in advance with cash, giving the cheerful woman at the desk his new name. The room was identical to the last, but quieter. He parked the Civic around back, in a spot visible from his window.

He stayed there. Not because it was the end goal, but because he was done running for a moment. He needed to wait. To watch. He spent the first day peering through the curtains at the parking lot, noting the other cars, a pickup truck that belonged to the maintenance man, a minivan with family stickers, and a couple of other beaters like his. He walked to a diner down the road for meals, always taking a different route back. He filled the Honda with gas at a station two towns over. He listened, and he watched. Day one passed. No unfamiliar cars lingered. No one asked about him. Day two. Nothing. Day three dawned, cold and clear, and still, nothing.

On the morning of the third day, Shane woke early. The motel room was quiet, the only sound the cheerful chirping of birds outside his window and the distant, occasional rumble of a truck on the main road. No security radios chattered. No teammates shouted in the hallway. No reporters clamored outside. No Ilya moved through the rooms of their enormous, silent house, the floorboards creaking under his weight. Shane lay on his side, his hand resting on the now more pronounced curve of Bean. He could feel a firmness there that hadn't existed a week ago.

Nobody had come. No one had found him. The investigators, if they were even looking, had not descended on this nowhere motel in rural Pennsylvania. The panic, the frantic energy of escape, had bled away, leaving behind a strange, hollow calm. For the first time, Shane allowed his mind to drift beyond the mechanics of running. He couldn't live in motels forever. He couldn't drive in circles indefinitely. Bean was growing. Eventually, they were both going to need somewhere to live. Not just a place to hide, but a place to be. The thought was terrifying and, beneath the fear, sparked a faint, tentative glimmer of something else.

He lay in the center of the motel bed, hand on the firm curve of his belly, listening to the birds. The frantic energy that had propelled him from Ottawa through a maze of buses and trains had finally burned off, leaving behind a hollowed-out calm. He'd done it.

For three days, no one had knocked on his door. No fleet of black SUVs had pulled into the parking lot. The world, or at least Ilya's terrifyingly efficient corner of it, had not found him. The relief was profound, but it was immediately followed by a colder, more practical realization. He couldn't live here. Bean wouldn't live here. They needed a refrigerator that wasn't stocked with tiny bottles of water and overpriced alcohol. They needed a stove. They needed a place where he could put down roots and have them both be safe. The thought of finding such a place was daunting, a mountain to climb after he'd just finished crossing a desert, but the alternative, a permanent state of transience, was impossible. He got up, showered in the tepid water Martha's plumbing provided, and went to find groceries, and maybe, just maybe, a glimpse of what came next.

He drove his rattling Honda with no destination beyond 'away from the main road.' He passed through Strasburg, with its train museums and little shops, and kept going, following a two-lane county road as it wound deeper into the farmland. The landscape opened up, a patchwork of brown and faded green under a vast grey sky. Enormous bank barns, their sides painted with faded hex signs, stood sentinel over fields striped with the ghosts of last season's crops. White farmhouses with wide porches sat back from the road, laundry flapping on lines despite the chill. He passed horse-drawn buggies, the clip-clop of hooves a serene counterpoint to his engine's grumble, their Amish drivers nodding solemnly as he gave them a wide berth. Hand-painted signs advertised eggs, produce, and quilts, some with honor-system cashboxes nailed to posts. It felt like a different century.

Willow Creek announced itself subtly. A green sign, faded by sun, read simply: WILLOW CREEK POP. 842. The road dipped into a shallow valley, and the town revealed itself: a

cluster of clapboard and brick buildings nestled along a single main street. There was an old brick library with white columns, a volunteer firehouse with gleaming trucks visible through open doors, a post office flying a flag, two steepled churches- one red, one white- and a diner called The Morning Bell with a neon coffee cup in the window. A hardware store, a barber pole spinning lazily outside a small shop, and finally, Miller's Grocery & General Store. There was no Starbucks. No chain pharmacy. No traffic light. Shane slowed the Honda to a crawl, taking it in. A man carrying a bag of feed out of the hardware store lifted a hand in a casual wave. Shane instinctively checked his rearview mirror, certain the gesture was meant for someone else. There was no one behind him. He looked back. The man was still looking his way, smiling now. Shane raised a tentative hand from the steering wheel. The man's smile widened, and he gave a firmer wave before heading to his truck. "Small towns are weird," Shane muttered to the empty car, but the knot of tension between his shoulders had loosened just a fraction. This place, with its quiet anonymity and unasked-for waves, might just be perfect.

Miller's Grocery had wooden floors that creaked underfoot and shelves stacked with a mix of brand names and local goods. The air smelled of fresh bread and coffee. By the entrance, a massive cork bulletin board bristled with handwritten notices: FRESH FIREWOOD – CALL ELMER, BABYSITTING – RESPONSIBLE 12-YR OLD, QUILTING CIRCLE TUESDAYS, APARTMENT FOR RENT – INQUIRE WITHIN. Shane's eyes skimmed the last one but darted away, but then he read it again and decided it couldn't hurt to ask. He grabbed a plastic basket.

His shopping was aimless, guided by hunger and a vague sense of what he needed nutritionally. Crackers, apples, a jar of peanut butter, a box of cereal, some yogurt, a block of cheddar, a jar of dill pickles that called to him with sudden urgency, a loaf of whole wheat bread, his prenatal vitamins from the pharmacy aisle, and finally, a package of chocolate chip cookies. He stood in the baking aisle, holding the cookies and staring at a box of spaghetti as if it contained the secrets of the universe. Dinner. He needed to construct a dinner.

"Forgot your list, honey?"

The voice, dry and matter-of-fact, came from his left. An elderly woman stood beside him, her own basket laden with sensible items: onions, potatoes, a whole chicken, carrots. She was looking pointedly into his basket, then at his face, then back at the basket.

Shane looked down at his collection. He blushed and looked down. "Some of it."

“Well, that isn’t a very good dinner for someone in your condition now is it honey?” she asked, her eyebrow arched.

He considered the question seriously. “I haven’t - wait um how did you know?” He asked, all wide eyed and ready to bolt.

She made a soft, disapproving *tsk* sound. “Honey, I birthed nine children and I've lived around pregnant omegas my entire life. You think I don't know that scent? Its my gift!”

Her name was Ruth. She was somewhere in her late sixties, with sharp blue eyes set in a network of fine wrinkles, her grey hair pinned back in a practical bun. She wore a simple floral dress under a worn cardigan. She wasn’t Amish, but she had the settled, capable air of someone who had lived around the community her whole life. Most importantly, her gaze held no spark of recognition. She wasn’t seeing Shane Hollander. She was seeing a young, tired-looking omega with a basket full of snacks.

“How far along are you?” she asked, her eyes dropping briefly to the still unnoticeable curve of his stomach beneath his hoodie.

Shane tensed instinctively, the old fear rising. Then he realized she was looking at Bean, not searching his face for clues. “Uh, a few weeks,” he said, deliberately vague.

Ruth nodded, then gestured to his basket with her chin. “And you’re feeding that baby crackers?”

He felt a flicker of defensive pride. “There are apples here too.”

She leaned over slightly to look. She pursed her lips. “Now that just wont do.”

“They’re large apples.”

That was when Walter appeared. He was a tall man, slightly stooped, with a full head of white hair and a face that seemed naturally inclined toward a gentle solemnity. He carried a small bag of flour and some bags of more produce. “Who’s this?” he asked, his voice a low rumble.

“Oh, um sorry I didn’t catch your name, hon,” Ruth said.

It took Shane a conscious half-second to remember that it was him. ‘Evan.’ he muttered.

Walter looked Shane up and down. “You bothering my wife, Evan?”

Before Shane could formulate a denial, Ruth answered. “I’m bothering him.”

Walter nodded slowly, then slowly smiled. “That sounds more likely.”

A short, surprised laugh escaped Shane. It was a real sound, not a choked-off puff of air. Something tight in his chest loosened a notch.

Without further discussion, Ruth began to fix his groceries. It wasn’t domineering; it was almost maternal, “You need eggs,” she stated, plucking a dozen from a cooler and placing them in his basket. “And vegetables. Frozen are fine if you won’t eat fresh fast enough.” A bag of peas and corn blend joined the eggs. “Something easy. A roast chicken will last you for a few meals. They’re good here.” She steered him toward the back of the store, Shane following in a daze, Walter trailing behind them like a benign shadow.

“Does she always do this?” Shane asked Walter quietly.

“You get used to it,” Walter replied, his eyes twinkling.

“He hasn’t,” Ruth called over her shoulder without turning around.

“Forty-eight years,” Walter said to Shane, as if sharing a great secret.

Eventually, as Ruth debated the merits of instant oatmeal versus the rolled kind for him, she asked, “Where are you staying?”

The guard slammed down again. Shane’s shoulders tightened. “Around here,” he said.

Ruth waited, her silence a patient, tangible thing. She was apparently immune to awkwardness.

“A motel,” he finally conceded.

Her expression shifted into one of profound distaste. “Which one?”

He told her.

She looked genuinely horrified. “Oh, no. Not Martha’s place.”

“Plumbing’s fine,” Walter offered mildly.

“The hot water goes,” Ruth countered.

“Sometimes.”

“And Martha hasn’t replaced those mattresses since Clinton was president.”

Shane stared. “Well, I was actually going to call for a place to rent from a sign that I saw in the front.”

Walter snorted, a dry, dusty sound that was definitely a laugh.

Ruth and Walter exchanged a glance then, a silent conversation that passed between them in the space of a heartbeat. Decades of marriage distilled into a look. Ruth turned back to Shane. “We have a basement to rent out. That’s our sign.”

Shane blinked. “Oh- wow. Great.”

Walter coughed, turning his laugh into a convincingly gruff clearance of his throat. Ruth rolled her eyes, but a smile touched her lips.

She explained. Their house, just outside town, had a fully finished walkout basement. Their grandson had lived there for a few years after college. It had a private entrance, a small bedroom area, a living room with a decent couch, a bathroom with a shower, and a little kitchenette with an apartment-sized stove and fridge. There was a second alcove, currently used for storage, that could fit a crib. It had been empty for months. They’d thought about renting it but never got around to advertising. They hadn’t wanted just anyone.

“I’m a stranger,” Shane pointed out.

Walter considered him. “Technically.”

Ruth looked at him, her head tilted. “You don’t feel like one.”

The statement made him feel warm inside for the first time since he started running. And it unnerved him because he had instantly felt so comfortable with them both too. He didn’t feel like a stranger to them either.

Every instinct honed over the last week screamed at him. This was a risk, an unknown variable. People weren't this nice without wanting something- money, information, leverage. But Shane had grown up with Yuna and David Hollander. He knew the feeling of genuine, unasked-for kindness. This felt similar. Ruth wasn't probing for details. Walter hadn't asked where he came from. Neither had uttered the question hanging in the air, 'Where is the alpha?' A pregnant male was obviously an omega and to find one away from their mate was extremely out of the norm. They simply saw a need and, with pragmatic grace, moved to meet it.

"We're heading home," Ruth said, her tone shifting back to the practical. "You're welcome to follow and look at the place. No obligation."

Shane hesitated, the urge to bolt warring with a deeper, more exhausted urge to stop moving. He considered getting in his car and driving anywhere else.

Then Ruth added, "If you don't like it, you don't like it. At least come see it before you pay Martha another night for that terrible little room she probably has you in."

"The room isn't that bad," Walter murmured.

"You haven't slept in it."

"Neither have you."

"Exactly."

Shane laughed again, the sound easier this time. Against the frantic chatter of his paranoia, he heard a quieter, more compelling voice. Follow them. So he did.

Their house was a five-minute drive from Willow Creek, down a gravel lane lined with bare-branched trees. It was a large, traditional farmhouse, white with dark green shutters, two stories with a welcoming front porch draped in the skeletal vines of a sleeping wisteria. It

wasn't grand, but it was impeccably kept and charming. A detached garage stood to one side, and beyond it, a large barn whose doors were shut against the cool air. Neat, dormant vegetable gardens lay in rows beside the house. There were neighbors, but the properties were spaced with generous acres of field between them. It felt both connected and private. There were no gates, no security cameras, just a mailbox at the end of the drive reading "Fischer."

Shane parked his Honda beside Walter's aging pickup. Before he could even open his door, Ruth was out of the truck and waving him toward the house. "Come on inside first. I have soup on."

"I thought we were looking at the basement," Shane said, grabbing their grocery bag.

"You can look after lunch," Ruth declared, already heading up the porch steps.

Walter came up beside Shane, speaking under his breath. "Don't fight it."

The soup was chicken and vegetable, homemade and rich. They ate at a round oak table in a sunny kitchen that looked out over the back fields. The conversation was light, circling around the town, the unseasonably cool fall, Walter's ongoing battle with a woodchuck under the shed. They asked nothing of Shane. He was simply Evan, the guest for lunch.

Afterward, Ruth led him through a door off the kitchen and down a narrow set of carpeted stairs. "Your own entrance is around the side," she said, flipping a light switch.

The basement apartment was small, but well built and perfectly clean. To someone used to the soaring, minimalist spaces of his and Ilya's home, it was almost comically compact. But it was warm, and flooded with light from several large windows set high in the walls- the house was built on a slope, making it a proper walkout. The living area held a worn but comfortable-looking plaid sofa and a bookshelf filled with paperbacks. The kitchenette had old honey-colored cabinets, a small stove, and a refrigerator. The bedroom area was separated by a partial wall, holding a double bed with a simple iron frame and a plain dresser. The bathroom was basic but clean, with a shower-tub combo. And there, off the living area, was the alcove Ruth had mentioned: a nook just deep enough, currently housing some cardboard boxes and an old rocking chair.

Shane looked at that alcove and his mind did something it hadn't allowed itself to do before. He imagined future there, he saw a crib and changing table. The image was so vivid, so startlingly concrete, that his breath caught.

"How much?" he asked, his voice a little rough.

Ruth smiled. "I think \$300 is fair." It was absurdly low, less than he'd paid for three nights at Martha's motel.

Shane stared. "A week?"

"Month," Walter said from the stairwell, where he lingered, giving them space.

"For all of this?" Shane gestured around the apartment.

Walter looked around slowly, as if seeing it for the first time. "Ruth charges extra for the bathroom."

Shane's eyes widened. Walter held his solemn expression for a count of three before Ruth reached over and swatted his arm. A grin broke through Walter's weathered face. Shane found himself laughing, a real, full-bodied laugh that made his eyes water. "Seriously?"

He tried to offer more. Ruth refused. He insisted, citing the utilities, the space. She refused harder, her hands planted on her hips. "Well, we don't need the money but that's what we charged our grandson to give him the start of a sense of money management. It's fair."

Walter leaned close to Shane, his voice a conspiratorial whisper. "I'd stop negotiating."

"Why?"

“You’re making her angry.”

Shane stopped negotiating.

Ruth and Walter went back upstairs then, deliberately, giving him the gift of privacy in a space that wasn’t yet his. He walked the perimeter slowly. He ran a hand over the cool Formica countertop. He looked out the largest window at the view: the Fischer’s backyard, a stand of birch trees, and beyond, rolling fields leading to a distant tree line. He listened. The only sounds were the faint hum of the furnace and the muffled, comforting thumps of life above him- a footstep, the closing of a cabinet, the distant murmur of voices.

He could lock the door. He would have his own key. His terrible, beloved Honda would be parked outside. His money, what was left of it, was his own. No one in the world would know this address unless he chose to tell them. Ruth and Walter didn’t need his real name. They didn’t need his story. They had, with baffling, wonderful simplicity, accepted the version of him he presented.

He placed both hands over the tiny swell of Bean. “What do you think?” he whispered.

And then he felt it. Something shifted low inside him. Not quite a kick, probably too early for that, but distinct enough that Shane froze. . A gentle, sensation, as if Bean had shifted position inside its watery world just to reassure his daddy that they would be just perfect. Shane froze, his breath stopping in his throat. He pressed his hand harder, waiting. But nothing happened, it was all internal.

His eyes filled instantly, hot tears blurring the sunlight on the floor. “Okay,” he breathed, a wet laugh escaping him. He swallowed hard. “Okay. I guess that’s a vote.”

He climbed the stairs. Ruth was washing the lunch dishes. Walter was sitting at the table, reading the local weekly paper. They both looked up as he entered.

The words felt monumental. “I’d like to rent it.”

Ruth's face softened into a smile that held no surprise, only quiet satisfaction. "Good."

Walter simply folded his paper and nodded. "We'll write up a simple lease. Nothing fancy. For tonight, just get your things."

That evening, Shane sat alone on the plaid couch. His duffel bag, containing the sum total of his former life, lay unopened on the floor. Beside him, neatly folded, was Ilya's old shirt. His prenatal vitamins next to the toaster on the kitchen counter. Through the window, he could see the dim shape of his Honda in the fading light. Upstairs, the floorboards creaked with a familiar rhythm. Water ran through pipes. Someone, Walter, probably- hummed a tuneless melody. Ordinary sounds. Family sounds.

He rested both hands on his belly, a gentle reminder of the future unfolding within him. He had spent over a week trying to become a ghost, to erase every trace of Shane Hollander. But sitting here, in this tiny, rented basement in a town he'd never heard of, he realized the goal had shifted. He wasn't thinking about which bus to catch tomorrow, or how to cover his tracks. He was thinking he should get curtains for the windows. That he needed a better pillow. That the alcove would need to be measured before he could even think about a crib. Small things. Normal things.

The apartment wasn't the beautiful, empty house he'd thought he owned with Ilya. But *he* had chosen it. He had followed a kind-eyed woman through a grocery store and, against all his better judgment, followed her home. He had said yes.

Later, when he crawled into the unfamiliar bed, he pulled Ilya's shirt to his chest, burying his face in the fading scent of leather and cedar and home. The loneliness was a physical ache, a hollow space beside him. But the lock on the basement door was a lock he controlled. It wasn't there to keep him in. It was there to let him choose who came in.

Maybe, he thought, as the house settled into sleep around him, he could stay here for a while.

The ceiling was wrong.

That was the first thought, floating up through the thick syrup feeling of a deep, dreamless sleep. The texture was wrong- popcorn, sprayed on in clumsy swirls. The color was wrong, a flat, off-white that absorbed the weak morning light filtering through the small, high windows instead of reflecting it. The mattress beneath him was wrong, too firm, and the room smelled of different, a cool, clean scent of concrete and laundry detergent, entirely absent of the familiar, grounding notes of Ilya's cedar-and-leather scent, of their shared shampoo, of the beautiful way that the light seemed to come in through the windows of the master bedroom in Ilya's Ottawa home.

His heart gave a single, hard kick against his ribs, like a primal warning, before the memories of everything returned, crashing down like a sheet of ice.

Pennsylvania. Willow Creek. The Fischers. The basement. The Honda. Evan.

He was Evan Mercer, and he was lying in a rented bed in a stranger's basement in Amish country, and he had run away from his life.

Shane lay perfectly still, listening. Upstairs, the old house spoke a language of its own. Pipes groaned as water ran. Floorboards creaked under careful, shuffling footsteps. A low, rumbling voice, Walter- said something indecipherable. A higher, clearer voice, Ruth- responded, "I heard you the first time." A cabinet door closed with a solid thump. The clatter of silverware against a bowl.

They were ordinary sounds, very domestic not unlike what he'd had for those precious few weeks with Ilya. The sounds of a life proceeding, calmly and predictably, entirely separate from the storm he had fled. Strangely, they made the tight coil of anxiety in his chest loosen, if only for just a fraction. He was a guest in this house, he could just... be.

Then, a knock on the private door that led from the basement apartment to the main house.

Every muscle in his body locked anew. His breath caught. The knocking came again, polite but persistent.

“Evan honey?” Ruth’s voice, muffled by the wood.

Shane stared at the wrong ceiling. He didn’t move.

“I made too many pancakes. Come on up and have some breakfast.”

He closed his eyes. Ruth Fischer did seem like the type to accidentally make too many pancakes. This was a bald-faced, benevolent lie. He knew it. She knew he knew it. It was an invitation he couldn’t refuse without being rude, and rudeness felt so wrong for this sweet woman.

He dragged himself out of bed, pulled on the same sweatpants and a long-sleeved t-shirt from his duffel, and padded up the narrow interior stairs. When he opened the door to the kitchen, the scene that greeted him was one right out of the old 1950’s shows that his mother loved so much.

The table was set for three, but it groaned under the weight of breakfast for a small army. A stack of pancakes teetered precariously on a platter, easily two dozen high, golden brown and steaming. A bowl of scrambled eggs the size of a football sat beside it. There was bacon, sausage links, a dish of butter softening in its ceramic crock, a jar of maple syrup, a jug of orange juice, and a pot of coffee so large it could have served a construction crew.

Walter was already seated, methodically piling his plates with a bit of everything. He gave Shane a brief, acknowledging nod.

Shane looked from the feast to Ruth, who was wiping her hands on a checkered apron. “Good morning Ruth, Walter” he said, his voice still rough with sleep. “How many pancakes did you think you were making?”

She waved a hand, dismissing the question as irrelevant. “Sit. Eat. They’re better hot.”

Shane slid into the chair opposite Walter, who didn’t look up from his plate. “Walter,” Shane said quietly, leaning forward. “Help me out here.”

Walter took a slow sip of coffee, then set the mug down with a soft clink. He met Shane’s eyes. “Don’t bother,” he said, his voice a low, gravelly rumble. “Just eat. It’s easier.” The old man grinned up but quickly started eating again when Ruth came to sit at the table.

Shane looked at the old man’s resigned, peaceful expression and understood. Walter seemed to have surrendered this particular battle years ago. Resistance was not only futile, it prolonged the inevitable. Defeated, Shane reached for the platter. The pancakes were, admittedly, perfect- fluffy, with crispy, lacy edges. He took two, then added a third under Ruth’s watchful eye.

They ate in a comfortable silence broken only by the clink of cutlery and the occasional comment from Walter about the weather forecast. Ruth did not interrogate him. She asked if he’d slept alright, if the basement was too cold, if he needed more blankets. She did not ask where he was from, beyond the vague “up north” he’d offered when arranging the rental. She did not ask about the baby’s other parent. She did not ask why a young, pregnant omega was arriving alone with a single duffel bag and paying in cash for a month’s rent in advance. Her lack of curiosity was not indifference; it was a form of offering some grace. She had decided he needed feeding and a safe place to stay. The reasons why were his business.

This, more than the locked door or the rural address, made Shane begin to relax. For years, he had been surrounded by people who wanted something from Shane Hollander- his performance, his compliance, his story, his body, his love. Ruth wanted him to eat another pancake. Walter wanted Ruth to stop cooking enough food to feed the entire Philly Flyers. That was the extent of their demands.

Later that morning, as Shane was unpacking the meager contents of his duffel into the small dresser provided, he heard the distinct, high-pitched squeal of a slipping serpentine belt. It was coming from the direction of his Honda, parked beside the Fischers’ sensible sedan. He finished folding a shirt, walked outside, and found Walter already there, his head cocked as he listened to the engine idle.

“Sounds like a dying cat,” Walter observed without preamble.

“I know,” Shane said, wincing. “I was going to have it looked at today.”

Walter popped the hood with a practiced motion. “Belt’s loose. The tensioner’s probably worn.” He pointed a thick, calloused finger at a component Shane couldn’t have named. “Simple fix. I think I’ve got the part in the garage.”

“I’ll pay you for it,” Shane said immediately.

Walter looked at him, his expression unreadable. “For what?”

“The part. And your time.”

“I haven’t fixed anything yet.”

“When you do.”

Walter straightened up and fixed Shane with a steady gaze. “No.”

“Walter.”

“Evan.”

They stared at each other. Shane saw the same quiet, immovable stubbornness he’d seen at the breakfast table. “Fine,” Shane muttered, knowing it wasn’t fine at all.

An hour later, the squealing had stopped. Shane waited until Walter had gone inside, then slipped a fifty-dollar bill under the driver's side windshield wiper of Walter's car. He went back to the basement, feeling a small, petty sense of victory.

The victory was short-lived. That evening, when Shane went out to get something from the Honda, he found the fifty-dollar bill, neatly folded, tucked under his own windshield wiper.

The war had begun.

Over the next few days, Shane set about making the basement his own. The process was a quiet, deliberate contrast to furnishing the sprawling Ottawa house with Ilya. That had been overwhelming to some degree, trying to blend both of their styles and having pretty much an unlimited budget- designers with glossy catalogs, custom furniture built to specifications, art chosen for specific walls, everything new, perfect, and coordinated. It felt like building a museum exhibit for a life they were supposed to live.

Here, his needs were simple, his budget self-imposed, and his choices entirely his own. He needed sheets that weren't the cheap, pilled polyester set provided. He needed towels. A better pillow. A lamp for reading. A few dishes so he wouldn't have to keep borrowing from Ruth. Maybe a small bookshelf. He had money, but it wasn't the millions from before and he didn't know how much medical care would be without insurance and in a new country.

He drove the now-quiet Honda to a thrift store in the next town over that Ruth recommended. The bell above the door jingled, and the air smelled of old paper and lemon polish. He felt a bizarre sense of dislocation as he walked past racks of used coats and shelves of chipped coffee mugs.

He found one, a simple brass base with a green glass shade. A small sticker on the bottom read \$18.00. He picked it up, turned it over in his hands, and seriously considered whether eighteen dollars was too much to pay. The absurdity hit him a moment later. One of the watches sitting in his safe in Ottawa- a gift from Rolex when he became an ambassador for them when he signed his rookie contract, was probably worth more than every single item in this store combined. The thought didn't bring comfort; it brought a sharp, sour shame. He bought the lamp.

When Ruth discovered his plans to acquire basic household goods, she was personally offended. “Curtains?” she said, putting her hands on her hips. “I’ve got curtains.” She disappeared into the depths of the house and returned with a set of heavy, floral-print drapes that smelled faintly of cedar. They were decidedly not his style, big, blowsy roses on a cream background. He tried to turn them down. “Ruth, I can buy curtains.”

“Why?” she asked, and he had no answer that satisfied her.

He hung them anyway. And, weirdly, he grew to like them. They were thick, blocking out the night chill completely, and the cheerful, outdated pattern felt unpretentious and honest. Walter, without being asked, brought down a small, solid oak bookshelf from the attic. It had water stains on one side and smelled of old wood. Shane placed his thrift-store lamp on it. Nothing matched. The couch was a plaid relic, the rug was braided wool, the curtains were floral. It was a collection of cast-offs. And Shane loved the space more each day because no one had designed it as a form of a trophy for a specific lifestyle. It was just a little place where Evan got to exist.

While unpacking the last few items from his duffel, his fingers brushed against soft, worn cotton at the very bottom. He went still. He knew what it was. He had known, in some recess of his mind, that he’d packed it, though he’d refused to consciously acknowledge the act. He pulled it out. It was a plain grey t-shirt, so soft from countless washes it was nearly sheer in places. Ilya’s. He had managed to sneak some of the alphas clothing before he left in case he needed them and now he was regretting the choice. It needed to be ripped off like a bandaid but it was easier said than done.

The scent hit him first, faint but unmistakable, cedar, leather, the particular soap Ilya used, the essential, alpha-musk essence that only belonged to Ilya. It was faded, a ghost of the real thing, but it was enough. His omega physiology responded instantly, violently. A wave of warmth and desperate longing washed through him, making his knees weak. *Home. Mate. Safe.*

He sat down heavily on the edge of the bed, the shirt pressed against his face. He breathed in, and the dam he’d been building all week cracked. Tears, hot and silent, streamed down his face, soaking into the cotton. He cried for the loss, for the fear, for the unbearable weight of loving someone so much that being near them felt like suffocation, but that suffocation was something that he still craved. He cried until his head ached and his breath hitched.

“Fuck you,” he whispered into the fabric, his voice thick. He wasn’t sure who he was talking to- Ilya, his own traitorous hormones, his omega instincts, or the universe and fates themselves for having this be their fate. Probably all four.

He did not throw it away. He folded it with careful, almost reverential precision, and slid it underneath his pillow. That night, and every night that followed, he slept with his face turned toward it, one hand curled around its fabric under the pillowcase.

A few days in, Shane discovered something mildly horrifying: everyone in Willow Creek already knew who Evan Mercer was.

Not his real identity. Just Evan. He went to the small local grocery store. The woman at the checkout, a cheerful person with kind eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses, smiled at him. “Morning, Evan. Find everything alright?”

He froze, his hand tightening on the handle of his basket. How did she know his name? The paranoia was instant, a cold splash of adrenaline. Then logic reasserted itself. Ruth had undoubtedly mentioned her new tenant to someone at the church social or the grocery store. That person had told someone else. The hardware store owner, when Shane went in for a lightbulb, asked, “Walter get that belt tightened on your Honda?” At the post office, the clerk said, “Heard you’re staying with the Fischers. Ruth’s apple pie is the best in the county.”

He was living in a fishbowl. He had, perhaps, chosen the worst possible place in America for true anonymity. But as the initial panic subsided, he realized the crucial, saving difference. They knew Evan Mercer and absolutely nothing about Shane Hollander. His biography here was simple: from New Hampshire, quiet, pregnant, renting the basement, drives the ugly Honda, polite, Ruth thinks he’s too skinny. It was a shallow, complete picture, and nobody seemed driven to look beyond it. Their curiosity was benign, a way of placing a new piece into the familiar puzzle of their community.

People waved. At first, Shane would just nod awkwardly from behind the wheel of the Honda. Then he began raising a hand in return. By the end of the week, he caught himself doing it automatically when an older man in a truck gave him a two-fingered salute from the opposite lane. The realization made him smile, a small, genuine thing.

The issue of prenatal care came up casually over dessert. Ruth was refilling his coffee- decaf as per her insistence. “Have you found a doctor yet, Evan?” she asked.

Shane’s fork, loaded with pie, stopped halfway to his mouth. “What?”

“For the baby,” she said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “You’ll need to get established.”

His stomach dropped through the floor. In his frantic focus on escape, on security, on mere survival, he had shoved this critical need into a mental box marked “Later.” He couldn’t use his elite, discreet omega specialist in Montreal, wouldn’t risk his suppressant doctor in New York. He needed to figure out how Evan Mercer, uninsured, paying cash, obtained competent, confidential prenatal care.

“I haven’t found one yet,” he admitted, his voice quiet.

Ruth stopped, the coffee pot hovering over his mug. “How far along are you?”

“Not very long. Almost 3 months I think.”

She gave him a look he was already coming to know- a mixture of concern,

“I’ve been... busy getting settled.”

Ruth gave him a look. Shane was beginning to know that look. It was not judgmental, but it was more like unconvinced. “Well,” she said, returning to her oatmeal. “I know someone. Good practice over on Haven Court. Dr. Alvarez. She’s an omega herself. Very gentle, more of a doula but she did go and finish medical school. The town was so proud of her when she came back. Sees a lot of Amish and Mennonite women who prefer... quieter care.”

She said it so casually, Shane felt a surge of gratitude so sharp it hurt. “Thank you, Ruth.”

“I’ll call her tomorrow. See when she can fit you in.” She pointed her spoon at him. “You need vitamins, too. The good kind. Not the junk from the supermarket. I’ll pick some up.”

“Ruth, I already have-”

“Hush. You’re arguing with the woman who knows a thing or two about this. Bad strategy.” Walter said from behind his newspaper.

He hushed. The problem wasn’t solved- there would be forms, a medical history to fabricate, the constant risk of exposure, but he really did need a doctor here. And he knew, with a certainty that overrode all fear, that he would not compromise Bean’s health for the sake of hiding. Some lines even he wouldn’t cross.

The outside world intruded properly on Saturday. He’d gone to the diner alone, an act that was beginning to feel normal. The bell over the door jingled his entrance. Betty, from behind the counter, nodded and held up a coffee pot. He nodded back. Yes, please.

He took his usual booth by the window, the one with a slightly torn vinyl seat. The place was half-full with the late breakfast crowd: elderly couples, a family with fidgety kids, a few farmhands in seed-company caps. The air was rich with the smell of frying bacon and maple syrup. Safe. Normal.

Betty brought his coffee. “Usual coming up, Evan.”

“Thanks, Betty.”

He was sipping the bitter, welcome coffee when he heard it. A familiar, resonant baritone, sharp with intensity, cut through the clatter of dishes and low hum of conversation. It was

coming from the small television mounted above the counter, tuned to a sports channel.

His entire body went still. The coffee cup halted halfway to his mouth.

On the screen, in the glorious, punishing high-definition of a national broadcast, was Ilya. Not a photograph, not a memory. Living, moving Ilya. In Centaurs blue, skating with a fury that was visible even in the few seconds of highlight footage.

Shane hadn't deliberately watched hockey since leaving. He'd avoided news sites, turned off notifications, resisted the corrosive pull of searching Ilya's name. He knew that once he started, it would be a vortex he might not escape. Now, Ilya was twenty feet away, larger than life, and Shane couldn't look away.

The clip showed a sequence from a game a few nights prior. Ilya carried the puck over the blue line, danced around a defenseman with a deke so sharp it was almost cruel, and fired a wrist shot that the goalie barely snagged with a desperate glove. A great play. Then, after the whistle, an opposing forward gave Ilya a slight, unnecessary shove. What happened next wasn't hockey. It was pure reaction.

Ilya dropped his gloves instantly, before the linesmen could intervene, and grabbed the player by the jersey. There was no measured aggression, no strategic agitation. It was raw, unfiltered violence. He threw two punches that landed with sickening thuds audible even over the diner's audio. The player went down. Ilya stood over him, chest heaving, face a mask of naked rage, before being dragged to the penalty box by two officials.

The commentator's voiceover was clinical. "...and Rozanov's going to sit for that one. That's his third fighting major this season, and we're only a couple weeks in. Uncharacteristic lack of discipline from the Centaurs' new captain. He's playing great hockey, but the temper seems to be on a hair trigger."

The camera cut to Ilya in the penalty box. He wasn't scowling or muttering at the refs. He was staring straight ahead, his gaze focused on nothing, his jaw clenched so tight the muscle ticked visibly. Sweat dripped from his hairline. He looked... hollowed out. Furious, yes, but the fury was a shell over something worse.

Shane knew that face. He knew the set of those shoulders, the blankness in those usually expressive eyes. Ilya was terrified. And the terror was manifesting as a rage that sought targets on the ice.

Shane's chest ached, a physical pain that radiated from his sternum. For one wild, horrible second, the impulse was so strong he nearly stood up: call him. Right now. Just hear his voice. Tell him, *I'm okay. Bean is okay. I'm safe. Please, please stop doing this to yourself.*

But he didn't move. His hand, resting on the Formica tabletop, curled into a fist.

"You like hockey?"

Ruth's voice, directly beside him, made him jerk. He hadn't heard her approach. She must have come in after him, maybe to meet a friend. She stood by his booth, following his gaze to the television, where now a car commercial played.

Shane tore his eyes away, trying to reassemble his face into something neutral. "A little. Used to play."

Ruth looked back at the screen, where the sports segment had returned, now showing a different game. "That one who was fighting. He looked angry."

Shane let out a tiny, choked laugh. "Yeah. He did."

"Handsome, though."

Shane slowly turned his head to look at her. "Ruth."

"What?" She took a sip of the water glass Betty had placed in front of her. "I'm old, Evan. Not dead."

Shane made it until the next morning. He considered that an accomplishment.

For almost twenty-four hours, he managed not to do anything stupid. He went back to the house after the diner, ate the dinner Ruth left covered for him in the refrigerator later that night, took his prenatal vitamin, showered, and crawled into bed at a perfectly reasonable hour. He even managed to sleep for almost four hours before waking with Ilya's shirt twisted in his fist and the image of him sitting in the penalty box burned behind his eyelids.

Third fighting major. Only a couple weeks into the season. It was an uncharacteristic lack of discipline.

Shane had almost laughed when the commentator said it. There was nothing uncharacteristic about it. Not really. The world knew Ilya Rozanov, hockey player. Shane knew the man underneath. He knew exactly what Ilya did when fear or rage became too large to contain inside his body. He found somewhere else to put it.

Apparently, this time, he was putting it into other people's faces.

By seven the next morning, Shane was dressed.

By seven fifteen, he had one of the prepaid phones tucked into his pocket.

By seven thirty, he was driving away from Willow Creek.

He told himself he was going for breakfast.

This remained technically true when he stopped at a diner nearly an hour away and ate two eggs, toast, and an enormous cinnamon roll because Bean had apparently decided sugar was now a medical necessity. Afterward, he drove another forty minutes in the opposite direction, passing through two towns before pulling into a shopping center busy enough that his Honda disappeared among several hundred other cars.

Shane sat behind the wheel for another five minutes.

"This is stupid," he whispered. Bean, as usual, offered no useful opinion. He pulled the phone from his pocket. The battery had been stored separately. He slid it into place, inserted the SIM card, and stared at the black screen. His thumb hovered over the power button.

The first time he'd called his mother, he'd given himself less than thirty seconds. Enough to say he was alive. Enough to tell her Bean was okay. Enough to ask her to look after Ilya.

Then he disappeared. Now he had a key in his pocket. There were floral curtains hanging in his windows. He'd made himself a home.

Ruth had put three containers of soup in his refrigerator despite Shane repeatedly explaining that he knew how to feed himself. Walter had apparently decided Shane's Honda was a personal restoration project. Dr. Alvarez's number was written on a piece of paper beside his bed. He had somewhere to go back to.

Maybe that was why calling home suddenly felt more frightening. Shane turned on the phone. He waited for it to connect, then dialed the number he knew better than his own. Yuna answered on the second ring.

“Hello?”

Shane closed his eyes. “Momma.”

There was a sharp inhale. “Oh my God. Shane?”

“Mom, please.” He heard movement immediately, then the sound of a door closing.

“Okay. Okay, baby. I'm here.”

“I need you not to ask me where I am.”

“I won't.”

“Promise me.”

“I promise.”

Shane swallowed. “And you can't tell Ilya I called.”

That silence lasted longer.

Shane opened his eyes. “Momma.”

“I heard you.”

“I need you to promise.”

“Shane, he is...”

“Momma.”

Her breath trembled through the phone. “I promise.”

Some tight band around Shane's chest loosened. “Okay.”

It was strange. He'd spent weeks imagining this. There had been so many things he'd wanted to tell her, questions he'd wanted to ask, things he'd wanted to hear. Now that he had his mother on the phone, every carefully constructed sentence disappeared.

Yuna solved the problem for him. “Are you eating?”

Shane's mouth twitched. “Yes.”

“Enough?”

“Yes.”

“Are you somewhere warm?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have money?”

“Yes.”

“A safe place to sleep?”

“Yes, Momma.”

“Are you alone?”

Shane hesitated. “I live alone. But an older couple is around a lot.”

“That isn't what I asked.”

Of course it wasn't. He looked through the windshield at people pushing carts between parked cars.

“There are people around me,” he said carefully. “Good people.”

Yuna exhaled. “Do they know?”

“No.”

“Anything?”

“Mom-.”

“Do they know about the baby?”

Shane looked down at his stomach.

“That part is getting harder to hide.”

A tiny, broken laugh came through the phone.

Shane smiled despite himself.

“I'm safe,” he said again. “Really. I'm renting a little apartment. It's small, but it's nice. The people who own the house are older.”

Before paranoia could swallow him, Yuna asked, “Are they taking care of you?”

Shane looked toward the passenger seat, where a foil-wrapped piece of banana bread Ruth had shoved into his hand before he left sat beside his water bottle.

“Yes.”

Yuna made a sound that was suspiciously close to a sob and a laugh at the same time.

“Good.”

“Mom.”

“Good,” she repeated more firmly. “Someone should be feeding you.”

“I can feed myself.”

“I know you can.”

“Then why is everyone obsessed with feeding me?”

“Because we love you.”

The words almost made him cry. Shane looked down.

Yuna seemed to hear the change in his breathing because her voice softened.

“Do you have a doctor?”

“Yeah.”

“An omega specialist?”

“Sort of. She's an omega. She works with a lot of pregnancies. I'm seeing her soon.”

“Soon?”

“I have an appointment.”

“Shane.”

“The baby is okay,” Shane added. “As far as I can tell. I'm taking vitamins. Eating. Sleeping.”

For a few seconds it felt so normal that it hurt. Shane stared at his hands.

He shouldn't ask.

He'd called to reassure her. That was all, he shouldn't ask. “How is he?”

Yuna didn't pretend not to understand. Her silence told Shane more than an immediate answer would have. He closed his eyes. “Momma?”

“He's functioning.”

Shane's throat tightened.

“He's playing. He goes to practice. He goes to the games. He does what the team needs him to do as much as he can.”

“I saw.”

Another pause.

“You saw him?”

“Yesterday. On TV.”

“Oh.”

“He was fighting.”

“Yes.”

“Three times already.”

“Yes, it's pretty bad.”

Shane pressed his lips together.

“How bad is it?”

Yuna was quiet for several seconds.

“He isn't okay, sweetheart.”

His eyes burned immediately.

“He doesn't sleep enough. He doesn't eat unless somebody puts food in front of him. He's lost weight. He's angry all the time, and when he isn't angry...” She stopped.

“What?”

“He's very quiet.”

That was worse. Shane lowered his forehead to the steering wheel.

“He's still looking for you.”

Of course he was. “I told him not to.”

“I know.”

“He read the letter.”

“Yes.”

“And he's still looking.”

“Yes.”

A flash of anger cut cleanly through the grief.

“Jesus Christ.”

“I know.”

“I specifically told him I needed space.”

“I know, Shane- but you have to understand that you just disappeared.”

“Then why the fuck can't he just give me one thing I ask for?”

His voice cracked on the final word.

Yuna didn't answer immediately. When she did, her voice was gentle. “Because Ilya has a lot of work to do.”

Shane wiped angrily at his cheek. “I shouldn't have asked you to take care of him.”

“Yes, you should have.”

“He's not your responsibility.”

“No. He's not.”

“Then why are you doing it?” Yuna's answer came without hesitation. “Because you asked me to. And he's alone now. He needs a mother.”

That broke something in him. Shane covered his mouth.

“And because I love him,” she continued. “I'm angry with him. I don't agree with what he did to you. I understand why you left. All of those things can be true at the same time.”

Shane stared through the windshield, vision swimming. “He's hurting because of me.”

“No.”

“Mom.” Yuna went very quiet. He hated himself for saying it because it was true.

One phone call, Ilya would be here. Shane could end it.

For one weak, aching second, Shane desperately wanted her to. He wanted his mother to say, *Come home*. He wanted her to make the decision. Shane's eyes closed. A tear slipped down his cheek. “I miss him.”

“I know.”

“I miss him so fucking much.”

“I know, baby.”

“I don't want him to be like this.”

“I *know*.”

“What if he does something stupid?”

“Then the people who love him will deal with it. Your dad and I have been trying to help him as much as he lets us.”

Shane let out a shaking breath.

“You don't have to come back because he's hurting,” Yuna continued. “And I won't ask you to. If you ever go back to Ilya, it should be because you want to. Not because you're afraid of what he'll do without you.”

Shane cried silently. It was almost cruel. Not what she said. What she refused to say. She wouldn't give him permission to surrender.

She wouldn't take the choice away from him. Even now, his mother was handing it back. After a minute, Yuna spoke again.

“Can I ask one thing?”

“You promised.”

“Not where you are.”

Shane sniffed. “Okay.”

“Can you tell me something about my grandbaby?”

His face crumpled. He looked down at his stomach.

“Bean's getting bigger.”

Yuna laughed through what was unmistakably a sob. “Bean? You kept the name?”

“That's what we've been calling them.”

We've. Shane felt the word after it left his mouth. He didn't correct it.

“Have you felt anything yet?” Yuna asked.

Shane rested his palm over the small swell.

“A little. I think. Sometimes I'm not sure if it's Bean or gas.”

Yuna laughed harder. “Your father used to say the same thing about you.”

“I'll call again. I don't know when.”

“That's okay.”

“And you really can't tell him.”

“I promised you.”

“Thank you.”

“Shane?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

His chin trembled.

“I love you too, Momma.”

“And your father loves you.”

“I know.”

“And wherever you are, whatever you decide, you have somewhere to come back to. Do you understand me?”

Shane squeezed his eyes shut.

“Yeah.”

“Momma?”

“I'm here.”

The question came out so quietly he almost hoped she wouldn't hear it.

“Does he still love me?”

Yuna was silent. Shane stared at the steering wheel. Then her voice came through, soft and unbearably sad.

“Oh, Shane.”

His throat closed.

“That was never the problem.”

Shane ended the call before he could completely fall apart.

He sat motionless for several seconds, the phone clenched in his hand, tears slipping silently down his face.

Then training, paranoia, and too many terrible movies took over.

He powered the phone down. Removed the SIM card. Snapped it between his fingers, then immediately wondered if snapping a SIM card actually accomplished anything. He removed the battery too, because apparently he was Jason freaking Bourne now, except Jason Bourne probably didn't cry in shopping-center parking lots while pregnant.

He disposed of the pieces separately before driving away.

The trip back to Willow Creek took almost two hours.

By the time he turned onto the Fischer property, dusk had settled over the fields. Warm yellow light glowed through the farmhouse windows. Walter's truck was parked beside the garage. Smoke curled lazily from the chimney.

Shane parked beside the house. He sat there for a moment. Then the back door opened and Ruth stepped onto the porch.

She didn't ask where he'd been.

She simply held up a covered casserole dish.

Shane stared at her.

"You ate?" she called.

He almost started crying again.

"Yes."

Ruth narrowed her eyes.

Shane sighed.

"Chicken pot pie."

"Thank you."

"Heat it properly."

"Yes, ma'am."

She gave him a suspicious look, but patted his cheek and went back inside.

Shane carried the dish downstairs. He ate a little while later and took his vitamin. He showered, then he crawled beneath the blankets and reached underneath his pillow.

Ilya's shirt was there. Shane pulled it against his face. The scent was weaker.

That frightened him more than he wanted to admit. He curled around the shirt, one hand resting over Bean, and finally allowed himself to cry again. Ilya still loved him. Shane still

loved Ilya.

That had never been the problem. And somehow, knowing that hurt more than anything else.

Somehow, nearly two weeks had passed since Shane stepped onto that first train.

He stood in the middle of his basement apartment and took inventory. There were groceries in the mini-fridge: milk, eggs, fruit, the good prenatal vitamins Ruth had insisted on buying. Her paisley curtains hung over the windows, filtering the afternoon light into soft gold. The eighteen-dollar lamp stood sentinel beside the plaid couch. Walter's salvaged bookshelf held his thrift-store paperbacks and a small, framed photo of him with his parents at the lake, the only personal artifact he'd allowed himself. A spare blanket, thick and cable-knit (from Ruth's cedar chest), was folded over the armchair.

Walter had not only tightened the belt on the Honda, he'd checked the tires, changed the oil, and pronounced it "a decent little car" with warmth in his voice. It sat parked outside, right next to their own little toyota.

An appointment with Dr. Alvarez was scheduled for the following Tuesday. People in town waved, and started waving back without thinking.

Betty at the diner knew his "usual" was two eggs over easy, whole wheat toast, and bacon, crispy with a side cup of fruit.

And underneath his pillow, safely hidden, was a soft grey shirt that smelled more every day like memory and less like the man.

Shane wasn't happy. How could he be? He missed his parents with a dull, constant ache. He missed the structure and purpose of hockey, the familiar energy of a hard practice, the collective breath of an arena there to see him. He missed the beautiful, empty house in Ottawa, the nursery he'd painted with all the plans he had made for the space. He missed Ilya

so profoundly, so specifically, that it felt like a phantom limb being repeatedly severed, a sensation so vivid he could almost feel the weight of an arm around his shoulders, the press of lips against his temple.

But he was safe. And he was, minute by minute, brick by brick, beginning to function.

On his way back from a walk along the creek that bordered the Fischer property, he noticed something new beside his basement door. A small, rectangular piece of polished wood, nailed to the siding at eye level. On it, in neat, painted script, it read:

EVAN MERCER

It was nothing elaborate. No flourish, no decoration. Ruth had probably put it up so the mailman would know where to leave packages.

Shane stared at it. The name wasn't his. It never would be. But strangely, standing there in the cool afternoon air, the smell of fallen leaves and woodsmoke around him, it didn't feel completely false anymore. Evan Mercer wasn't replacing Shane Hollander. Evan was simply giving Shane a quiet, sheltered place to exist while he figured out who Shane Hollander needed to become.

He pulled the key from his pocket, a plain, brass key, not a fob for a high-security system and fit it into the lock. He turned it, heard the solid click of the bolt sliding home. He pushed the door open, stepped inside his rented, furnished, imperfect sanctuary, and closed it behind him.

Then he turned, and with a deliberate, conscious motion, he flipped the deadbolt. The sound was final. It echoed softly in the quiet room.

He had locked the door. Not because anyone had told him to. Not because a security protocol demanded it.

Because he had chosen to.

The silence that followed was his own.

The penalty box smelled of sweat, stale air, and the sharp, coppery scent of his own blood. Ilya sat on the narrow bench, his gloves discarded on the floor, his knuckles split and throbbing. The crowd roared, a distant, meaningless wall of sound. On the ice, the Centaurs were scrambling, shorthanded because of his double minor for roughing and unsportsmanlike conduct. He didn't watch. His eyes were fixed on the game clock ticking down above the opposite stands.

Seven days, fourteen hours, thirty-six minutes.

The calculation was automatic, like a constant, silent metronome in his skull. He didn't need to mark the calendar. He felt every second of Shane's absence, a hollow space where the bond used to hum with warmth and quiet reassurance. Now it was a silent, screaming void.

Across the ice, Bood skated past the box. He didn't look at Ilya. His alternate's face was set in a grim mask of professional disappointment. Ilya knew the speech already. *We need you on the ice, this isn't you. Get your head in the game.*

Troy had given him countless speeches, they almost all had. It was all noise. The game was noise. The rules were noise. The only signal, the only thing that mattered, was the absence. Shane was gone. Therefore, nothing else existed.

The final horn blew. Ilya was the first one down the tunnel, ignoring the shouted questions from the media scrum, brushing past the equipment manager. He didn't go to the locker room. He went straight to the private family lounge, where Anatoly was waiting, phone in hand, his expression carefully neutral.

"Well?" Ilya's voice was a rasp, stripped raw from shouting on the ice and in the endless, silent car rides home.

Anatoly sighed. "The facial recognition sweep at every major train and bus terminal between Montreal and New York yielded over two hundred partial matches. He's very smart. He kept his face down, and when he couldn't he had his hat down low. None have been confirmed. The cash withdrawals from the accounts he still controls have stopped entirely. He must have a lot of cash in hand. I managed to figure out that he must have left with around \$325,000 Canadian."

Ilya listened, his blood cooling in his veins. Every detail was a brick in a wall Shane had built around himself. A wall designed specifically to keep Ilya out. The precision of it was a special kind of agony. It wasn't a panicked flight. It was a meticulously planned over some time.

"He has money," Anatoly continued, his tone shifting to one of cautious reason. "And a head start. He has to have false identification that is, so far, flawless. He planned this for weeks, perhaps months."

Ilya turned from the window overlooking the empty arena seats. The fluorescent light of the lounge washed out his face, highlighting the bruise darkening along his cheekbone from a fight two nights ago. His blue eyes were utterly vacant of anything but a cold, focused fire. "Then break the laws. I don't care what you have to do but find him."

Anatoly didn't flinch. He'd heard variations of this for a week. "Ilya- "

"Find the person who made the identification. Find the printer. Find the source of the paper. Track every prepaid card sold in a hundred-mile radius of where we've been for the last six months. Hack the security cameras of every store that sells them. I do not care what it costs. I do not care what laws you break. You have people who do this. Use them."

“And if he finds out?” Anatoly asked softly, the real question hanging in the air between them. “When he finds out how far you went to find him, after everything... what then?”

Ilya’s jaw worked. A muscle ticked in his temple. That was the crack in the furious armor, the contradiction that was eating him alive. The terror beneath the rage wasn’t that he’d never find Shane. It was of Shane’s face when he discovered the depth of the violation Ilya was committing to get him back. He was dismantling Shane’s freedom, his privacy, his autonomy, all over again, in a desperate bid to prove he could finally respect it.

He had no answer for Anatoly. He turned back to the window. “That is none of your concern. Just find him.”

Yuna found him later that night, not at the stark, modern house in Ottawa, which he now hated, but at the cottage. He was standing on the dock in the dark, staring at the black water, a bottle of vodka dangling from his fingers. He hadn’t opened it yet. He just held it, he had finished a bottle already and if he did open this one, it would be gone in less than a few minutes.

She didn’t announce her arrival. Her car door closing, her footsteps on the gravel, were deliberate signals. He didn’t turn.

“You spoke to him,” Ilya said, his voice flat. It wasn’t a question.

“Yes.”

He turned then, slowly. In the faint moonlight, he looked carved from stone and shadows. “Where is he?”

“I don’t know.”

He took a step toward her, the bottle slipping and crashing to the deck. “Where is he, Yuna?”

She met his gaze, her own sharp and unwavering. She was afraid of him and *for* him at that moment- not of physical harm, but of the raw, unstable power of his grief. But she was more afraid for her son. “If I knew,” she said, each word deliberate, “I wouldn’t tell you. Something happened between you two, and it was bad enough for Shane to leave. We need to figure out how to fix this before you should get him back.”

He absorbed the statement, a faint tremor running through his shoulders. He looked away, back at the lake.

“He called me,” Yuna continued, her voice losing none of its edge. “After he left. He said... he said to tell you he’s safe. That he’s sorry. And he asked me...” She paused, forcing the words out. “He asked me to take care of you. He said, ‘He doesn’t have anyone, Momma. He’s not going to be okay.’”

Ilya’s breath left him in a ragged, silent gasp. He took an unsteady step backward, as if the words had physical force. Anatoly had picked up the incoming call on Yuna’s records, but the prepaid number led nowhere. He’d had Yuna followed to see if she went to her son just in case though. That never happened. His legs buckled. He didn’t crumple to the ground, but he sat down heavily on the rough wood of the dock. He covered his face with his hands, his broad shoulders curling inward.

Shane was gone. Shane was afraid of him. Shane had built a life so separate that even his own mother wouldn’t reveal his location.

And Shane was worried about *him*.

The contradiction shattered what was left of his control. A harsh, broken sound escaped him, muffled by his palms. Then another. He cried silently at first, then with great, heaving sobs that wracked his entire frame, the kind of crying that comes from a place so deep it feels like it’s tearing organs.

Yuna watched. Her anger was a live wire, but her sympathy was a dull ache. This man had driven her son to run. They had formally met under bad circumstances and she had worried and dreaded what would happen to her son, but Shane loved him. And Shane, from whatever anonymous location he was in, had asked her to do this.

She walked over and sat down on the dock beside him, not touching him at first. The night sounds of the lake filled the space his crying eventually left. After a long while, when his shoulders had stilled and his breathing was just wet, ragged pulls of air, she spoke softly.

“He said one more thing.”

Ilya didn’t lift his head.

“He said the baby is fine.”

A fresh, silent tremor went through him. He lowered his hands. His face was ravaged, wet, open in a way she had never seen it. Not with anger, not with arrogance, not with his usual teasing charm. With pure, unguarded devastation. He nodded, a tiny, childlike motion, as if absorbing a vital piece of data. *Their Bean was fine.*

Yuna finally reached out and placed a hand on his back, between his shoulder blades. He flinched at the contact, then went still, as if her touch was a lifeline thrown into a stormy sea. He didn’t lean into it. He just accepted it, his head hanging low.

That was the beginning.

The weeks that followed settled into a terrible, ritualistic rhythm.

Ilya played hockey. He played with a brutal, reckless fury that earned him more penalty minutes than points most of the time. He scored breathtaking goals followed by stupid, violent penalties. He fought anyone who looked at him wrong. The Centaurs coaches tried to rein him in. Boodram tried to talk to him. It was like shouting into a hurricane.

After games, Anatoly would report. The searches expanded, grew more intrusive, more legally precarious. They tapped phone records of old contacts. They bribed border control clerks in three states. They used shady freelance hackers to probe hospital databases for omega pregnancy registrations under a dizzying array facial descriptions. Nothing. Shane had vanished into the American landscape like a raindrop into the ocean.

Ilya would return to the empty Ottawa house or the cottage. When Yuna learned that he used to go to a therapist when he was separated from Shane the first time, she insisted he start going to weekly sessions again instead of just sporadic virtual ones. Galina, adjusted his medications. The meetings were brief, but they did help to control his rage. She noted his “escalated symptom profile” and prescribed a higher dose of a mood stabilizer. “The instability is understandable, Ilya,” her calm, filtered voice would say. “The separation is a profound stressor especially given the circumstances, but we also have to understand that your omega was feeling that he wasn’t safe with you. This will help blunt the sharper edges of the anxiety, allow you to focus.”

Yuna made sure he ate. She appeared with containers of food, simple things that required no thought. Soup. Stew. Sandwiches. She didn’t ask him questions. She was there to offer comfort and make sure he took his medication and was okay for the time being. She was a stubborn, silent presence, a promise made to her son. Sometimes, she noticed he seemed almost eerily calm before taking the small white pill Galina prescribed. An hour or two later, a restless, foggy agitation would set in. He’d pace. He’d stare at maps on his computer screen until his eyes glazed over. She mentioned it once, carefully, but then he would sleep for hours.

“The medication Galina gave you... does it make you tired?”

He’d looked at her, his gaze distant. “It makes the thoughts quieter.” Then he’d gone back to pacing.

The ritual was constant: Hockey. Penalties. Searches. Medication. Yuna. Repeat.

And every day, the silent calculation in his head. *Twenty-two days, seven hours, twelve minutes.*

Months passed.

In a quiet basement in Pennsylvania, Shane's stomach grew round and firm under Evan Mercer's soft t-shirts. Ruth knitted a small, yellow blanket. Walter, in his shed, built a sturdy, simple crib from sanded pine. Dr. Alvarez, listened to a strong, steady heartbeat every month and asked no questions beyond medical necessity.

Shane had taken to journaling every new development with the pregnancy. He took pictures every Friday night of his belly. He wrote down every craving. Every food he couldn't stand. Everything that made him laugh or cry.

The Honda developed a new rattle, which Walter diagnosed and fixed with a replaced bushing and no charge. 'Evan' was invited to the church harvest supper and brought a store-bought pie that Ruth discreetly re-heated and improved. The diner knew his order: decaf tea, scrambled eggs, wheat toast. His hair grew even longer, now he had enough to pull into a sloppy bun or pony tail. His face softened with the weight gain of pregnancy. He was no longer the Fischers' mysterious tenant; he was Evan from the Fischer place, the quiet young omega expecting his first. He paid his rent on time, waved from his driveway, and kept mostly to himself.

And every night, he slept with a faded grey shirt under his pillow, the scent now only a memory his mind conjured up. Shane imagined what Ilya would say if he called suddenly. Would he be happy to hear from him? Curse at him for taking their child away? Would he beg for Shane to come back?

He almost did call a few times. The numbers were dialed on one of his burner phones but he couldn't type the last number. He wanted to call his mother, his father. He saw Rose on the

red carpet last month for her movie and she didn't look as happy as usual- was it because of him? He avoided the sports channel, not strong enough to hear what was happening there.

He wrote pages and pages in his journal. Last month Ruth and he had gone out of town to a fair and he'd purchase a nice new leather bound journal from a crafter. Slowly, he'd started filling the pages and gluing the bump and ultrasound pictures. He had an idea that he was going back and forth from but he needed to make sure in was untraceable. He wanted to let Ilya know that the baby was okay, but every way of getting it back to him would mean he'd be found.

In Ilya's world, the only thing that grew was the stack of dead-end reports from Anatoly and the number of miles on the penalty tracker. Galina's medication kept the screaming panic at bay, but it also dampened everything else, leaving him moving through a grey fog, punctuated by bursts of irrational, sharp anger on the ice. Yuna watched, her concern deepening as the days wore on.

Then, one Tuesday afternoon in late March, Anatoly called. His voice was different. Not excited, but taut, focused.

"We have something."

Ilya was in the Ottawa gym, hammering a punching bag. He stopped, the bag swinging slowly. "Where?"

"It's not a location. We were reviewing everything. Isn't it interesting that the NHL released a statement saying that Shane would be placed on the IR list about 20 minutes after he left the arena? Also, we've picked up a person. One of the hackers finally got deep into a protected server- a very private, very expensive artisan. Specializes in high-end, custom false documentation. The kind that can get passed scanners at airports and border control."

Ilya's heart began to pound, a dull, heavy beat against his ribs. "And?"

"There was a purchase. Eight months ago. Paid for with a wire transfer from a holding company we've been monitoring. It was a shell, but we finally peeled it back. The funds originated from Shane's trust."

Ilya knew. He knew before Anatoly said it. The air left his lungs.

Silence roared in Ilya's ears. He saw it with perfect, horrifying clarity. Shane, sitting at his kitchen table in Montreal, seeing the financial records, understanding the control that had been taken. And in that moment of cold, furious realization, using the very system Ilya had imposed to leave him.

"The documentation was delivered from postal box to postal box. The box was closed the day after pickup. But the artisan... he keeps backups. Photographs of his work. For his portfolio."

Ilya's knuckles were white around the phone. "Send it to me."

The image arrived seconds later. It was a scan of a driver's license. The photograph showed Shane, but not as Ilya had ever seen him. His hair was lighter, cut shorter. He wore plain, wire-rimmed glasses. He wasn't smiling. He looked directly at the camera, his expression calm, resolute, utterly foreign.

Anatoly continued, "We are still scanning his computers to find what name they linked to the picture, but I believe it's him and the timeline matches. I have all my guys looking at this for you."

It wasn't the concrete lead he wanted, but at least it was something. The first real lead in over four months of nothing.

Ilya stared at the face of the man he loved, living under a name that wasn't his, in a photograph taken for the explicit purpose of disappearing from Ilya forever. The grey fog of

the medication receded, burned away by a surge of pure, incandescent feeling, a vicious cocktail of hope, terror, and a love so profound it felt like a sickness in his bones.

He had a name. A false name, but a name.

Evan Mercer.

The hunt, which had been a desperate, scattered search in the dark, suddenly had a scent.

Shane stood in the doorway of the cottage, watching the red taillights disappear into the dark tunnel of trees, the weight of the day settling into his bones. The careful scrutiny, the measured conversations, the unspoken history that had hummed just beneath the surface of every laugh and shared memory- it all lingered in the room behind him, a low-grade current beneath the newfound, fragile peace, the warm light of the christmas tree cast a homey glittering effect on the windows and walls.

He could feel Ilya's presence before he heard him. A shift in the air, a focusing of the silence. Turning, Shane saw him by the sliding glass door, a broad silhouette against the moonlit glass of the lake. The rigid, impeccable control Ilya had maintained for twelve straight hours was finally beginning to fracture at the edges. It was visible in the tight cords of his neck, in the way his hands were shoved deep into his pockets, shoulders hunched slightly as if against a cold only he could feel. He was staring out, but Shane knew he wasn't seeing the water. He was seeing the memories of the day- every assessing glance from Scott, every too-protective gesture from Yuna, every moment Shane had belonged to a circle that had, for a long time, existed separately from him.

Without a word, Ilya turned. His eyes, dark and unreadable in the dim living room light, found Shane's. He didn't smile. He didn't speak. He simply held out a hand. It wasn't a request. He slowly waddled towards his mate, his belly feeling heavier after so many hours of moving back and forth.

Shane crossed the room and took it. His own exhaustion melted away, replaced by a different, warmer kind of anticipation. Ilya's fingers closed around his, their grip firm, almost too tight, as if reassuring himself of the solidity of the connection. He pulled Shane gently toward the door, slid it open with his free hand, and guided them out into the night.

The air was cold but sweet, washing over them, carrying the clean scent of pine and deep, cold water. It felt like a baptism after the closed-in, human warmth of the cottage. Ilya didn't stop on the deck. He led them down the familiar, uneven path to the dock, a thick wool blanket tucked under his arm. His movements were deliberate, silent.

At the very end of the dock, where the weathered planks met the black, whispering expanse of the lake, he stopped. The moon was high and nearly full, painting a shattered, silver highway across the gentle ripples. Without ceremony, he shook out the blanket, the rough wool landing with a soft *whump*.

"Lie down," Ilya murmured. His voice was a soft, hoarse command, he had turned back and started the space heater that Ilya had insisted they purchase when out here that fall.

Shane felt a laugh bubble up, a quiet, breathy sound of disbelief and surrender. "Here?" The question was pointless. The answer was in the set of Ilya's jaw, in the desperate need shining through the cracks in his control.

"Here. Now." A faint, familiar smirk finally touched Ilya's lips, the first real crack in the careful facade he'd worn all day. It was a ghost of his usual arrogance, but it was real. "Unless you are scared of the wolf-birds."

The old, silly joke did it. Shane's tension broke. "You're the one who's scared of them," he retorted, but he was already moving, letting Ilya guide him down onto the blanket gently. His balance was off with the belly and he had trouble sit and standing sometimes. The wool was scratchy through his thin shirt, the planks beneath firm and unyielding. Above, the sky was an endless sprawl of black velvet and diamond chips, so vast it made the cottage, the trees, their own bodies, feel beautifully insignificant.

Ilya settled beside him, then over him, bracing his weight on his forearms, caging Shane in, always careful to not put weight on their baby. For a long, suspended moment, he just looked down. The moonlight bleached his features, highlighting the stark lines of his cheekbones,

the shadowed hollows of his eyes. His expression was solemn, almost reverent. He was studying Shane's face as if memorizing a map he'd been lost without.

Then, he lowered his head and began to kiss him.

It started slow. A series of soft, closed-mouth presses against Shane's lips.. But the enforced distance of the day, the hands kept politely apart, the kisses limited to brief, public pecks, the constant, draining awareness of being observed- had banked a fire in both of them.

The kiss deepened, turning hungry and searching. Ilya's tongue swept into Shane's mouth, and Shane met it with his own, a soft, helpless purr escaping him, lost in the shared breath between them. It was more than passion, Ilya had a way of consuming him like a wildfire. His kisses seemed to ask *'Are you still here? Are you still mine after all that? I had to look at you spending time with others for so long and I need you to be focused on only me now.'*

Ilya's mouth left his, trailing a hot, wet path down his jaw, back to the sacred, vulnerable territory of his throat. He nuzzled into the junction of Shane's shoulder, his nose a cold point against the feverish skin. Then he inhaled, deeply, shudderingly, his nose pressed directly to the faint, raised scar of their bonding bite. He scented him. Not with the frantic, desperate need of a heat, but with a deliberate, worshipful intensity. It was an act of erasure and reaffirmation. Each slow, deep breath was a silent, fervent litany: *Mine, my mate, my home, my peace.*

Ilya's hips pressed down in a slow, deliberate roll, the hard line of his erection unmistakable even through their jeans. The friction made Shane gasp, his back trying to arch off the blanket but Ilya shifted to control his movement. "The look you gave me when you came out... hair wet, skin flushed. Like a wet, angry kitten. It was all I could do not to kick everyone out and have you drop to your knees right there."

Shane laughed again, the sound shaky, vibrating against Ilya's lips. "They would have heard everything. My mom was in the next room."

"I do not care," Ilya whispered, but he captured Shane's mouth again, swallowing the weak protest, his hand sliding under the hem of Shane's shirt. He leaned over Shane, pressing a kiss on his distended stomach. "Be good for papa, Bean. Go to sleep and let me and daddy spend some time together." He pressed another kiss when they both felt the kick.

His palm was warm and slightly rough as it splayed over the curve of Shane's stomach, his thumb stroking the sensitive skin just below his navel. The touch was possessive, yes, but it wasn't demanding. It was a claim of intimacy, not of control. It said, *This is my right, but also my privilege. This is where I belong.*

They moved together on the scratchy blanket, a slow, fully-clothed simulation of what they both desperately craved, constrained only by courtesy, since Shane loved being outside at night but Ilya wouldn't have him catch a chill. Jeans rubbed against jeans, shirts rucked up, hands explored the familiar landscapes of backs and shoulders and hip bones through layers of fabric. It was a dance of frustration and exquisite pleasure, each muffled groan, each hitched breath, each whimper and purr from his mate drove Ilya insane.

And yet, somehow, it was enough. Here, under the open, judging sky, with the lake whispering its ancient secrets beside them and the bond in their chests finally singing a clear, quiet, golden note of alignment, the frantic need began to settle. It melted into a deep, thrumming contentment, a satisfaction that went beyond the physical. Ilya eventually stilled, his body a heavy, warm careful weight atop Shane's, his face buried fiercely in the curve of Shane's neck, breathing him in as if he were oxygen.

"I love you," Ilya said, the words muffled by skin and cotton.

"I love you too. So much." Shane's fingers, which had been gripping Ilya's shoulders, relaxed, coming up to card slowly through the soft, curls at his nape.

"It's always... harder than I thought," Ilya admitted, the raw honesty of it a stark contrast to the performative ease he'd displayed all day. "Sharing you with them. Watching you laugh with Scott. Seeing you around other alpha's."

Shane's heart ached. He tightened his fingers in Ilya's hair. "You were perfect. You were... patient. You listened. You didn't get defensive, even when Scott made that comment about the media frenzy."

Ilya was silent for a long moment. The lake lapped softly at the dock pilings. "I was terrified," he confessed, the words so quiet they were almost carried away on the breeze.

“Every single second. That I would say the wrong thing. That my face would show the wrong thing. That I would... slip.” He lifted his head finally, his eyes searching Shane’s in the moonlight. The vulnerability there was breathtaking. “And you would remember why you left. And they would see it. And they would take you away again.”

The sheer magnitude of the fear, so carefully concealed beneath a day of easy smiles and passed dishes, unraveled something in Shane. “Nobody will take me away from you. We’ve started a family. That’s binding us for life and we’ll be so happy when we’re old and grey, surrounded by all our friends and family and grandchildren.” He sat up a bit on his side so Ilya could see him and that he meant every single word. “No one is taking me anywhere,” Shane said, his voice firm. “I’m not a thing to be taken. I’m here. I chose to be here. With you.”

Ilya searched his face, looking for any hint of doubt, any shadow of the old fear. Finding none, he let out a long, shuddering breath and dropped his forehead to rest against Shane’s. “Bez tebya menya net ,” he whispered.

“What’s that one?” Shane asked, pulling Ilya’s face to his for another kiss.

"Without you, I don't exist." Ilya answered with a slow smile. “I don’t ever want to live without you, Shane.”

They lay like that for a while, wrapped in each other and the night. The physical urgency had passed, replaced by a deeper, more profound need for connection. Eventually, Ilya rolled onto his back, pulling Shane with him so that Shane’s head rested on his chest, their legs tangled together. Shane listened to the strong, steady beat of Ilya’s heart under his ear, a rhythmic counterpoint to the water’s whisper.

“They love you,” Ilya said, his voice rumbling in his chest. “Your mother... she looks at you like you hung the stars. And your friends, the way they are with you... it is not just friendship. It is... loyalty. I’m glad you have that, but I want to be everything to you.”

Shane nodded against him. “They’re all amazing. After everything... with the trackers, the control, the way my world got so small... they were the ones who held it open for me. They protected me when I needed it most.” He paused, choosing his next words with care, knowing their weight. “And you are important to me. I can’t say you over everyone else and they

wouldn't make me choose. I hate the very idea of having to choose. But if forced, it would be you."

Ilya was silent, his hand making slow, soothing circles on Shane's belly. He was staring up at the constellations, his face a mask of solemn thought. This, Shane knew, was the true consequence of Ilya's past actions. Not the legal repercussions or the financial untangling, but this: the ghost of the isolation he'd created, now haunting the doorstep of the future he wanted. Shane was risking his most vital connections to include him. The weight of that responsibility, of that gift, was a tangible pressure between them.

"I'm trying my best," Ilya finally said, his voice low and sure. "To be deserving of you and make you happy."

That statement stole Shane's breath. This was the man who had tracked him across continents, who had broken laws to find him, offering him a compromise.

Shane pushed himself up on one elbow, shifting so he could look Ilya directly in the eyes. The moonlight was kinder now, softening the sharp lines of his face, catching the flecks of green and gold in the deep blue of his irises. Shane's own expression was utterly earnest, his analytical mind, which had spent so long weighing risks and calculating survival, now fully committed to its most terrifying and liberating conclusion.

"Ilya," he said, his voice firm, leaving no room for misinterpretation. "I see you trying, so thank you. That means so much to me, I won't take advantage of that. Just promise to always talk to me, so we don't go backwards."

Ilya saw it all in his face. The fear, yes, a flicker of it deep in his brown eyes. But beneath it, shining brighter, was a determination so fierce it seemed to glow. He didn't smile. The moment felt too sacred, too fragile for that. He simply reached up and cupped Shane's cheek, his thumb stroking the beautiful freckles of his cheekbone. He nodded, a slow, deep, wordless acknowledgment that carried the weight of a vow. "Okay," he breathed, the sound barely more than a sigh of the wind.

Shane held his gaze for another long moment, feeling the truth of it settle into his bones, warmer and more solid than the wool blanket beneath them. Then he leaned down and kissed

him, a soft, sealing promise. When he pulled back, a practical thought surfaced. “It’s late. Should we go back inside?”

Ilya’s smirk returned, fuller this time, edged with a familiar, predatory warmth. “It is not that late,” he murmured, his hands sliding down to grip Shane’s hips. “And we are already here. And we have a blanket.”

The earlier, simmering urgency reignited, fanned by the emotional catharsis. This time, there was no restraint born of nearby listeners, only the vast, approving silence of the night under the stars. Clothes became obstacles to be removed with impatient, fumbling hands. The cool air raised goosebumps on their skin, quickly chased away by the heat of mouths and palms and seeking bodies.

Ilya worshipped him under the moon. His mouth traveled every inch of exposed skin, the hollow of his throat, the planes of his chest, the sensitive trail leading down from his navel, with a reverence that was both tender and fiercely possessive. Each kiss, each nip, each languorous stroke of his tongue was a reaffirmation of his earlier scenting. *Mine, all of you. Every scar, every memory, every part that belongs to others and every part that belongs only to me.*

When he finally sheathed himself inside Shane, it was with a slow, inexorable push that made them both cry out, the sounds swallowed by the immense night. For a moment, they didn’t move, just stayed fused together, foreheads touching, breathing the same air, feeling the bond between them flare into a brilliant, golden circuit of pure sensation. It was more than sex, it felt like more, from the very first time. A re-fusing of halves that had been brutally cleaved apart and painstakingly, undoubtedly glued back together.

Then Ilya began to move, and all thought dissolved into feeling. The rhythm was slow at first, deep and rolling as the lake beneath them, each thrust a deliberate, soul-deep connection. The rough wool of the blanket scraped against Shane’s back, a sharp, grounding counterpoint to the unbearable sweetness of the friction within. He wrapped his legs around Ilya’s waist, heels digging into the small of his back, pulling him closer, deeper, as if he could erase the space between their very cells.

Ilya’s control, so tightly held all day, began to fray in the most beautiful way. His thrusts had to stay in control to avoid putting pressure on the growing belly, he had to focus on Shane’s queues to make sure he wasn’t feeling any pain or discomfort, but at Shane’s guidance, his

trusts turned harder, faster, more desperate. His breath came in ragged gasps against Shane's neck, punctuated by broken, Russian words that Shane didn't need to understand. The meaning was in the tone: worship, desperation, love, and a profound, aching relief.

Shane was unraveling beneath him, pleasure coiling tight and electric in his gut, sparking along every nerve. The world narrowed to the points of contact: the hard planks beneath the blanket, the sweat-slick skin of Ilya's back under his palms, the crushing, perfect pressure inside him, and the blue-fire intensity of Ilya's gaze locked on his. He was murmuring too, a stream of consciousness, Ilya's name, yes, please, more, a sobbed don't stop, the purring he couldn't suppress- all the while falling into those bottomless blue eyes, seeing his own ecstasy reflected back at him, along with a love so vast and terrified it finally broke him.

His climax tore through him like a silent lightning strike, a seismic wave of pleasure that arched his back off the dock and ripped a soundless scream from his throat. Ilya followed him over the edge seconds later, driven by the clenching, pulsing heat around him, his own release wrenched from him with a guttural, shuddering cry that echoed out over the water. He collapsed onto Shane's side, a dead weight of spent passion and trembling relief.

Shane woke with a violent start.

There was no lake. No moonlight. No Ilya.

Only the low basement ceiling above him, his skin clammy beneath his sleep shirt and the humiliating evidence of exactly how vivid the dream had been beneath the sheets.

He bit his fist in a need to smother the cry that was starting in his chest. He quickly got out of the bed, or as quickly as Bean let him and went into the bathroom to turn on the shower. While that started, he went back to strip the sheets off the bed. Great. Just great. That was the third time this month. He blamed the hormones, of course.

The snow began a few days before Christmas Eve, a gentle, persistent fall that dusted the fields and frosted the bare branches of the oaks along the driveway. Inside, the house underwent a transformation. The quiet spaces Shane had grown accustomed to were invaded by a cheerful, noisy tide of family. Children's boots tracked melting snow across the kitchen floor. The smell of roasting turkey and gingerbread overpowered the usual scents of lemon

polish and coffee. Coats were piled on every bed, and the living room couch became a landmine of pillows and sleeping bags.

Shane watched from the periphery of the kitchen, a cup of decaf tea held between his hands. His stomach, now a firm, undeniable curve beneath his sweater, felt like both a shield and a beacon. He was nervous. This was the largest group of strangers he'd been among since he'd become Evan. He kept waiting for a pause, a double-take, for someone to point and say, "I know you." It never came. To the arriving children, he was just a man in Grandma's kitchen. To everyone, he was just Evan.

Ruth never asked if he was joining them. Two days prior, she had informed him. "Dinner is at two. Don't be late. Then we usually watch movies and the kids wake everyone up for presents."

Shane had hesitated. "Ruth, I don't want to intrude on your family."

She had looked up from the pie crust she was rolling, her expression one of genuine confusion. "Well, honey. Its a good thing you're part of the family then."

"Your family. Your children, your grandchildren..."

"Yes, we already established that. We do white elephant for presents on the adults. Nothing that explodes and its \$50 or less," she said, as if this settled the matter completely, and went back to her rolling pin.

Walter, passing through with a stack of plates, had caught Shane's eye. "Don't bother," he'd murmured, the ghost of a smile on his face.

So Shane was there, a quiet island in the cheerful chaos. He helped where he could, fetching things from high shelves for Ruth, refilling drinks. He felt a strange, aching warmth watching Walter, usually so reserved, get talked into wearing a paper crown by a giggling great-granddaughter. This was what normal looked like. Loud, messy, and saturated with a love that asked for nothing but presence.

The back door opened again, letting in a flurry of cold air and a man shrugging out of a snow-dusted coat. “Sorry, traffic on 30 was a nightmare,” he said, his voice a pleasant, warm baritone that cut through the din without shouting.

“Samuel, you’re late,” Ruth said, but she was already moving to hug him.

“Grandma.” He kissed her cheek, then turned to hug Walter. “Grandpa.”

Shane observed him from across the room. Samuel “Sam” Fischer was probably in his early thirties. He had his grandmother’s kind eyes and his grandfather’s solid build, though he was taller. Brown hair, a bit ruffled from the drive, hazel eyes that crinkled at the corners when he smiled at something a child said. He was handsome in an unassuming, approachable way. An alpha, his scent was a mild, clean blend of fresh snow and pine, pleasant and utterly non-threatening.

Ruth propelled him across the kitchen. “Evan, this is our grandson Sam. Sam, Evan lives downstairs. We adopted him like a little baby chicken.”

Sam’s gaze shifted to Shane. It was brief, taking in his face, his posture, the curve of his stomach. There was no flicker of recognition, no intrusive assessment. Just a calm, open regard. “Hey, nice to meet you, Evan.” he said.

“Hi,” Shane replied, bracing internally for the inevitable questions.

Sam didn’t ask any. Instead, he nodded toward the mountain of food. “Grandma feeding you against your will too?”

The question was so unexpected, so perfectly aligned with Shane’s own internal commentary, that he let out a short, genuine laugh. “Constantly.”

“Good,” Sam said, a smile playing on his lips. “Means she likes you.”

From the stove, Ruth called out, “Samuel Fischer, I can hear you.”

“I know,” Sam called back, not looking away from Shane, his smile widening.

Later, during the chaotic gift exchange, Shane found himself corralled into a board game with a pack of kids and Sam, who had been appointed referee. Shane, unable to fully suppress a lifetime of competitive conditioning, found himself strategically orchestrating the downfall of a nine-year-old named Liam. Sam watched, amused, and when Liam had decisively lost, Sam leaned over and said, “You’re ruthless. I respect it.”

After the pie was served and the children had crashed in sugar-fueled heaps, Shane and Sam ended up doing dishes. It was a companionable silence, broken only by the rush of water and the clink of plates. Shane was carrying a stack of serving platters to the pantry. They were awkward, but not heavy.

“Want help?” Sam asked from the sink.

“No, I’ve got it,” Shane said, maneuvering carefully.

“Okay,” Sam said, and turned back to scrubbing a roasting pan.

Shane stopped halfway to the pantry. He waited, the platters in his hands. He was so accustomed to his “no” being the start of a negotiation, a prelude to a sigh, a concerned look, or a firm, “Let me take those.” He was braced for an argument that didn’t come. Sam had simply accepted his answer and moved on. The simplicity of it was so disarming Shane almost dropped the platters. He finished putting them away, the interaction echoing in his mind. It had been so insignificant Sam had probably not even thought about it after a second. For Shane, it felt strange.

Sam stayed in the house for several days after Christmas. He was a veterinarian, he told Shane, with a practice in Lancaster but he was moving back. He'd grown up in Willow Creek, spent every summer with his grandparents, and had moved away for school but found himself drawn back to the area. They fell into an easy rhythm. Sam helped Walter repair a sagging barn door; Shane sat on an upturned bucket, handing them tools and debating with Walter because Walter thought that even Omega's needed to know how to fix things themselves and could be as independent as the next person.

When Sam needed to pick up some supplies in town, he asked Shane tagged along to keep him company. They got lunch at a diner Shane hadn't tried, and Sam confessed to a deep, abiding love for terrible horror movies, which Shane found both baffling and hilarious.

Afterward, back in his basement apartment, Shane's analytical mind caught up with the day. They had spent hours together, alone. They laughed. Sam had paid for lunch, though Shane had tried to split it. Objectively, to an outside observer, it could have looked like a date. The thought sent a spike of anxiety through him. He didn't like ambiguity. The next time Sam stopped by, Shane, while they were repotting some of Ruth's plants in the sunroom, broached it directly.

"Was the other day- in Lancaster. Was that a date?"

Sam looked up from the soil he was patting down around a fern. He didn't seem surprised, just thoughtful. "Would you like it to have been?" he asked, his tone genuinely curious, not leading.

Shane's stomach tightened. "No."

Sam nodded, once after a few seconds. "Then it wasn't."

Shane stared at him. That was it? No performative disappointment, no attempt to persuade, no subtle shift in his scent to convey wounded pride. Just acceptance. The relief was so profound it felt like a physical unclenching, but it was followed by a bewildering pang of something else. He had become so conditioned to conflict as a form of care that this calm respect felt almost alien.

As the weeks of January bled into a cold, grey February, their friendship solidified. Sam began visiting his grandparents more frequently. Ruth and Walter noticed, exchanging quiet, knowing looks but saying nothing. Sometimes Sam came ostensibly to see them, but would end up knocking on Shane's basement door. Sometimes he texted Shane directly. The choice to engage was always, unmistakably, Shane's. No one had assigned Sam to him. No one had decided Shane needed an alpha friend. He had chosen Sam himself, and Sam had simply been there, consistent and undemanding.

Eventually, Shane offered him the scant, fictional biography of Evan Mercer. He was pregnant. He was bonded. He was separated from the baby's alpha. Something had happened that made leaving necessary. He didn't want to discuss it. Sam listened, his expression sober and attentive. "Okay," he said. And he never pushed for more.

But while Shane's mind found peace in Willow Creek, his body was becoming a traitorous, aching thing. As his pregnancy progressed into the fifth, and then sixth month, the biological reality of being separated from his bonded alpha grew more pronounced. His omega physiology knew he was carrying his bonded alpha's child. The silence where the bond had been was no longer just an emotional absence; it was a physical craving.

He became restless, much needed sleep eluding him for hours. He would wake in the dark, clutching Ilya's shirt to his face, only to be met with the faint, faded ghost of a scent that was more memory than reality. The disappointment was a sharp, childish grief. He nested instinctively, rearranging pillows and blankets, always including one of the pieces of clothing he'd stolen from Ilya, a pathetic substitute for the alpha who should have been there. His emotions frayed at the edges. He cried once because Walter fixed his favorite mug after he'd chipped it. He snapped at Ruth over nothing and spent an hour miserably apologizing.

And his body reacted to Sam's alpha scent with a confusing, frustrating clarity. It wasn't fear or repulsion. It was a deep, instinctive recognition of wrongness. Not dangerous, not unpleasant. Just not *his*. Not *Ilya*. The quiet pine scent, which he liked intellectually, made his own omega scent shift subtly in a silent, biological rejection. It made him angry, at himself, at his own omega side that seemed determined to undermine his logical, hard-won safety.

One night, the pining was particularly hurtful. A deep, restless ache settled in his bones, a hollow feeling that no amount of tea or reading could fill. He wrapped himself in a blanket, shoved Ilya's shirt under his sweater against his skin, and went outside to sit on the porch steps. The night was bitterly cold, the sky clear and splattered with stars.

He didn't hear the door open behind him. A presence settled on the step a few feet away. Sam, wearing a heavy jacket, holding two mugs. He handed one to Shane. Hot chocolate, with tiny marshmallows.

They sat in silence for a long time, watching their breath fog in the air.

"You miss him," Sam said eventually, his voice quiet in the vast stillness of the night.

Shane stiffened, the old defensiveness rising. "I hate him, I really should hate him." he said, the words brittle.

Sam took a sip of his drink, looking out at the dark outline of the barn. "I'm not saying you didn't."

The correction, gentle and undeniable, deflated Shane's anger. He slumped, the blanket slipping from his shoulders. The hot chocolate was sweet and rich on his tongue. After a long while, the truth crept out, whispered to the frozen night. "I don't hate him." He swallowed. "Sometimes I wish I did."

Sam didn't offer platitudes. He didn't trash-talk the unknown alpha. He just sat there, a solid, silent presence in the dark, bearing witness to the contradiction that was tearing Shane apart. "Well, you can both hate and love someone. The human mind is confusing like that sometimes. The good thing is that not everything has to be set in stone. People fall in and out of love, in and out of hate."

A few days later, the reality of the future began to press in. Dr. Alvarez appointments discussed birth plans. Ruth had started a quilt. Walter had finished the crib. The abstract concept of "Bean" was becoming an imminent, terrifying reality. Over dinner at Sam's apartment in Lancaster- a comfortable, messy place full of books and dog hair—Shane found himself voicing his fears.

"I just... I look at all of it. The crib, the clothes, the doctor's charts. And I think, 'I have to keep this tiny person alive. Make every decision. Be everything. And I don't...'" His voice wavered. "I don't know how I'm supposed to do this by myself."

Sam was quiet, finishing his bite of pasta. He put his fork down carefully. “You don’t have to,” he said.

Shane’s head snapped up, immediate tension locking his spine. “Sam.”

“Stop,” Sam said, his voice firm but not unkind. He held up a hand. “I know what you’re thinking. That’s not what this is.” He took a breath, choosing his words with visible care. “I know you don’t want me that way. I’m not asking you to. I know you’re still bonded. I know you love him.” He said it all matter-of-factly, without a trace of resentment. “But I care about you. And I’m probably going to care about that kid whether you want me to or not. That’s my choice.” He leaned forward, his hazel eyes earnest. “If you’re scared because you think you have to do all of it alone, you don’t. That’s all I’m saying. The offer stands. No strings, no expectations. As a friend who could be... more, to the baby, if you wanted that. A co-parent. Not a mate.”

Shane’s throat closed. He looked away, blinking rapidly. The offer was staggering in its generosity and its sheer lack of coercion. It was everything he should have wanted.

In the days that followed, he turned it over in his mind. On paper, Sam was perfect. Stable, kind, emotionally mature. He had a good career, a loving family, deep roots in a community that had already embraced Shane. He respected boundaries not as a concession, but as a default. He would never hire investigators or control finances or mistake fear for love. Bean could have grandparents, cousins, a safe home, a father figure who was calm and present. Shane could have a partner, in the truest sense of the word. A life of quiet, uncomplicated peace.

And when he tried to imagine that life, to slot himself and Bean into that picture, his mind rebelled. When he imagined holding his newborn for the first time, the person he ached to turn to, to share that stunned, overwhelming joy with, was Ilya. When he imagined a toddler’s first steps, the laugh he wanted to hear beside him was Ilya’s. When he thought of Bean calling someone “Papa,” the face that formed was Ilya’s, grinning that ridiculous, proud grin. Every cherished moment, every future fear, every quiet hope, his heart instinctively reached for the wrong man. The complicated, infuriating, dangerous man he had run from. The realization filled him with a furious, helpless grief. He had been handed the possibility of something simple, gentle, uncomplicated, and his stubborn heart still reached for Ilya.

At his next prenatal appointment, Bean was healthy, active, and perfect. Dr. Alvarez, finished her measurements and made a note. As she prepared to leave the exam room, Shane spoke, his voice barely above a whisper.

“Can you sever a bond?”

Dr. Alvarez’s pen stilled. She looked up, her expression turning carefully professional. “A mating bond?”

Shane nodded, his hands resting on the curve of his stomach. “Mine.” He paused. “While I’m pregnant.”

Dr. Alvarez sat back down slowly. “It is medically possible,” she said, her tone measured. “But it is a significant procedure, and during pregnancy, it carries risks. The bond is physiologically reinforced because your body recognizes you are carrying your alpha’s child. Severing it could cause severe hormonal instability, intense pining symptoms, scent dysregulation, insomnia, appetite issues. It could increase the risk of premature labor or other complications.” She studied him. “I would generally advise waiting until after delivery, unless the bond itself poses a direct and immediate danger to your wellbeing.”

Shane listened, his heart thudding dully. He already knew most of this. He asked the real question, the one that had driven him here. “If I did it... would I stop wanting him?”

Understanding softened Dr. Alvarez’s eyes. She sighed quietly. “Physically, your body would eventually stop searching for his scent, for the bond connection. The acute pining would fade, in time.”

“And the rest?” Shane pressed, his voice cracking. “The... missing him?”

The doctor’s gaze was filled with a deep, empathetic sadness. “Evan, I can sever a physiological bond. I can’t remove a person from your heart.”

The words landed with the finality of a stone dropping into a deep well. That was it. The truth he'd been circling. He wasn't trying to free his body. He was trying to free his heart. And medicine had no cure for that.

He told Sam about it later, sitting in Sam's truck outside the pharmacy. "I asked about severing the bond."

Sam, who had been reaching for the door handle, went completely still. He turned to look at Shane. "Why?"

Shane shrugged, staring out at the slushy parking lot. "I thought... maybe then I could..." He couldn't finish the sentence.

"No," Sam said, the word sharp.

Shane glared at him, irritation flaring. "It's my decision."

"It is," Sam agreed immediately, his tone softening. "It is your choice completely." He turned fully in his seat, his expression serious. "If you decide you want it for yourself, I'll drive you there. I'll sit in the waiting room the entire time. I'll bring you home and make sure you have everything you need. I mean that." He reached out, but stopped short of touching Shane, letting his hand fall back to the seat between them. "But don't cut a piece of yourself out because you think I deserve a chance. Or because you think it's what you should want. Don't do it for me."

Shane was stunned into silence. Here was an alpha, one who cared for him, explicitly telling him not to alter his fundamental nature for his sake. He was protecting Shane's autonomy even from Shane's own misguided sense of fairness. The irony was a bitter, beautiful ache. This was the healthy choice, the mature choice, the kind of love everyone said was real.

And as he looked at Sam's honest, worried face, Shane finally understood the terrible, liberating truth. Loving Ilya had never been his problem. The problem was that Ilya's love had felt like a cage. Freedom wasn't about finding a man who would never build a cage. It

was about having the absolute, unquestionable right to walk away from it. And it was about choosing, from that place of freedom, who to let into your heart.

He had that freedom now. He could walk away from Ilya forever. He could choose Sam, choose peace, choose the uncomplicated life.

“I can’t,” he whispered, more to himself than to Sam. “I can’t choose you.”

Sam didn’t look hurt. He looked resigned, a little sad, but understanding. “I know,” he said softly. “And it’s okay.”

They sat in the quiet truck, the engine ticking as it cooled. A world of potential, safe and sweet, stretched out before Shane. And with a heart that felt both broken and strangely whole, he turned his back on it, choosing instead the memory of a storm.

Hundreds of miles away, in a soundproofed office in Montreal, Ilya Rozanov stared at a single sheet of paper. The frantic, volatile energy that had characterized the past months was gone, burned away into a cold, hyper-focused intensity. The medication Galina prescribed kept the howling void at bay, leaving his mind clear and sharp as a scalpel.

On the paper was a name.

EVAN JAMES MERCER.

A driver’s license photo, slightly blurred from a digital scan. The man in the picture had different hair and wore wire-rimmed glasses. He wasn’t smiling. But the set of the jaw, the shape of the eyes, the stubborn, beautiful line of his mouth—it was Shane. It was a ghost Shane had crafted for himself.

Anatoly stood across the desk. “The trail from the forger ends at a postal box in New York. The box is closed. The address on the license is a vacant lot in Concord. There is no credit history, no employment records, no vehicle registration. He built this identity from nothing.”

Ilya’s finger traced the edge of the paper. “He used the old bank account,” he said, his voice hollow. “The one my people took over. He used my own system to pay for his escape.” There was a perverse pride in the agony of it. His Shane was so brilliant, so ruthless when cornered.

“It appears so,” Anatoly confirmed quietly.

Ilya looked up, his blue eyes like chips of winter ice. “Find every Evan Mercer in the United States. Cross-reference with new prenatal medical records for omegas. Check small-town rental agreements paid in cash. Look for men matching his description, pregnant, living alone, appearing within the last six months. Start in the Northeast and spiral out.”

“Ilya,” Anatoly began, the scale of the task daunting.

“A pregnant omega doesn’t simply disappear,” Ilya interrupted, his voice low and deadly calm. “He needs food, shelter, medical care. He must have left a footprint. Find it.” He looked back down at the photograph, at the unfamiliar name beneath the familiar face. A strange, quiet certainty settled over him. The frantic search was over. The hunt had begun. “Evan Mercer,” he whispered to the silent room.

The ghost had a name. Now, he just had to find where he was hiding.

Chapter End Notes

I’m going to keep these end notes short because I have a feeling the comments are going to be... interesting. 😄

I absolutely want to hear your theories about what happens when Ilya finally finds him because, well... Please remember that you all love me before you open the next chapter that I hope will be ready by Friday- I can't rush it. 😭😄

That's all I'm saying. Do not shoot the author. I have a plan. TRUST THE PROCESS.



Thank you guys so so so much. I genuinely love reading every single reaction.

See you in the next one.

...please be nice to me. 😂💕

Chapter 43: Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

Okay. I'm really, really sorry for what I'm about to do- but on the plus side I got this one a whole day early! 😭

That's it. That's the note.

Thank you for all the support. Y'all are amazing.

Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go hide in my bunker. 😊😭

Please remember you liked me once. ❤️

Chapter Notes

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

The days after Shane disappeared did not pass, they felt like layers of sediment settling over Ilya's consciousness. He moved through time with a terrifying, mechanical functionality that everyone noticed. He wouldn't sleep unless it was only to pass out for a couple hours. He went to Centaurs practices. He executed drills with a cold, flawless precision that made his new teammates glance at him sideways. He showered in scalding water until his skin was red. He returned to the stark, empty house in Ottawa or, more often, drove the few hours to the cottage, which now felt less like a sanctuary and more like a crime scene, the last place Shane had truly been *his*.

He ate when Yuna or David placed food directly in front of him. A sandwich appeared on the counter; he would consume it in six tasteless bites. A bowl of soup was set beside his laptop; he would spoon it into his mouth without looking away from the screen. He did not cook. He did not order in. He accepted their offerings with a silent nod, just to keep them somewhat happy. They should hate him. Their son had vanished because of him. Yet Yuna called every day, several times a day. David texted every morning on his way to work, and he responded to them, his forehead pressed against the cold glass of the cottage window, as Yuna talked about her garden, or a book she was reading, or the weather in Toronto. It was not for comfort but it kept him going when all he wanted to do was swallow the bottle of pills and drain the vodka he had shipped to the house every few days. He sometimes wondered if this was what his mother felt- the all consuming despair that threatened to swallow him. But then he thought that they would find Shane. It was a tether, the one thought in the world that he clung to.

His own thoughts were not always chaotic. They were ruthlessly organized when he was focused and the only thing he could ever focus on was finding Shane and his child. Shane was pregnant. Shane was his bonded omega. Shane was emotionally distressed. Shane was somewhere Ilya could not see, could not protect, could not *make him understand*. Therefore, Shane was in danger. The nature of the danger was irrelevant, it could be physical, medical, emotional. Its mere possibility was an emergency. Every other consideration- Shane's anger, his pleas for autonomy, the shattered trust, was a variable in the safety equation, not a limiting principle. Ilya could live with Shane's hatred. He could live with screaming arguments, with a lifetime of icy silence. He could not live with Shane dead in a ditch because Ilya had respected a boundary when every instinct screamed that boundaries were a luxury they could not afford.

The crack in the logic was a hairline fracture, but it was there, and it ached. He kept remembering the kitchen in Montreal, the look on Shane's face, not just anger, but a kind of horrified betrayal.

Late at night, when he was trying to quiet his mind, he saw where things might have been better, he could have explained things, maybe warned Shane. But never did he think that Shane would run again, not after they bonded and started their family. That was the core of it. Ilya had appointed himself arbiter of Shane's safety, judge and jury of every risk, and had seen that appointment not as an overreach but as the fundamental duty of his love. Now, in the silence, the question whispered: if his protection felt so much like a prison that Shane had chosen the unknown over it, what did that make his love?

He shoved the thought aside. It was a philosophical indulgence. The practical reality was that Shane was gone, and Ilya needed to bring him back, kicking and screaming if need be.

His search was not a wild, public unraveling. It was a clinical, private campaign. He worked through Anatoly, leveraging every legitimate and illegitimate contact he had, private investigators with discretion, security consultants, data analysts. He authorized exorbitant retainers. He tracked the money Shane could access, watched for credit card pings, hospital admissions under his fake name, traffic cameras near borders. He was not hunting a fugitive; he was, in his mind, attempting to establish a baseline: alive, safe. The violation of it was not a violation to him. It was for the greater good to get him back.

When Anatoly's call came, it was not with a location, but rather an observation.

“The league’s announcement placing Shane on Injured Reserve,” Anatoly said, his voice careful over the secure line. “It was timestamped and released to the press at 8:04 AM Eastern, the morning after he left.”

Ilya was at the cottage desk, a map of the northeastern United States illuminated on his screen. “So?”

“So, the medical evaluation and paperwork required for that designation, especially for a player of his profile, is not instantaneous. It requires coordination between team doctors, league officials, the PR department. For it to be ready to publish first thing in the morning...I did some digging and the email came the afternoon before from Crowell to trigger the announcement for first thing in the morning.”

Ilya’s blood, which had been moving sluggishly through his veins for days, turned to ice. He saw it with perfect, horrible clarity. The announcement hadn’t been a reaction. It had been part of the plan. “Someone knew,” he said, his voice flat. “Someone inside the league knew he was not coming back.”

“Yes, sir. Seems that way.”

The directionless fear crystallized, sharpened into a single, shining point of fury. Crowell. The logic was seamless, inevitable. Crowell had always wanted Shane under his thumb. Crowell had tried to manipulate him before. Crowell had the access, the authority, the cold-blooded pragmatism to help a valuable asset disappear if he believed it served the league’s- or his own, interests. The reasonable questions- why would Crowell help? What could Shane have promised him?- were drowned out by the roaring certainty in Ilya’s skull. Crowell knew something. The man who’d tried to break them up right in their faces when Shane was found out was involved.

Anatoly heard the change in his breathing. “Ilya. You cannot go to this man demanding answers. We are looking through his communications right now, I just thought you’d like to know we had a small lead. We do not go in shouting.”

“I am going to talk to him.” The frantic energy was gone, replaced by a cold so profound it felt like clarity.

“Ilya- ”

“Where is he?”

A long pause. Anatoly understood the futility of argument. “He is in his office in New York- no appointments I can see today.”

“Good.”

Ilya did not change his clothes. He drove to the airport and waited until the first flight was ready to board. He frowned when he saw David’s text asking if he needed anything from the store and he texted their group chat that he needed to catch a flight and would be gone for the day. The plane took off and he sat perfectly still for the duration of the flight, staring at his own reflection in the window. The man who stared back was unfamiliar. Hollowed out. Purposeful.

He did not announce his arrival. He walked past the assistant’s desk, a shadowlike figure in a black coat, and opened the door to Commissioner Crowell’s office.

Crowell looked up from his desk, not startled, but with the weary resignation of a man who had long anticipated a troublesome meeting. He calmly muttered something into the phone and hung up the call, a stark contrast to the raw, untamed fury Ilya carried in with him.

“Rozanov,” Crowell said, setting his pen down. “This is unexpected.”

Ilya closed the door. The click of the latch was definitive. He did not approach the desk. He stood just inside the room, his hands loose at his sides, his posture deceptively relaxed.

“When did you know?”

Crowell leaned back in his chair, steeping his fingers. “Know what?”

“Do not,” Ilya said, the words dropping into the quiet room like stones, “play with me. When did you know Shane was leaving? Who authorized the IR announcement before he was gone? Who helped him? Where is he now?”

Crowell watched him, his expression unreadable. “Shane Hollander is on injured reserve for medical reasons. The details of his condition are private, between him and his healthcare providers. The league followed standard protocol.”

“You lie,” Ilya snarled, the cold beginning to crack, revealing the magma beneath. “You knew. You helped him disappear? Tell me now, Crowell before I slit your throat and burn your body.”

“I helped a player in my league access the medical leave he requested,” Crowell corrected, his voice calm, infuriatingly reasonable. “What he does with that leave is his business. As is his location. He’s your mate, Rozanov. You both made it clear that the relationship was not any of our business, so that is what we’ve done.”

Ilya took a step forward. The air in the room tightened. “If you are harboring an omega the law is on my side, Crowell. He belongs to me and if I find out that you know where he’s been, I’ll kill you.”

“Are you sure he belongs to you?” Crowell asked, his gaze level. “Because from where I’m sitting, it looks an awful lot like the reason he needed protecting was standing in my office. This behavior, Rozanov, this sense of entitlement to his every breath, is precisely why nobody who cares about him is going to give you his location. I don’t see his friends behind you. I don’t see that grand crowd of fans outside my office again, or that you’ve even posted about it.”

“What ever happens between the two of you, I couldn’t care less. Hollander was a better asset to the league when he was single and it wasn’t known what he really was, but I we can spin the omega thing.”

The words were a scalpel, precise and cruel. Ilya felt them sink in, past the fury, past the fear, to the raw, shameful nerve they exposed.

Crowell pressed the advantage, not out of malice, but out of a cold sense of duty. “He didn’t disappear, Rozanov. He left you.”

The distinction was like a guillotine.

Ilya went utterly still. The world narrowed to the polished surface of Crowell’s desk, to the faint hum of the city thirty stories below. *Missing* was a tragedy, an act of fate or malice. *Left* was a choice, a final verdict where his mate found him lacking.

“He is pregnant,” Ilya repeated, the words a desperate, weakening incantation. “He could be sick. Something could happen to the baby. He needs-”

“Have you considered,” Crowell interrupted, his voice dropping, “that he might have decided that his career was just more important? I mean, everyone who knows Hollander knows that this game was everything to him.”

The rage that erupted then was pure, white-hot, and alpha-primal. It was a physical wave, a demand to lunge across the desk, to smash that calm, condescending face into the glass, to make him understand. Ilya’s muscles coiled, his scent spiking with violent intent. He saw the flicker of alarm in Crowell’s eyes, the subtle shift in his posture, bracing for the blow.

He did not move.

Somewhere, in the storm of his mind, he heard a voice. Not in his ears, but in the ruined, silent place where the bond had been. It was just like a smokey wisp of a memory, but it had the force of a command. *Stop*.

He did not know if it was Shane’s voice from the kitchen, or from the cottage, or from some past memory. It did not matter. It was the line he could not cross. Not here, not like this.

With a shuddering, violent effort, he turned. He wrenched the door open and walked out, past the wide-eyed assistant, down the hall, to the elevator. He did not look back.

Outside, on the cold New York sidewalk, the fury vibrated through him, making his hands shake. He leaned against the slick granite of the building, sucking in great, ragged gulps of air that tasted of exhaust and city filth.

Crowell was wrong. He had to be wrong. Shane was safer with him. Ilya had spent years building walls, hiring guards, monitoring threats, eliminating dangers. Every action, every controlling, suffocating gesture, had been a brick in the fortress of Shane's safety. Ilya *knew* he was safer with him.

So why did I leave?

There it was again, that voice that sounded so much like Shane in his head. He must be going crazy. He turned and tried to hail a cab. If he was going insane, he might as well enjoy hearing the voices of his mate.

The flight back to Canada was a blur to him. Ilya sat motionless, Crowell's words echoing in the hollowed-out chamber of his skull. *He left you.* The distinction was a live wire, searing every other thought. He hadn't been robbed. He had been judged and found wanting. He should have been used to that. He hadn't been enough for his mother, for his father. The rest of his extended family only paid attention to him when they can get something in return. The fury that had sustained him through the confrontation had burned down to a cold, heavy ash, settling in his bones. By the time he landed, retrieved his car, and began the drive north to the cottage, a fine, persistent snow had begun to fall, ghostly in the headlights.

He arrived long after dark. The cottage was a black shape against the lesser black of the lake and woods. He didn't turn on the lights. He walked through the familiar rooms, his boots tracking melted snow on the floors, and went straight to the cabinet where he kept the vodka. He took the bottle and the orange plastic vial of pills, the ones Galina had prescribed for

“acute anxiety episodes,” the ones that promised a thick, dreamless silence, and went back outside.

The snow was falling in earnest now, fat, silent flakes that coated the dock in a pristine, inch-thick layer. He didn’t brush it off. He sat down at the very end, the cold immediately seeping through his jeans. He opened the vodka, took a long, burning swallow, and lit a cigarette. The smoke mixed with his breath in the frozen air. He placed the pill bottle carefully beside him on the planks, within easy reach. He wasn’t planning to use it. But its presence was a comfort, a tangible representation of an exit door left ajar. As long as finding Shane was the imperative, the door remained closed, but the door was there. Was this what his mother felt?

He lost track of time. The snow dusted his shoulders, his hair, gathered in the folds of his coat. The lake was a vast, black plain slowly being erased to white. He felt nothing but the cold and the slow, dull throb of Crowell’s words. He wondered if he drank enough to pass out and lay in the cold, would he hear Shane’s voice again?

He heard the car long before he saw its headlights cut through the trees. Yuna’s sensible sedan. He didn’t turn. He heard the car door, her footsteps on the path, the slight pause as she saw him. He waited for the exclamation, the demand to know what he was doing, the frantic grab for the pills.

Her footsteps receded. The cottage door opened and closed. He assumed she’d gone inside to wait, or to call David, or to simply give up on him. He took another drag of his cigarette, the ember bright in the twilight.

The door opened again a few minutes later. He didn’t look. Then a weight, heavy and warm, settled over his shoulders. A thick wool blanket, the one from the back of the living room couch. Before he could react, Yuna sat down beside him on the snowy dock, not asking for space, not offering a platitude. She pulled a corner of the blanket over her shoulders and lap, and moved closer to his side, and looked out at the vanishing lake.

Silence. It wasn’t the tense, waiting silence he was accustomed to. It was a shared, burdensome quiet. He finished his cigarette, crushed it into the snow between the planks, and lit another. She didn’t comment.

Eventually, she spoke, her voice as quiet as the falling snow. “Shane learned to skate out there.”

Ilya’s hand, bringing the cigarette to his lips, stilled. He didn’t look at her, but every part of him focused on her words.

“David would smooth out a patch for him,” she continued, her gaze softened. “From the time he could barely stand on the blades. He was... determined. He’d stay out until his cheeks looked like two little apples and his mittens were soaked through. He’d practice the same crossover, the same stop, over and over. If he fell, he’d scramble up before you could even think to help him. If David tried to steady him, Shane would get this look- furious, like his dignity had been assaulted. It was so cute.” A faint, wistful smile touched her voice. “I used to watch from the kitchen window. He insisted he could do it all himself.”

Ilya saw it. A tiny, fierce shadow on the ice, all concentration and stubborn will. The image was a gift, a precious, painful piece of Shane he hadn’t possessed. He almost smiled.

Yuna’s tone softened, grew melancholy. “When we realized he wasn’t just a kid having fun, when we saw he was genuinely gifted... we became frightened. We were terrified *for* him. We knew what he was. We knew the world he wanted to enter. An omega, in that sport... scouts, coaches, other players... it would change everything before anyone ever saw how good he was.” She tucked the blanket tighter around her legs. “So we protected him.”

The word landed in Ilya’s chest with the weight of an anvil. *Protected*. So everyone was allowed to protect his mate except for him?

“We thought we were doing the best we could with the hand he’d been dealt,” she said. “We let him skate. We let him dream. We found the doctors, we helped him hide. And every year he got better, every time he made a team, we were so proud, and so much more terrified. Because suddenly this impossible thing he wanted didn’t look impossible anymore. The stakes got higher.”

Ilya listened, the vodka forgotten in his hand. The snow fell between them.

After a long pause, he asked, his voice rough from disuse and smoke, “Why did you not let him spend more time around alphas?”

Yuna turned her head slightly toward him.

He elaborated, the question forming as he asked it. “He spent his childhood hiding. Suppressing, avoiding. Why not... expose him? To good ones. To teach him what it was. What instinct should be followed, what ones not to. What is normal.” The slight accusation was there, not a blame for Shane leaving, but a search for a root cause. If Shane had been educated, perhaps he would have understood Ilya’s actions as protection, not predation.

Yuna didn’t bristle. She looked back at the lake. “We tried to talk to him about it. About being an omega, about what it might mean. Shane didn’t want to talk. For him, being an omega was tangled up with everything he believed could destroy his future. He didn’t want lessons about alphas. He didn’t want to imagine a future where one became... relevant. He wanted to play hockey. Just turned his focus fully on hockey.” She sighed. “We stopped pushing. And he was always on teams, in locker rooms... we assumed he was getting plenty of exposure to alphas. His teammates were alphas. Coaches. Opposing players. He spent more time around them than almost anyone.”

She was quiet for a moment, the realization dawning in her voice as she spoke it aloud. “We didn’t understand that being near alphas was not the same thing as learning how to navigate intimacy with one.”

Ilya stared at the blank white void where the lake had been. “He understood hockey players.”

Yuna looked at him, her eyes glistening in the ambient light from the cottage windows. “Yes,” she said quietly. “I suppose that’s different.”

The silence stretched again, warmer now under the shared blanket. The vodka bottle was half-empty. The pill bottle sat like a silent third party.

Ilya’s next question was barely a whisper, ripped from a place of raw dread. “Was he afraid of me?”

Yuna didn't answer immediately. She took a slow breath, her own breath fogging in the air. She loved this man beside her, saw his shattered need, his desperate love for her son. But Shane was her son.

"Sometimes, I think," she finally said, the word gentle and unforgiving.

Ilya's cigarette stopped halfway to his mouth.

"I made mistakes, I think. But they looked worse because he didn't know what-" he stopped, needing to find the right words while not giving too much away. "He did not understand what it was supposed to be like," Ilya said eventually. "With an alpha. He thought every instinct was for the best. Every time I needed to know where he was, every time I wanted him protected, every time I..." He stopped. There were things he would never tell Yuna. "He thought it meant I did not trust him."

Yuna nodded, taking the information in. "I think he wanted what he saw in the movies. Or between David and I. It was all very equal. We actually had hoped that he'd just find a nice beta and be happy."

Yuna looked down at her hands, pale in the gloom. "David and I don't know everything that happened between you," Yuna said quietly. "Shane didn't tell us everything. Neither have you. But I saw him change, Ilya. I saw how tense things were before. And I saw you start answering for him. Deciding things for him. Even when he was standing right there telling you what he wanted. But I also saw him so happy and relaxed this past summer."

It was the first time anyone had said it to him so plainly, without the buffer of his own guilt or Shane's tears. Ilya's defensiveness rose, a hot, familiar tide. "I was protecting him."

"I know," Yuna said, and the simple agreement threw him. He'd expected a fight.

"Then why does everyone say this like I wanted to hurt him?" The frustration cracked his voice.

“Because you keep talking about what you *meant* to do, Ilya.” Her voice was firm, maternal, leaving no room for evasion. “Shane had to live with what you actually *did*.”

He looked away, jaw tight, the old anger flaring. It was unfair. He’d acted with the best intentions. “He should have told me,” he ground out. “He should have told me he was having problems with how things were. Given me a chance to fix it.”

“Yes,” Yuna agreed, and again, her agreement disarmed him. “He should have.”

He looked at her, surprised.

“He is my son, and I love him more than my own life,” she said. “And he might have handled this... badly. He broke your heart. He broke mine. And you broke his. He disappeared and let us all think the worst. That was cruel.” She met his gaze. “And you should have listened before he believed leaving was his only choice. All things can be true, Ilya.”

The complexity of it, the absence of a clean villain, was somehow more exhausting than simple blame. He dropped his cigarette into the snow and watched it die. His eyes drifted to the orange bottle.

Yuna didn’t grab for it. Instead, she reached over and pulled the blanket more securely around his shoulders, her hand lingering for a moment on the heavy wool, then she reached up and brushed the snow from his curls.

After a long while, Ilya’s voice, small and stripped bare, broke the quiet. “You think he is okay? That my baby is okay?”

Yuna answered without a heartbeat of hesitation. “Yes.”

“How do you know?”

She looked out at the lake, now just a memory under the snow. “Because my son has been falling down on this lake since he was four years old.” She turned her head, and in the dim light, he saw the absolute faith in her eyes, a faith born of a thousand witnessed stubborn risings. “He’s always gotten back up.”

The snow melted over the following weeks, turning the lake back into a sheet of cracked, grey ice, then into black, choppy water that mirrored the slow churn inside Ilya. The conversation with Yuna on the dock settled into him like a stone dropped into deep water, it was there, a weight, but its full implications hadn’t yet reached the surface. He remembered her words, *sometimes*, and the way they had felt like a physical blow. But the memory of Shane’s fear, when he allowed himself to touch it, immediately sparked the defensive justification: he had given Shane reason to be afraid of the world, never of him. His actions had been justified, he was sure, but maybe his approach could have been more gentle so someone like Shane, who needed to ask all his questions and have a plan for everything. The logic, in his head, remained sound, even as the image of Shane’s wide, hurt eyes in their Montreal kitchen began to haunt the edges of his sleep.

He threw himself back into hockey. It was the only thing he had left that made any sense or made him feel anything other than rage or despair. Practices were attended. Games were an outlet for his need of violence. On the surface, he was functioning better. He was scoring. The Centaurs were winning. He wasn't being a very good captain or leader, but the guys were giving him space. He answered Anatoly’s updates, Yuna’s daily check-ins, David’s texts. He ate the meals Yuna left in his fridge. He existed in a strange state of high-performance stasis.

But the ice became the only place where the pressure valve could be released, and he was twisting it open wider every game.

It began subtly. A hit along the boards that drove a player into the plexiglass with a force that echoed through the arena a second after the puck was gone. An unnecessary, lingering shove after a whistle. He’d finish his checks long after the play had moved on, his eyes flat and cold as he skated away from the stumbling opponent. The aggression was calculated, not frantic. It was a testing of limits. It made him want to feel something again.

His teammates noticed first. Bood, started giving him a wider berth in the locker room, his dark eyes watching Ilya with the wary caution of a man assessing a lit fuse. The coaches pulled him aside after a game where he'd taken two minor penalties for interference. "We need you on the ice, Rozanov, not kicked out of the game. Control it."

Ilya had nodded, his expression blank. He didn't channel it. He refined it. The hits got harder, cleaner in their illegality. He developed a reputation within games again; opposing players would glance over their shoulders when he was on a line change. He seemed almost disappointed when they avoided him, when they turtled instead of offering the fight his body was screaming for. The league sent a warning about a borderline hit on a rookie from New York. Ilya read the email and deleted it. He ignored Hunter's call that night.

The suspension, when it came, felt inevitable. It was during a road game in Tampa. The play was just a scramble in the corner, a battle for a loose puck Ilya had already decided was his. The Lightning forward, a veteran alpha known for his own grit, got the puck first. A normal player would have engaged, tried to lift the stick. Ilya saw the opening, the angle of the man's body, and took it. He drove his shoulder directly into his ribcage, lifting him off his feet and sending him head-first into the boards. The crack was sickening, audible even over the crowd's roar. The player didn't get up at first.

The arena roared. Ilya skated slowly to the bench, his breath fogging his visor, his heart pounding not with adrenaline but with a cold, dull satisfaction. *That* was a consequence. *That* was a reaction equal to the turmoil inside him. He sat down as the trainers rushed onto the ice. The referees convened. The call was a five-minute penalty for boarding and a game misconduct. The next day, the league office announced a three-game suspension for the hit, citing its dangerous and predatory nature.

The suspension shattered the fragile schedule of his days. Hockey had been the clock he set his life by. Now there was nothing but empty. The search, which had been a parallel for his moods, became his sole occupation. He haunted the cottage, his laptop glowing in the dark, maps and timelines and financial records blurring before his eyes. He communicated with Anatoly in terse, encrypted bursts, his agitation spiking with every dead-end lead. *The Evan Mercer identity is a ghost. No credit trail. No medical records. He is not using it.* Sleep became a distant memory, chased away by cigarettes and vodka that no longer warmed him, only made the edges of the room softer and the silence louder.

Yuna and David became his anchors. He grew to love them when he saw little pieces of Shane within them. Yuna called every morning. If he didn't answer, she called again. She didn't ask how he was. She asked, "Have you eaten?" or "It's supposed to snow again tonight, make sure you wear your coat." he'd been without someone to look after him like that for so long that at first he bristled under the attention but now he needed it. David texted him pictures of stubborn engine parts asking for his opinion. Their persistence was a mystery. He had driven their son away. He had failed. Yet they persisted, and he found himself answering, his voice rough, telling Yuna he'd eaten the soup, telling David the part looked corroded. He was becoming dependent on their quiet, unwavering presence, and the part of him that still feared vulnerability hated it.

It was during one of these calls, his voice slurred with exhaustion and a few shots of vodka, that he let it slip. Yuna had been talking about a friend who was seeing a therapist for anxiety. Ilya, staring at the frozen lake, muttered, "Galina used to say anxiety was just the body's alarm system. Useless if there is no actual fire."

There was a pause on the line. "Galina?" Yuna asked, her tone carefully neutral.

"My therapist." He regretted it immediately.

"You saw a therapist?"

"For a while. After Shane and I were having problems. I needed to be better for him." He didn't elaborate.

Another pause, longer this time. "Ilya," Yuna said, her voice softening into that maternal tone that could bypass his defenses. "Maybe you should talk to her now. This... this isn't sustainable. You can't live like this until he comes home."

The words sparked immediate, bristling resistance. "I do not want to talk to someone who will tell me I am angry or that I should 'accept' this. I will not accept it." The vodka made him blunt. "I am not living, Yuna. I am waiting."

He heard her sigh, a faint sound of weary understanding. “I know,” she said quietly. “That’s why I’m asking.”

He refused. He refused again the next day, and the day after that. But the suspension stretched before him, an empty desert of time, and the ghosts in the cottage were getting louder. The memory of Shane’s fear, Yuna’s worried glances, the hollow, screaming silence where the bond had once been, it was all beginning to form a feedback loop he couldn’t escape. On the fourth day, when Yuna called and simply said, “I made an appointment for you with a Dr. Vance in Ottawa for tomorrow at two. I will drive you,” he didn’t have the energy to fight her. He grunted, which she took as assent.

He stood her up. He didn’t answer the door when she came to drive him. An hour later, his phone buzzed with a text from David. If he wouldn’t see the new doctor, they would commute him to the old one for his session or the team would get involved. He needed to accept the help.

The following week after yet another fight where he had to leave the game early, when Yuna said, “Galina. You mentioned her. Would you talk to her? If she could see you remotely?” something in him, some fractured, exhausted part, simply gave up. He was so tired. And Galina already knew him and had helped him before. She had seen him in the aftermath of his mistakes with his mate and had given him mental tools, and had guided him through the first waves of a difficulties that they had faced. She knew his language, which helped when he needed to express himself properly without stopping to search for the words he needed. “Fine,” he said, the word tasting like ash.

The session was conducted over a secure video link. Galina’s face appeared on his screen, familiar and unchanged. Sharp, intelligent features, dark hair pulled back, eyes that missed nothing but held no obvious judgment. “Ilya,” she said, her voice calm, professional. “It has been months.”

“Not that long,” he replied, but he didn’t terminate the call.

She let the silence sit for a moment. “Mrs. Hollander is very worried. Tell me what has happened.”

And so, for the first time, he articulated it. The words came out in a cold, clinical torrent. Shane. The pregnancy. The threats, real and perceived. The kidnapping, what he'd found out about his parents, the grinding fear that had lived in his gut since the moment he'd understood how easily Shane could be taken from him. He explained his actions, from his point of view and did not try to defend himself. "He was pregnant, he *is* pregnant" Ilya stressed, his voice tightening. "He is my bonded omega. My responsibility. Every instinct said danger. When he resisted... he did not understand. He thought it was about control. But I only ever wanted to keep him safe."

Galina listened, her expression neutral, taking notes on a pad. She did not flinch at the mention of fire, of death. She had heard these stories before, in different shades. When he finished, she looked up.

"Shane had the right to leave, Ilya."

The words were a bucket of ice water. His entire body went rigid. A cold, defensive fury surged up, and his hand moved to disconnect the call. This was what he had feared. Condemnation when no one could feel what was inside of him.

Before he could, she continued, her tone unchanged. "And you have the right to be devastated that he did."

His hand stilled. He stared at the screen, thrown off balance. She had validated both positions in one breath, placing them side-by-side without reconciling them. It was disorienting.

"Explain," he commanded, his voice low.

"Your protective instincts are not inherently wrong. They originate from love, from trauma, from a biological imperative heightened by his pregnancy. They are understandable." She leaned forward slightly. "And Shane's fear, his need for autonomy, his ultimate decision to remove himself from a situation that felt threatening to him, that is also understandable. You both were operating from profound fear. His fear of imprisonment. Your fear of loss. These fears created a cycle where each of your actions triggered the other's."

It sounded rational. It made the chaos feel like a diagrammable system, a faulty circuit instead of a moral catastrophe. He found himself nodding, grudgingly.

“The bond,” Galina asked, her pen poised. “Describe the physical sensation now. Compared to before.”

He did. The silence. The hollow ache. The occasional, phantom pulse that felt like a memory of Shane’s heartbeat, which left him gasping and nauseous. He described the compulsive searching, the way his thoughts would snag on a detail and unravel into hours of obsessive tracking. He mentioned the drinking, the smoking, the inability to sleep unless he was practically unconscious.

She asked about his aggression. Was it constant, or did it spike? What triggered it?

“When I think of him alone. Or with someone else. When I imagine something happening. When another lead goes nowhere. When I feel... helpless.” The admission cost him.

Galina made a note. “And what brings the aggression down? Briefly.”

“Hitting someone,” he said, the truth stark and ugly. “Finding a new piece of information. Yuna... talking. Sometimes.”

She absorbed this. “Ilya,” she said, her voice dropping into a gentler register. “Let me ask you something. If Shane walked through your door right now, at this moment, what is the first thing you would do? Be honest with yourself.”

The answer was immediate, visceral, and left no room for thought. “I would lock the door. I would take him upstairs. I would call a doctor to check the baby. I would... I would make sure he could not ever leave again.” He heard the words, heard what they revealed, and a cold shame washed over him.

Galina didn't react with horror. She simply nodded, as if he'd described a predictable chemical reaction. "And what do you think Shane would do, in that scenario?"

The question was a spear through his chest. He knew. He knew with absolute, devastating certainty. Shane's face would pale. His eyes would widen with that same trapped, terrified look. He would retreat. He might plead. He might fight. The bond, if it were still intact, would flood with panic.

Ilya looked away from the camera, his throat working. "He would be afraid," he whispered.

"Yes," Galina said softly. "Recognizing that is why you are here. We do not have to solve this today. But we can begin to work on the space between your instinct and your action. So that if Shane is ready to be found, or to return, your first response is not one that will make him need to run again."

It was the first time anyone had framed it as a skill to be learned, a reaction to be managed, rather than a character flaw to be condemned. It offered a sliver of hope, not for absolution, but for competence. He could learn to do this better. He could learn to keep them safe without making them feel like prisoners.

"How?" he asked, the word stripped of defiance.

"We start with the smallest things. The obsessive thoughts. The aggression. We develop strategies. And we talk. Every week." She gave him a small, professional smile. "Yuna will make sure you attend, I suspect. And it might help you if we were face to face. I have an office space in Gatineau that is close to your new home. We can meet there next week."

A faint, grim smirk touched his lips. "She will."

"Good. I will see you next week, Ilya."

He ended the call and sat in the darkening cottage. The misery was still there, a vast, cold ocean. But for the first time, he felt like he had been thrown a line, however thin. Galina had not excused him. She had not crucified him. She had given him a problem he could potentially work on: himself. He was not redeemed. He was still possessive, still desperate, still convinced in his marrow that Shane belonged with him. But a tiny, treacherous thought had been planted: what if keeping them safe meant learning to let go of the very instincts that screamed he must hold on tightest?

He poured some more vodka, but only one. He looked at the pill bottle on the counter, then opened a cabinet and placed it inside, out of sight. He had an appointment next week. He had to be coherent for it. It was a pathetic reason to stay functional, but it was a reason.

Galina, in her office hundreds of miles away, remained seated after the screen went dark. She looked down at the pages of notes she had taken during the session, reading over them once before adding several lines beneath the last entry. Aggression. Obsessive thought patterns. Acute distress associated with separation. Heightened protective response surrounding Shane and the pregnancy. The damaged bond. None of it surprised her. If anything, Ilya had been remarkably predictable. She tapped the end of her pen against the paper, considering what he had said about Yuna before circling her name once and writing ‘mother figure?’. Then she closed the notebook and reached for her calendar. Next Tuesday, 2:00 p.m. She wrote his name into the empty space, shut the book, and went home.

The air in Galina’s Gatineau office was cool and still, smelling faintly of lemongrass and the a vague essential oil scent from the candles placed all over the office. It was a space designed for calm, a deliberate contrast to the chaos Ilya carried in with him like a storm front. He arrived five minutes early, thanks to Yuna, who said she’d wait for him so they can have lunch. She had the worried look in her eyes. He had tried, he wanted to say she was lucky that he even woke up that morning and made it to the appointment, but everything else about him spoke of disintegration. His hair was damp from a rushed shower, but there were shadows like bruises beneath his eyes, stark against his pallor. He wore a black Henley and dark jeans, but the clothes hung on him slightly, as if he’d lost weight the team’s nutritionists hadn’t accounted for. When he sat in the patient chair, it wasn’t with his usual contained readiness. He perched on the edge, his right leg bouncing in a rapid, nervous tremor he seemed unable to control.

Galina observed him from her own chair, her notebook open on her lap. “Ilya,” she greeted, her tone neutral. “How have you been this week?”

He didn’t answer immediately. His gaze flicked to the window, to the door, then to the phone he’d placed on the small table beside his chair. It lit up with a notification, a news alert, not Anatoly, and he snatched it up, his thumb swiping the screen before his expression tightened and he set it down again, harder than necessary.

“Ilya,” Galina repeated, gently firm. “The phone. Please put it away for our time.”

“Anatoly is searching,” Ilya said, the words clipped. “He could call. I need to be reachable.” The leg continued its frantic jiggle.

“He has your number. He will leave a message if it’s urgent. This hour is for you.” She waited, her gaze steady. “You are not reachable to him while you are present here.”

A muscle worked in his jaw. With a visible effort, he picked up the phone, powered it off, and shoved it into his jacket pocket, which he’d kept on. He didn’t relax. If anything, the absence of the device seemed to heighten his agitation, his eyes darting to the pocket as if he could will it to vibrate. “There is nothing,” he finally said, answering her initial question. “No sign. No trail. He is like a ghost. Every day he is a ghost.” He ran a hand through his hair, the gesture jerky. “He is pregnant, Galina. Every week that passes... what if something is wrong? What if he is not eating? What if he needs a doctor and will not go because he is afraid of being found? What if...” He stopped, his throat working. “What if he has decided I will never meet my child?”

Galina listened, her pen making a brief note. “Those are very real fears,” she acknowledged. “And they are tormenting you. But I want to return to something we touched on last time. Shane’s perspective.” She leaned forward slightly. “He did not disappear to punish you, Ilya. Whatever his reasons, he reached a point where leaving his career, his home, his life, and his bonded alpha felt like the safest available choice. Have you considered what it means that he has managed to remain hidden this long?”

Ilya’s head snapped up, defensiveness flashing in his hollowed eyes. “He is vulnerable. He is an omega, alone, without his alpha. Pregnant. That is not safety.”

“And yet,” Galina said, her voice calm and inexorable, “his luck, as you call it, has held for this long. He has managed to protect himself, to find shelter, to evade a search conducted by professionals with significant resources. Can you acknowledge, even for a moment, that wherever he is, Shane may currently feel safer than he felt with you?”

The words were a physical blow. Ilya flinched, his hands curling into fists on his knees. He hated her for saying it. He wanted to argue, to list every threat, every instance of violence that had necessitated his protection. But the memory of Shane’s face in their last weeks together, the careful distance, the silent tension, the way Shane would sometimes look at him with an expression closer to appraisal than affection, rose up and stole his breath. He couldn’t tell her she was wrong. He could only sit in the suffocating truth of it, his leg still bouncing, a trapped animal in a cage of his own making.

“I do not want to talk about that,” Ilya ground out, the words ragged. “I want my mate back. I need to know if he is eating. If he is sleeping somewhere safe. If a doctor has listened to our baby’s heart. I want to know if someone else is touching him. If he has told anyone about the pregnancy. If he lies awake at night and hates me.” His voice broke on the last sentence, the raw admission hanging in the quiet room.

Galina watched him spiral, saw the panic tightening his shoulders, the way his breathing shallowed. She let the silence stretch for a beat too long, then deliberately slowed her own speech. “Ilya. Look at me.” When his wild eyes met hers, she continued, her tone measured. “Last time, I asked you what you would do if Shane stood in front of you now. You said you would lock the door, call a doctor, ensure he could not leave. I want to ask you again. If Shane were standing here, right now, between us, what would happen?”

This time, he didn’t answer immediately. He looked away, his gaze fixing on an abstract painting on the far wall, his chest rising and falling too quickly. The tremor in his leg spread to his hands, which he clenched tightly to hide it.

“Ilya?” Galina prompted, softer.

“I am afraid,” he whispered, the confession dragged from a place of profound shame. “Of what I would do.”

Galina remained perfectly still. “Afraid you would hurt him?”

“No!” The denial was instant, violent, horrified. “Never. I would never... I mean I don't think I can hurt him.” He dragged a shaking hand over his face. “But I am so angry with him, Galina. I am angry that he left. I am angry that he took my child away. I am angry that he let me think he might be dead. I am angry that he planned this, that he lied to me for weeks while he planned it. I am angry that I am tearing myself apart looking for him while he is somewhere, alive, choosing not to come home.” The anger boiled over, hot and immediate, then collapsed into the fear beneath. “And I do not know which feeling would win first. The part that wants to hold him and never let go, or the part that wants to shake him and demand how he could do this. I imagine... locking every door. I imagine screaming. I imagine dropping to my knees and just... touching his stomach, to know the baby is real. I do not trust myself to know which I would be.”

He finally looked at her, his blue eyes wide with a terror that had nothing to do with external threats. He was afraid of the storm inside him.

Galina nodded slowly, taking this in with grave professionalism. “This is important, Ilya. Being frightened by your own potential reaction means you recognize that your current emotional state could be dangerous for Shane.”

He bristled at the word. “Dangerous? I am not a danger to him. I love him.”

“One can love someone desperately and still behave in ways that frighten them or cause harm,” she stated, her voice leaving no room for romantic fallacy. “Especially when the person is dysregulated. When they are experiencing severe sleep deprivation, consuming alcohol and substances to manage anxiety, grappling with obsessive thoughts, biological distress from separation, the rage. These are not moral failures. They are neurological and hormonal realities. And they can make a person unpredictable. Volatile. And we cannot ignore your history together. You have described encounters to me in which Shane's consent was compromised or absent. You have told me yourself that you attempted to impregnate him without his knowledge. Being bonded now does not erase those events, or the effect they may have had on how safe he feels with you. ”

She let that settle for a minute. “If Anatoly called you tomorrow and said, ‘We found him,’ I would not recommend you go to that location alone.”

Ilya stared at her, a fresh wave of defiance rising. “What am I supposed to do? Send someone else to collect my mate?”

Galina didn't blink. “No one should be collecting Shane, Ilya. If he is found, the priority should be confirming he is safe and well. Then, Shane gets to decide what happens next. He left. He retains that agency.”

Ilya wanted to bolt from the room. Every fiber of his alpha being revolted against the idea. His mate was missing, his child was growing away from him, and he was supposed to wait for permission? But the image of Shane's fearful face, the memory of his own shaking hands, the terrible admission that he didn't trust himself, it all acted as a tether, keeping him in the chair. He stayed. That, in itself, was a form of progress, a brutal, unwilling capitulation to a logic he despised but could no longer entirely refute.

Seeing him remain, Galina shifted focus. “Your mood has deteriorated significantly since our last conversation. Tell me about your sleep. The drinking. The aggression I heard about during games. From what I understand, you've become more violent than warranted.”

He told her. The two, three hours of fractured, nightmare-riddled sleep if he was lucky. The vodka that no longer warmed, only blurred. The hits that were less tactical now and more cathartic, seeking impact for impact's sake. The obsessive cycling of thoughts, Shane in a car accident, Shane ill, Shane deciding he didn't want the baby, Shane loving someone else. The way hope would flare with Anatoly's ringtone and then evaporate, leaving him emptier and more enraged each time.

Then, carefully, she introduced the possibility. “Therapy will give you tools, Ilya. But tools are difficult to use when your nervous system is in a constant state of alarm. There is a realistic concern here. We are not speaking hypothetically. Anatoly is actively searching. Shane could be located at any time. And you have just told me you do not trust your reaction.” She paused, letting the practical truth of it sink in. “I am recommending a temporary course of medication. It is not meant to change who you are. It is meant to help stabilize these extreme swings, to lower the intensity of the agitation, to give you back some space between the trigger and your reaction. So that if that call comes, you can think, and choose, rather than simply... react.”

Ilya resisted instantly. “No. I cannot be dulled. What if he needs me? What if something happens and I am too slow?”

“The goal is not to make you slow or numb, Ilya. The goal is to prevent you from being overwhelmed by impulses that frighten even you.” She leaned forward, her next argument designed to bypass his defenses and speak to his deepest drive. “You are preparing yourself for the possibility that Shane comes home. This is part of that preparation. To become someone who can handle that moment without destroying the chance of him staying.”

His resistance wavered. He saw the logic, even through the fog of his pride and fear. A grudging, exhausted acceptance settled over him. “Fine,” he muttered.

As the session drew to a close, the desperate, unanswerable question he’d been carrying finally broke free. He looked at Galina, all his brittle armor gone, leaving only the raw wound beneath. “Do you think he will ever come back?”

Galina closed her notebook and regarded him with a compassion that felt genuine, aligned with the Shane-protective stance she’d maintained throughout. She did not offer false hope. “I think,” she said carefully, “that if you want there to be any chance of Shane choosing to come back to you, then you need to become someone he isn’t afraid to come back to.”

That devastated him. They also gave him a direction, however impossible it seemed. He left the office with a new medication in his hand and the grim understanding that his first task in winning back his family was to dismantle the very instincts that screamed he must claim them.

After he left, Galina sat for a moment in the quiet room. She opened her notebook to today’s pages. Her notes were meticulous: *Severe deterioration in affect & impulse control. Sleep deprivation chronic. Alcohol use escalated. Primary fear: his own reaction upon locating S. Acknowledges S may feel safer away. Agreed to pharmacologic intervention to moderate acute dysregulation.* Her pen hovered, then she added a single line, underlined:

If S is located - acute risk of escalation.

She closed the notebook and leaned back, shutting her eyes and thinking.

The weeks that followed settled into a new kind of agony, one with a structure so rigid it felt like a different species of torture. Every Tuesday at two-thirty, Yuna would arrive at the cottage or, if he was in Ottawa for a game, at his stark, empty house. She would drive him to Gatineau in silence, the car filled only with the low hum of the engine and conversations usually was stilted and over in less than a few minutes. He attended his sessions with Galina not because he believed in redemption, but because Yuna had become his keeper she was strict, decreeing that he would go. The medication she had prescribed, small, white, innocuous pills he took each morning with a glass of water, did something. It was not a cure. It did not touch the hollow, screaming void where Shane had been. It did not lessen the compulsive checking of his phone, the mental tally of days (fifty-seven, fifty-eight, fifty-nine), or the frantic, private research he conducted in the dead of night.

What it did was sand down the sharpest edges. He slept, not well, but in stretches of three or four hours instead of ninety-minute fragments plagued by nightmares of empty roads and hospital corridors. The rage that had fueled his violent, penalized play on the ice became a quieter, colder burn, more like smoldering coals than an open flame. He could sit through a team meeting without feeling his skin crawl with the urge to bolt. He could eat a full meal if Yuna sat across from him and mirrored each bite. He could, functionally, exist. But the obsession remained, pristine and untouched by the chemical buffer. It was merely channeled, forced underground into more meticulous, less visibly destructive pathways.

He began to read, secretly, obsessively, about pregnancy. He downloaded an app meant for expectant parents, inputting a fictional due date based on his last certainty of Shane's cycle. Each week, a notification would buzz on his phone: *Your baby is the size of a blueberry*. Later: *Your baby is the size of a lemon*. He hated it. He hated the cheerful, generic animations, the bland, encouraging text about fetal development, the way it referred to "your partner." He would stare at the cartoonish image of a lima bean with limb buds, and a fury so profound would rise in him that his vision would blur. An algorithm, a piece of code written by strangers, knew more about his child's growth that week than he did. He knew, intellectually, that Shane would be showing by now. His stomach would be rounding, a firm curve beneath his hands if Ilya were there to feel it. He wondered if Shane talked to the baby. If he resented it. If he loved it. If he was afraid. The questions were a swarm, constant and stinging.

Therapy became a backdrop noise, a weekly debriefing of his own decay. Galina remained a figure of calm, infuriating reason. She never wavered from her position that Shane's departure, however painful, was an exercise of autonomy. She challenged Ilya when he slipped into language about claiming or retrieving. "You are searching for information, Ilya, not for a person to be collected," she would correct, her tone neutral. She asked him to articulate Shane's possible reasons, to imagine Shane's fear not as an irrational obstacle to his protection, but as a valid emotional reality. It was excruciating. He would leave her office feeling scraped raw, yet somehow unable to dismiss her logic. She seemed, objectively, to be on Shane's side. And a part of him, the part that loved Shane more than his own pride, knew that side needed defending, even from himself.

Yuna's presence became woven into the fabric of these Tuesdays. Sometimes she would wait in the small, tastefully boring reception area; other times she would run an errand and return just as the session ended. On a few occasions, the timing aligned such that she was there when Galina opened the office door to see Ilya out. Their interactions were fleeting, polite, and entirely ordinary.

"Hello, Mrs. Hollander."

"Hello, Dr. Kostova."

"He did well today."

A nod, a tight smile, and Ilya would be steering her toward the elevators.

Yet, in the car afterward, Yuna would sometimes fall into a pensive silence that had a different quality to it. Once, as they merged onto the highway back toward Ottawa, she said, almost to herself, "She's very... composed."

Ilya, staring out the window, grunted. "She is therapist. She tries to calm me down. Is working I think."

"Yes," Yuna agreed, but her hands were tight on the steering wheel. Another time, after Galina had smiled at her- a perfectly professional, closed-lipped smile, Yuna had smiled automatically in return. Only later, in the passenger seat, did she realize the muscles along her neck and shoulders had been locked in a subtle, defensive rigidity the entire time. She dismissed it. It was natural, she told herself. This woman held fragments of her son's and now her figuratively adopted sons' bonding, his pain, his fears, in her hands. Of course it felt invasive. Of course some primitive, maternal part of her brain saw another female influence

near her fractured family and bristled. It was irrational. Galina had been nothing but appropriate and had truly helped Ilya over the past few weeks. Yuna felt vaguely embarrassed by her own unease and chalked it up to the general, soul-deep stress of the situation. It was her lizard brain, useless and paranoid.

The break, when it came, arrived via Anatoly's encrypted line on a Thursday evening. Ilya was in Ottawa, having just returned from a road trip where he'd played good enough. He answered on the first ring, his heart already a trapped bird in his ribs.

"We have narrowed the location down," Anatoly said, bypassing any greeting. His voice was flat, drained of the excitement such news might once have carried. "The car. We finally pieced together enough traffic-camera captures and toll data from the first forty-eight hours. The pattern indicates a southerly route from border crossing, skirting major urban centers, then a definite push into the tristate area. New York, New Jersey, possibly Pennsylvania. The last reliable plate-reader hit was on the New York State Thruway, heading toward the Catskills region."

Ilya was on his feet, the room tilting around him. "Where? Exactly."

"That is the problem, the trail becomes thin after that. The car does not appear again on any major highway we have access to. It either left the road systems we can monitor, was sold or scrapped, or is being used so locally and infrequently it avoids automated detection. The absence is... notable."

Ilya's mind, sharpened by obsession and the strange, clarifying focus of his medication, began working immediately. "If he were in Manhattan, Jersey City, Stamford... the cameras would have seen it. Parking garages, tolls, traffic intersections. He is not in a city. Or he got rid of the car immediately. But if he kept it... he would need it somewhere with less coverage. Somewhere he could walk. Somewhere a car isn't necessary every day. A small town. A rural area." He was pacing now, the phone pressed to his ear, his free hand gesturing at the empty air as if drawing connections.

"Those are possibilities," Anatoly cautioned, the weariness clear in his tone. "But we cannot assume he chose the location himself, or that he retained the vehicle. He may have transferred to another form of transport we cannot trace. He may have..."

“He is there,” Ilya interrupted, the conviction absolute. “Somewhere in that circle. He is there.”

From that moment, the abstraction of the search collapsed into a terrifying, tantalizing specificity. The entire continent was no longer the hunting ground. It was New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania. Ilya pulled up maps on his laptop, the screen glowing blue in the dark room. He zoomed in on the vast, messy sprawl of the area, the countless towns, the winding backroads, the dense forests of the Catskills and the upper New York, the quiet stretches of Jersey Pine Barrens, even to the coastal Connecticut villages. He began marking hospitals with maternity wards, clinics rumored to provide discreet omega care, pharmacies that carried specific prenatal vitamins. He researched rental markets in small towns, looking for patterns of cash-only leases. The map was no longer just a map. It was a puzzle, and Shane was the missing piece. For the first time, Ilya could look at it and believe there was an answer hidden somewhere among those roads. Not *if* they would find him anymore. *When*.

It made him both better and worse. The frantic, directionless energy coalesced into a laser focus. He stopped drinking almost entirely; he needed his mind clear. He slept less, but with a purpose, waking to scribble down connections that had occurred to him in the twilight between sleep and waking. He was, in many ways, more functional than he had been in weeks-in months. But the quiet intensity of his obsession had deepened, becoming a fundamental part of his metabolism. He existed only to look for Shane. When the Centuars were eliminated from cup contention he was almost relieved. The fans, team and ownership were thrilled- they had made it to the finals for the very first time and from their bottom position of the previous years- it was a big nod to Ilya that while playing so inconsistently, he'd manage to carry the team that far.

Yuna found him like that one evening, having let herself into the Ottawa house with the key he'd given her months ago, a gesture he now neither remembered nor regretted. She stood in the doorway of his study, a bag of groceries in her arms, and froze. He was seated at his desk, but he wasn't slumped in despair. He was leaning forward, his posture taut with concentration, his eyes scanning the illuminated map on his screen with a ferocious intelligence she hadn't seen since before Shane left. There was something alive in him again, something frighteningly alert.

“Ilya?” she said softly.

He didn't startle. He turned his head slowly, as if pulling himself from a great depth. “They narrowed it,” he said, his voice rough but clear.

She set the groceries down on a nearby table, her movements careful. “Where?”

“The tristate area.” He gestured at the screen, at the sprawling, multi-colored mess of highways and county lines.

Yuna went utterly still. For a fleeting second, a cascade of emotions played across her face, a wild, involuntary hope, immediately chased by a sharp, maternal fear, then a profound, weary relief that there was, at least, a *there* instead of a terrifying everywhere. She moved closer, peering at the map over his shoulder. “Is he... is he safe?”

“I do not know,” Ilya said, the words bitten off. “But he is here somewhere.” He zoomed out slightly, highlighting the massive area Anatoly had identified. “Millions of people. Hundreds of towns. Is a lead at least.”

Yuna looked from the glowing screen to his profile, etched with exhaustion and a desperate, rekindled fire. She placed a hand on his shoulder, feeling the tense muscle beneath his shirt. Her voice was quiet, meant only for him. “Ok, good. He’s about 5 months along, we’ve missed it all.”

He inhaled sharply, as if the truth of that simple statement had only just reached him. He leaned back in his chair, her hand falling away, and stared at the map. The circle was impossibly large, a maddening haystack. But for the first time in sixty-three days, he knew the haystack had boundaries, they had news, they could have hope again. Shane was not floating in the ether. He was on the ground, somewhere within that glowing radius on his screen.

That night, Ilya went to bed not with the vodka bottle, but with that single, dangerous piece of hope burning a hole in his chest. The world had gotten smaller. And in the terrible algebra of his love, a smaller world meant a target finally coming into range. He fell asleep seeing the map behind his eyelids, its roads and rivers and town names weaving through his dreams, a labyrinth he was now convinced he could solve.

The first distinct kick had been a fluke, a bizarre, internal flutter Shane had dismissed as gas or a muscle spasm. Now, at just over twenty weeks, the movements were unmistakable. They were no longer flutters but deliberate, rolling shifts and sharp, unmistakable jabs. Shane had started charting them in a notebook he kept hidden in his nightstand, not because Dr. Alvarez had asked him to, but because his brain craved data, patterns, something to analyze besides the constant, low-grade panic. He noted times: after breakfast (orange juice, apparently exciting), mid-afternoon when he sat down with a book (boredom protest?), and most consistently, the moment he lay down in the dark silence of his bed (acrobatic hour).

But there was another pattern, one he refused to formally document, that was becoming impossible to ignore.

It happened the first time while he was washing dishes at Ruth's sink, staring out at the late afternoon light gilding the barn roof. A stupid, unbidden memory surfaced: Ilya, in the kitchen of the cottage, attempting to make syrniki and somehow managing to coat every surface, including the ceiling, in a fine dusting of powdered sugar. Shane had laughed so hard he'd cried. Ilya had looked so genuinely offended, then so pleased with himself for causing the laughter, his blue eyes crinkling at the corners.

Thump. A solid, unmistakable kick, right under his left rib.

Shane froze, his hands still in the warm, soapy water. He waited, breath held. Another, softer roll, a repositioning.

"Coincidence," he said aloud, his voice flat in the quiet kitchen. He rinsed the plate with excessive force.

He finished the dishes, wiped down the counters, and went downstairs to his apartment. He needed to reorganize the baby clothes Ruth had procured from a church rummage sale. As he sorted tiny sleepers by size, his mind, treacherous and weary, wandered to a different kitchen. The Ottawa house. Ilya, leaning against the granite island, watching him with that focused, quiet intensity that used to make Shane feel seen and, later, scrutinized. *What would he think of this?* The thought was idle, purely logistical. Would Ilya approve of secondhand clothes? He'd probably hire some absurdly expensive designer to customize an overly priced wardrobe. Shane's lips quirked in a faint, unwilling smile. But this was more meaningful. The

townspeople had started coming to them with clothing and baby bundles, no money exchanging- frowns when Shane tried to pay for anything. Ilya wouldv'e had a problem with that.

Thump-thump-thump.

A rapid series of kicks, a little foot or elbow drumming against the wall of his uterus like it was trying to get his attention.

Shane put down the tiny striped sock he was holding. He pressed his palm firmly over the active spot, just below his navel. "Oh, absolutely not," he muttered, his voice low. "We are not doing this. You are not a homing beacon."

The baby kicked again, directly into the center of his palm.

A surge of love for his little bean burst forward and he laughed. Figured that the little human he was growing would be reacting to his other father.

The guilt was immediate and sour. Of course the baby didn't know Ilya. Shane had made certain of that. He'd severed the tether and run away. He took a long, slow breath, the one Dr. Alvarez had recommended for anxiety. *In for four, hold for seven, out for eight.* He visualized boxing up the thought, the memory, the stupid, persistent biological echo, and shelving it in a high, dark corner of his mind. The kicking gradually subsided into the occasional, sleepy shift. Shane finished sorting the clothes, his movements methodical, his mind carefully blank.

The pregnancy was becoming physically difficult. His body, once a reliable, highly-tuned instrument he commanded without conscious thought, was now foreign territory. It was no longer just the stomach, no longer something he could disguise as bloating but an unmistakably pregnant curve. It was the skin. It felt too tight, stretched thin and shiny over his abdomen, itchy and sensitive. His nipples were constantly tender. He was always too warm, a furnace burning from the inside, yet the skin on his arms and legs felt parched, flaking in the dry winter air. His face oscillated between oily and tight. He was hyper-aware of every texture, every seam, every scent. He still took the weekly pictures of his bare baby bump and saved them, but as the weeks went on, he started to frown more and more. *This wasn't how it was supposed to be. He had wanted to be sharing this with Jackie and the others. Ilya was supposed to be smothering their baby with love and talking to him or her*

before they went to bed. Whenever he had his mind drift to that train of thought, he called Sam to hopefully distract him.

He had always relied on ritual, on the familiar sensory landscape of his own grooming. The precise citrus-herbal smell of his cleanser. The cool, gel-like serum that soaked in without a trace. The rich, unscented moisturizer that left his skin feeling protected, not greasy. The lip balm that healed overnight. He had left it all behind, a casualty of his pared-down, cash-conscious exile. In their place were drugstore substitutes: functional, bland, and utterly, maddeningly wrong.

The breaking point was a bottle of lotion. It was fine. It was perfectly adequate. It was recommended for sensitive skin. But it felt tacky for a full ten minutes after application, and it had a faint, powdery floral scent that lingered in his nostrils and made him want to claw his skin off.

He was in the bathroom, staring at the offending bottle, when Ruth knocked and entered with a basket of clean laundry. She took one look at his face, a mask of strained misery, and set the basket down. “Evan? What’s wrong honey?”

“It’s this,” Shane burst out, gesturing violently at the lotion. “It’s... it’s sticky. And it smells like a grandmother’s sachet. I hate it.” The vehemence in his own voice embarrassed him. It was lotion. He was a grown man, a former professional athlete, hiding from his powerful alpha mate, and he was about to cry over drugstore moisturizer.

Ruth didn’t laugh. She leaned against the doorframe, folding her arms. “So don’t use it.”

“I have to. My skin is... it’s like parchment. It itches.” He ran his hands over his arms in demonstration, a frantic, grating motion.

“Then get a different one.”

“I don’t know which one! They’re all wrong!” He heard the childish frustration and couldn’t stop it. “I miss my lotion. My actual lotion. And my face cream. And my cleanser. And the

oil. And the serum.” The list spilled out, a pathetic catalog of luxury he had voluntarily abandoned.

Ruth’s eyebrows lifted slightly. “So buy them.”

“They’re expensive,” he said automatically, the mantra of his new life.

“Can you afford them?”

He paused. The cash was carefully rationed and he barely touched it, but yes, a few hundred dollars would not bankrupt him. Not yet. “Technically.”

“Then order them.”

“It’s a waste. I need to save-”

“Evan,” Ruth interrupted, her voice softening into that no-nonsense tone that brooked no argument. “You are growing a whole other person in there. You are miserable in your own skin. You just had a fit over some moisturizers. I think buying the ones that make you feel like yourself is not a waste. It’ll be good for you and the baby.”

He wanted to argue, to cling to the austerity like he had planned, but the need was too visceral. The idea of his own products, of his skin feeling like *his* again, was a siren song. He capitulated with a grunt.

The process of ordering them, however, became its own comedy of errors. Ruth brought her ancient laptop downstairs. The website for the boutique brand was a masterpiece of minimalist luxury and maximalist bandwidth: huge, scrolling images, subtle animations, embedded videos of dewy-faced models. On the Fischers’ older internet connection, it was a digital test of patience.

They huddled together on his plaid couch, watching a spinning wheel of death where a “Add to Cart” button should have been. “This is ridiculous,” Shane muttered, clicking the trackpad with increasing aggression. “Who needs a video of someone applying serum? Just show me the bottle and take my money.”

“Perhaps rural Pennsylvania wasn’t their target demographic,” Ruth said dryly, sipping her tea.

After twenty minutes of loading, freezing, and refreshing, they managed to get seven items into the cart. The checkout page required creating an account. The password confirmation field glitched. Ruth leaned forward, squinting at the screen. “It says your password must contain a symbol, numbers and case sensitive.”

“That can’t be right,” Shane said, but he was too tired to be sure. Finally, after what felt like an epoch, a confirmation page loaded. Order Confirmed. Delivery in 3-5 business days.

A wave of profound, silly relief washed over him. Nothing was solved. He was still here, still pregnant, still hiding. But his things were coming. The tight, itchy feeling across his shoulders seemed to ease just knowing that.

The Fischers, emboldened by small victories, began their next campaign. The Willow Creek End of Winter Festival was the following weekend. It was the town’s quaint attempt to combat February gloom: hayrides converted to sleigh rides (weather permitting), a chili cook-off, local crafts, hot cider, and the crowning of the “Ice King and Queen,” a title bestowed upon the willing, or unwilling- owners of the two most successful businesses that year. Sam mentioned it. Ruth mentioned it. Walter, in his way, grunted that the fire department’s chili was usually very good.

Shane resisted. “Too many people,” he said to Ruth. “I’m not a fan of crowds.”

“Honey, you know everyone here, its not like tourist central,” Ruth countered. “You’ll blend right in. You’re just shy without needing to be. Everyone knows you now and the handful of people who don’t are still family leftover from visiting for the holidays.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Shane said, but the protest was weak. A part of him, a lonely, touch-starved part buried under layers of caution, wanted to go. To be normal for an afternoon. To eat chili and watch children tumble in the snow and feel, however briefly, like he belonged to the fabric of a place instead of hiding beneath its threads.

Worn down by their persistence and his own secret longing, he finally agreed. “For a little while,” he stipulated.

Ruth’s face lit with triumph. Sam, when he heard, smiled a slow, warm smile that made Shane look away. “I’ll save you a spot by the fire pit,” Sam said.

That night, back in the quiet of his apartment, Shane settled into his newest, most secret routine. He opened his laptop, connected to the painfully slow Wi-Fi, and navigated not to news sites or hockey forums he now avoided, but to a language learning application.

He was studying Russian.

He had a justification prepared, polished and ready for his mental inspection, though no one had ever asked. The baby was half Russian. That was a fact, a genetic and cultural inheritance. Whatever happened, and in his darkest moments, when he allowed himself to imagine the impossible possibility of Ilya finding them, if there was ever a reckoning, Shane refused to let his child grow up disconnected from half of their heritage simply because its Russian father wasn't there to provide it. It was practical. He started with children’s words. Mama. Papa. Spat. Kushat’. Numbers. Colors. Basic phrases. He told himself he was gathering resources, that eventually he’d seek out Russian children’s books, find language programs.

But his studies kept straying.

He would hear a word in his memory, the cadence of Ilya’s voice wrapping around it, and he’d have to look it up. Not for the baby. For himself.

Zayka. Lapochka. *Solnyshko*. Sun or sunshie. Whispered in the dark, a benediction.

Lyubimyy. Beloved. The simple translations on the screen were like small, precise blows. Sometimes the meaning was softer than he'd imagined; sometimes it was more intimate, more devastating. Tonight, he looked up one Ilya had used constantly, a casual endearment thrown over his shoulder, murmured into his hair, when he thought Shane was asleep. *Moy*. Mine.

Shane stared at the single, stark word on the screen. His. Not "my friend" or "my love." Just mine. A statement of fact, of possession, so fundamental to Ilya's worldview it needed no embellishment.

He went very still.

A slow, rolling movement started in his belly, not a kick but a full, somersaulting turn, as if the baby was rearranging itself to face the source of the sudden, quiet tension in the room.

Shane closed the browser tab, the screen going dark. He sat in the silence, the only light from the desk lamp pooling around his hands. After a long minute, he reopened the laptop, navigated back to the language site, and found a pronunciation guide. He clicked the audio for the word.

Moy.

He repeated it under his breath, shaping his mouth around the soft *m*, the open *oy*. Trying to mimic the exact, proprietary way Ilya had said it, where it sounded less like ownership and more like a cornerstone of reality.

The baby kicked, a firm, definitive thud against his bladder.

Shane let out a shaky breath, a laugh that wasn't a laugh. He placed his palm over the spot, feeling the residual tremor beneath his skin. He didn't know who he was addressing- the child, his own stubborn heart, the ghost in the room summoned by a single, forbidden word.

“Yeah,” he whispered, rubbing his belly, his voice barely audible. “I know.”

The words hung in the quiet apartment, a confession to the empty air and the life turning somersaults beneath his skin. Shane closed the laptop, the glow fading from his face, leaving him in the dim light of the desk lamp. He sat there for a long time, one hand resting on the curve of his stomach, feeling the occasional, sleepy shift within. The word *moy* echoed in the silent spaces of his mind, not in Ilya’s voice, but in his own careful, practiced pronunciation.

A few days later, salvation arrived in a thick, fancy cardboard box. Shane carried it downstairs carefully. Inside, nestled in an absurd amount of crinkled, grey paper, were his things. The sleek glass bottles, the minimalist jars, the familiar fonts. He lined them up on the bathroom counter with precise order. The cleanser, the toner, the serum, the day cream, the night cream, the body oil, the lip balm. It was ridiculous. It was decadent. It was *his*.

That evening, his shower felt like a decadent, familiar experience. The water sluiced away the drugstore residue, and when he applied his own products, the precise two pumps of serum, the half-dropper of oil warmed between his palms, his skin drank them in and sighed. It didn’t itch. It didn’t feel tight or greasy or wrong. It felt like *his*. He stood there in a cloud of his own, familiar, citrus-and-herb scent, and for the first time in months, the constant, low-grade irritation that had lived just beneath his surface dissipated.

Ruth, coming downstairs to return a book, paused in the bathroom doorway. Her eyes swept over the battalion of expensive bottles now occupying her simple white counter. “Good heavens,” she said, her lips twitching. “Did they include a security guard with all that?”

Shane, caught, felt a flush creep up his neck. “It’s... would you like some? I’m so sorry, I should have offered before.”

“Mmhmm.” She picked up the tiny bottle of serum, squinting at the label. “How much did this one cost? No, don’t tell me. I don’t want to know.” But she was smiling as she said it, a real smile that reached her eyes. She saw the difference in him. The set of his shoulders was looser. The pinched look around his mouth had softened. “You look like you finally got a good night’s sleep.”

He hadn’t, not really. But he felt more like himself than he had in months. The apartment, too, began to shift. The baby clothes were neatly folded in the dresser Walter had helped him

carry down. The prenatal vitamins sat beside his sink. His Russian vocabulary cards, filled with careful Cyrillic script and phonetic pronunciations, were tucked discreetly in a drawer. He had routines: tea with Ruth in the mornings, a walk when the weather permitted, now his nightly skincare ritual, his secret language lessons. Without ever making a conscious decision, Shane had stopped treating the basement apartment like a waystation. He was building a home.

By the day of the Willow Creek End of Winter Festival, the idea of going out into a crowd still made his pulse skitter. He stood in front of his dresser, frustrated. His old sweaters were too tight across the shoulders and belly. The looser ones he'd recently purchased swallowed him whole or clung in weird places. He pulled on a thick, cable-knit cardigan Ruth had loaned him, left open over a thermal shirt. In the mirror, his pregnancy was undeniable. A firm, round curve pushed against the soft wool. For a fleeting second, his old panic surfaced—*conceal, deflect, hide*. Then it faded, replaced by a weary acceptance. There was no hiding it here. In Willow Creek, he was just Evan, the pregnant omega. No one thought anything of his presence anymore. He was part of them.

Ruth, Walter, Sam, and two of the younger Fischer grandchildren practically formed an escort committee to prevent his retreat. Their pressure was a warm, insistent tide, pulling him out the door and into the crisp afternoon.

The festival was charming in its earnest, small-town way. Snow was piled in dirty banks along Main Street, but the cleared road was lined with booths. The smell of woodsmoke from fire pits mixed with chili, hot cider, and frying dough. A local band covered classic rock songs on a small stage. Children, bundled into colorful coats, raced between legs. Shane saw the Ice King and Queen, the owners of the hardware store and the bakery, wearing tinfoil crowns and looking profoundly embarrassed but laughing as they waved from a hay bale throne.

For a few hours, Shane let himself be carried along. He greeted people who called, "Hey, Evan!" He accepted another tiny, hand-knitted hat from a beaming older woman. He listened as Walter, with uncharacteristic vehemence, argued the merits of the fire department's "five-alarm" chili over the Rotary Club's "too damn sweet" version. Ruth knew everyone, her laughter a constant thread through the noise.

He dragged him for the first hour and introduced him to new people. He met old Margie's daughter who was passing through town for the week just for the festival. He met Pavel, Mrs. Olga's son who lived in New York. He was pulled into judging a cookie contest at some point

with Sam and Lola, Ruth's youngest daughter. He refused to think about the sugar and calories- that was something to think about after Bean's born.

And he *enjoyed* himself. He realized it with a start as he bit into a cinnamon-sugar doughnut, the sugar cracking delightfully. He wasn't thinking about being hunted, or money, or hockey, or Ilya. He was just here, in the cold sunshine, surrounded by uncomplicated kindness.

Sam was a steady, warm presence. He didn't hover, but he was often nearby. He saved a spot on a bench near a fire pit as promised, bringing Shane a cup of hot cider without asking. When Shane winced suddenly, a hand flying to his side, Sam's concern was immediate. "You okay?"

"Just the baby," Shane said, breathing through the sharp kick. "Decided my spleen was in the way."

Sam's expression softened. "Can I...?" He gestured vaguely toward Shane's stomach, his question trailing off.

Shane hesitated. The offer was innocent, friendly. But the thought of another person's hand on him there, feeling the life he and Ilya had made, sent a bolt of irrational possessiveness through him. It wasn't about Sam. It was about the fact that Ilya, the baby's other father, had never felt this. Ilya would have lost his fucking mind. Shane could picture it with painful clarity: Ilya on his knees, his big, careful hands splayed over the curve, talking nonsense in Russian, claiming credit for every movement.

"I'm... not really ready for that," Shane said, the refusal gentle but final.

Sam nodded easily, without a trace of offense. "Of course." He took a sip of his own drink, letting the moment pass.

Later, as the Fischer clan gathered for a group photo to commemorate Walter's chili victory ("See? I told you! Not too sweet!"), Shane hung back near the fire pit, laughing at something one of the grandchildren said to him. He was twenty feet away, profile turned toward the cheerful chaos, his coat open, the line of his pregnancy clearly visible against his dark

sweater. He was happy, his face relaxed in a way it hadn't been since long before he left Ottawa. A town council member tasked with documenting the event lifted a camera and snapped several pictures of the group, the wide-angle lens capturing the edges of the scene, the fire pit, the smiling bystander group, all gathering around the food stalls.

Shane saw the camera from the corner of his eye a moment later and instinctively turned his face away, shifting his body slightly. The old awareness, the athlete's wariness of lenses, flickered and then subsided. It was just a town photo. He wasn't the subject. He melted back into the crowd, the moment forgotten.

As the afternoon faded into a pale violet twilight, the excitement and the walking took their toll. Shane's lower back ached. His feet were swollen in his boots. The baby, hyped up on sugar and Shane's unusual activity, was practicing what felt like gymnastics.

Sam walked him back toward the house, the sounds of the festival fading behind them. "Glad you came?" Sam asked, his breath fogging in the cold air.

Shane nodded, the admission surprising him with its truth. "Yeah. I am."

They reached the porch steps. Sam turned to him, his hazel eyes warm in the gloom. "You looked... peaceful today. It was good to see."

There was a softness there, an opening. Shane felt it. He also felt nothing in response, no flutter in his stomach, no pull in his chest, no biological whisper. Just a fond gratitude for a friend who asked for nothing. "Sam," he began, his voice quiet.

Sam shook his head, a small, understanding smile on his face. "Don't. It's okay. I'm glad you had a good day." He didn't wait for an awkward goodbye, just gave a little wave and headed back toward the lingering festival lights.

Back in the apartment, Shane peeled off his layers. He was exhausted, sore, and utterly content. He went through his precious skincare routine, the familiar motions like meditation. In bed, propped on pillows, he opened his language app on his phone almost automatically.

Tonight's themed list was 'Family'

Mama.

Papa.

Rebyonok.

Dom.

His thumb hovered over the entry for dad. He listened to the audio clip, the deep, recorded voice saying it with a neutral, textbook precision. Nothing like the way Ilya would say papa to a child of his own. He told himself he was learning it for Bean. So he could teach them one day. So they would know the words. He practiced it anyway, whispering into the quiet, dark room. "Papa"

In Ilya's Ottawa study the mood was tense. Outside, a brittle winter darkness had settled, punctuated by the occasional colored light from neighboring houses. Inside, the glow from multiple screens painted the room in a cold, blueish wash. Maps were layered over maps on the largest monitor, the tristate area, a cursed circle that had once felt like a breakthrough and now felt like a taunt. Hospital directories, lists of prenatal clinics, spreadsheets of small-town rental properties scrolled by on another. The initial, electric hope that had surged when Anatoly narrowed the search radius had long since curdled into a grinding, obsessive stagnation.

Anatoly sat across from the desk, his own laptop open, his expression one of weary professionalism. He had been explaining, for what felt like the tenth time, why the investigation had slowed to a crawl. "It is the holiday, Ilya. Half my network is effectively offline. They have families. Children. They have worked without rest for months. They deserve a few days."

Ilya didn't look up from the map he was dissecting, township by pointless township. "My family is missing," he said, the words flat and chilled. The medication Galina had prescribed ensured the statement lacked its former volcanic heat. The rage was still there, a vast, frozen lake beneath the ice of his control, but it did not crack the surface. Months ago, this conversation would have involved thrown objects, shattered glass, threats. Now, the anger simply settled over him, a weight that made the room feel denser, colder.

"I understand," Anatoly replied, his voice devoid of apology but also of fear. He was one of the few people who could say no to Ilya Rozanov and have it stand. "Understanding does not change the reality. We cannot force people to work. The leads we are chasing are more administrative. Those offices are closed. We should just wait."

The silence that followed was punctuated only by the faint hum of the computers and the distant chime of the doorbell. Ilya pushed back from the desk with a controlled, deliberate motion and went to answer it. He returned carrying a compact, impeccably packaged shipping box. Anatoly watched, a flicker of mild curiosity in his eyes, as Ilya took a letter opener and carefully sliced through the tape. The care he used- precise, almost reverent, was a stark contrast to the impatient, agitated energy that had radiated from him all afternoon.

Inside, nestled in folds of grey crinkle paper, were bottles and jars. Sleek, minimalist packaging. A cleanser, a serum, a moisturizer, an oil.

"What is this?" Anatoly asked, leaning forward slightly.

Ilya lifted one of the bottles, his thumb brushing over the label. "Shane's things. His skincare. He had it on auto-order." He began placing the items neatly on the desk, lining them up as if preparing for inspection. "I did not cancel his account. He will want it when he comes back."

The statement was delivered with such matter-of-fact certainty that it stole the air from the room. It wasn't hope, not exactly. It was a logistical certainty in Ilya's internal narrative: Shane would return, and he would be irritated if his fancy serum had run out. There were likely other, unopened boxes upstairs, a stockpile of a future Ilya was grimly determined to provision for. Money had never been an object where Shane's comfort was concerned.

Anatoly's gaze drifted over the lineup. He recognized the brand. A faint, almost imperceptible line appeared between his brows. He reached out and picked up the small

bottle of facial oil, turning it in the light. “My wife,” he said, his voice quieter. “She once wanted this. The same oil. She saw it in a magazine. I told her I would get it for her birthday.” A ghost of a smile, tired and fond, touched his lips. “She refused. Said it was too expensive. And too difficult to get shipped to Moscow without exorbitant fees.” He set the bottle back down gently. “She bought a drugstore substitute instead.”

Ilya made a noncommittal sound, already gathering the products into his arms. He stopped by the door, “Get it for your wife, Anatoly. You never know when the last time you’ll see your loved ones.” He carried them out of the study and up the stairs, presumably to whatever shrine-like space held the rest of Shane’s awaiting life.

The moment Ilya disappeared, Anatoly’s posture changed. He stared at the empty space on the desk where the bottles had been. His mind, trained to see patterns in chaos, to connect disparate data points into a coherent thread, began to move. *Luxury. Difficult to obtain. Limited distribution. Direct online ordering.* Shane Hollander had fled with cash and caution, yes. But people under profound, prolonged stress eventually reach for familiar comforts. Rituals that make them feel like themselves. And if Shane wanted this particular brand, this exact, finicky, overpriced routine badly enough to have it on auto-order in his previous life...

Anatoly moved. His hands flew over his own laptop, accessing a portal he used for financial and digital forensics. He bypassed standard search protocols. He needed the brand’s order database, and within minutes, he had it, a stream of recent transactions. Thousands of purchases across the globe. He began filtering.

Parameters: Date range starting approximately two months ago, after Shane’s disappearance. Product codes. He mentally recreated the combination he’d just seen on the desk- the specific cleanser, the exact serum, the particular oil and cream. It was an oddly specific constellation of products, a full routine totaling well over five hundred dollars. How many people, in a given timeframe, would purchase this exact, expensive assortment?

He input the final filter and executed the search.

The results populated. Three orders.

Paris, France. He dismissed it instantly.

Montecito, California. Possible, but it jarred violently against the vehicle trail leading toward the Northeast.

Willow Creek, Pennsylvania.

Anatoly's breathing stopped.

Willow Creek. Inside the search radius. Deep in Pennsylvania, not far from the New York border. It was the epitome of what they'd theorized: a small, rural town, likely with limited CCTV, few automated plate readers, the kind of place where a person could arrive and barely use their car again. Where someone could walk to a post office, to a clinic, to a market. Where they could disappear into the background noise of ordinary life.

He isolated the Willow Creek order. The shipping address resolved not to a P.O. box, but to a rural route number. He cross-referenced it quickly with property records. The name associated was Fischer. Walter and Ruth Fischer.

He pulled up a satellite map, zooming in until the cluster of buildings that was Willow Creek filled his screen. Tiny. Insignificant. A speck.

And someone there had just spent more than five hundred dollars on the precise, idiosyncratic luxury skincare routine of Shane Hollander.

Anatoly sat back, his heart hammering against his ribs. The professional triumph was immediate, a fierce, bright spike of victory. *Found you.*

Then the feeling evaporated, replaced by something colder, heavier. He looked toward the staircase. He thought of Ilya upstairs, carefully storing Shane's lotions. He thought of Ilya's controlled, ice-cold anger. The medication that smoothed the sharp edges but did nothing to dim the compulsive need beneath. He thought of the things Ilya had confessed, in fragments, to Galina, things Anatoly only knew the snippets of, not the details.

His mind conjured an image, not of Shane Hollander the hockey star, but of a pregnant omega, frightened and alone, trying to build a fragile peace in a basement apartment in Willow Creek, Pennsylvania. He thought of his own wife, of her wanting the oil but refusing it, of her small, cherished comforts. The pity that washed over him was unexpected and profound.

If Ilya knew there was an address in Pennsylvania right now, there would be no stopping him. No rational discussion about verification, about approach, about Shane's state of mind or safety. Ilya would be in the car within the hour, driving through the night. The consequences of that confrontation, given everything, were potentially catastrophic. For everyone.

Anatoly's decision was clinical, born of risk assessment and a sudden, protective instinct for the missing man he'd never met. He minimized the browser window. With quick, efficient keystrokes, he began clearing the digital trace of his inquiry into the skincare company's records. He wasn't deciding to never tell Ilya. He was deciding he needed to know first. To verify. To send someone trustworthy, discreet, to Willow Creek to confirm Shane's presence, his condition, his situation. To gather intelligence before unleashing Ilya. He was, in that moment, protecting Shane from Ilya. And, perhaps, protecting Ilya from the irrevocable act he might commit in his desperate, lovesick rage.

He heard movement down the hall as Ilya picked up a call. Yuna Hollander had been calling him frequently recently. Ilya said that he didn't have therapy this week and he thanked Yuna for picking up a refill at the pharmacy.

He was closing the final trace when Ilya returned downstairs. Anatoly's face was a mask of composed focus, his screen now displaying the stagnant maps they'd been staring at for hours.

"Find anything?" Ilya asked, his voice dull with resignation as he resumed his seat.

"No," Anatoly said, the lie smooth and effortless.

They worked for another hour, the tension between them now of a different, unacknowledged kind. Anatoly's mind was racing, planning which of his few, most trusted operatives he could

dispatch to rural Pennsylvania without Ilya's knowledge. Ilya cycled through the same dead-end data, his movements mechanical.

Then Anatoly's phone rang, shattering the silence. The caller ID showed one of his employees, a dogged researcher who while young, he proved to be useful. Anatoly felt a surge of irritation. He almost sent it to voicemail. Another useless fragment to add to the pile.

He answered. "Yes?"

The voice on the other end was breathless with excitement, loud enough that the words escaped the receiver before Anatoly could clamp the phone to his ear. "Boss! You have to tell Mr. Rozanov-"

Anatoly's blood went cold. "Pavel," he said sharply, trying to cut him off.

Ilya looked up from his screen, alerted by the tone.

"-I found him! I'm sure of it, I finally-"

"Speaker," Ilya said. It was not a request.

Anatoly hesitated. That fraction of a second of hesitation was a fatal error. Ilya's eyes, which had been glazed with fatigue, sharpened into points of blue laser light. He saw the conflict on Anatoly's face, the calculation.

"Speaker, Tolya." The command was soft, absolute.

Trapped, with no plausible reason to refuse, Anatoly slowly lowered the phone. His thumb hovered over the speakerphone icon. He met Ilya's gaze for a fleeting second, a silent communication of warning and regret, then pressed it.

The young man's eager voice filled the quiet study, bright with triumph. "Boss! Tell Mr. Rozanov I found him. I have a location. I have proof."

On the other side of the desk, Ilya Rozanov went preternaturally still. Not a muscle moved. He was a statue of concentrated potential energy, every atom of his being focused on the plastic device on the desk between them. The world had narrowed to that voice, and the next words it would speak.

Anatoly said nothing. The five seconds of silence that followed were the longest of his professional life.

"Where?"

Ilya's voice was not loud. It was terrifyingly calm, a flat plane of sound that absorbed all other noise in the room. His entire being had narrowed to the phone on the desk, to the eager voice trapped within it.

"Willow Creek, Pennsylvania."

Ilya, however, was laser-focused on the voice. "Explain."

Pavel launched into his explanation, breathless with the thrill of his discovery. He was in Willow Creek visiting his girlfriend and his family for the holidays. He hadn't been working the investigation; he'd had no reason to believe Shane Hollander was anywhere near rural Pennsylvania. Earlier that day, he'd been at a town function with his girlfriend when Ruth Fischer had stopped by with someone named Evan.

He'd recognized Shane.

Not instantly. Hollander looked different. His hair was longer, curling slightly at the nape of his neck. He wore ordinary, worn-in clothes, a thick sweater, jeans. He'd gained the soft, round weight of mid-pregnancy across his face and body. Without the polished, public-athlete presentation, he didn't immediately scream "Shane Hollander" from the sports pages. He looked, Pavel said, like any other handsome, tired pregnant omega trying to get through a cold afternoon.

But then Shane had looked directly at him. And Pavel had *known*. The shape of his eyes, the line of his jaw beneath the softer flesh, the particular stillness of his posture even when trying to appear relaxed.

"You touched him?" Ilya interrupted, the question slicing through Pavel's narrative.

There was a confused pause on the line. "I... shook his hand. When we were introduced."

A beat of silence, heavy and charged. Then Ilya asked the question that actually mattered, his voice dropping lower. "Is he okay?"

"Yes," Pavel said, and the certainty in that single word was the first tiny fracture in the ice encasing Ilya. Pavel had seen Shane standing, walking, talking. He looked healthy. Tired, perhaps, and obviously pregnant, but fundamentally whole. He wasn't injured. He didn't appear to be held against his will. The people around him, this Ruth Fischer, seemed genuinely affectionate toward him.

Then Pavel added, his tone softening with something like sympathy, "Mr. Rozanov... he is very pregnant."

That landed quietly, a depth charge in the silent study. Ilya had known, intellectually. The app on his phone told him weekly that the baby was the size of a mango, then an eggplant. Yuna had spoken of it in abstract terms. He had imagined it, obsessively. But someone had *seen* him. A stranger's eyes had registered the physical reality of Shane carrying their child.

"What does he look like?" Ilya asked, his voice rough.

Pavel hesitated, unsure what he meant. “He looks... like himself. Just... as I said, pregnant.”

“His stomach.” Ilya’s words were clipped, urgent. “Is big?”

“Yes,” Pavel said gently. “He is visibly pregnant. There would be no hiding it now.”

“Does he look sick?”

“No.”

“Thin?”

“Not particularly.”

“Scared?”

This time, Pavel’s pause was longer, more considered. “No,” he finally said. “He didn’t look scared. He looks good.”

That answer did something unexpected to Ilya. It didn’t bring relief. It carved out a hollow, aching space beneath his ribs. Shane, in a strange place, surrounded by strangers, and he wasn’t scared. Not at that moment, at least.

Pavel explained how Ruth Fischer had introduced Shane as Evan, a tenant living in her basement. Ilya’s attention snapped to a new detail. “Who is Ruth Fischer?”

This was where Anatoly had a problem. Because he already knew. Ruth and Walter Fischer were the names attached to the address from the skincare order. He remained perfectly still, his face a mask of neutral attention, but he felt Ilya's gaze flick toward him when the surname was spoken. Ilya didn't confront him, not yet, but the glance was a seed planted in frozen ground.

Pavel explained Ruth was a local grandmother, well-liked in the community. Shane appeared to be staying with or very close to the Fischer family.

Then Pavel delivered the crucial piece. Through casual conversation, Ruth had mentioned Evan lived in the basement apartment on their property. She'd pointed out the external door. Pavel knew where Shane was sleeping.

Ilya stood up.

It wasn't a violent surge. It was a simple, decisive unbending of his body, as if pulled upright by a wire connected directly to that piece of information. Anatoly knew what it meant. Ilya was already calculating drive times, fuel stops, the fastest route south.

"Do not approach him again," Anatoly said into the phone, his voice firm.

Ilya turned his head slowly toward him.

Anatoly clarified before Ilya could argue. "If you see him again naturally, behave normally. But you are not to seek him out, question him, follow him, frighten him, or reveal that you know who he is."

To Anatoly's surprise, Ilya gave a single, tight nod of agreement. It wasn't born of newfound respect for Shane's boundaries, but of a terror so profound it overrode all other impulses: the fear of Shane running again, of losing the thread a second time. "He cannot know," Ilya said, his eyes locked on Anatoly's.

Pavel asked what he should do.

“Nothing,” Ilya said. Then, after a beat, “You stay there.”

“I was planning to stay through New Year’s, sir.”

“Good. You stay. You act normal.” Ilya began firing questions, each one more specific, painting a portrait of confinement. Does Shane drive? Is the car there? Does he live alone? Who is around him? Has Pavel seen him eat? Does he seem physically comfortable? Has he mentioned a doctor? Does the town have a hospital? Does he have friends?

Anatoly eventually interrupted, his voice cutting through the interrogation. “Ilya. He was simply introduced.”

Then Pavel hesitated. There was something else.

Ilya heard it immediately. “What?”

Pavel reluctantly mentioned Sam. He didn’t know what Sam was to Shane. Only that there was a younger man around him fairly often. Ruth had spoken of him casually. Pavel had seen them together outside the general store. Sam seemed protective of Shane, comfortable in his presence. He’d brought Shane a coffee.

“What kind of man?” Ilya asked, his voice dropping another degree.

Pavel didn’t understand.

“Alpha?”

“Yes.”

The room became dangerously quiet. Anatoly watched the medication perform its eerie alchemy. The old Ilya would have exploded, shattered something, filled the space with roaring rage. This Ilya simply absorbed the information, his expression cooling from intense focus to something harder, more crystalline. The ice thickened.

Then Pavel, perhaps trying to be helpful, mentioned the town festival. There had been photographs. They might be online.

Both Anatoly and Ilya moved for their laptops. They found the Willow Creek community page, the festival gallery. They scrolled through picture after innocuous picture: children sledding, the chili cook-off, the ridiculous Ice King and Queen. Ilya’s scrolling was impatient, frantic.

Then he stopped.

There he was.

Shane.

Slightly blurred in the background of a wider shot, near the fire pit, caught in a moment of laughter. His head was tilted back, his hand resting naturally, possessively, over the distinct curve of his stomach. The pregnancy was undeniable.

And Sam was there too, a few feet away, turned toward him, saying something.

For several seconds, everything else ceased to exist. The alias, Pavel, Anatoly, Sam, Willow Creek itself- none of it mattered. Shane was alive. His hair was longer. His face was fuller, softened. His body had changed, transformed by their child. And he was smiling. A real smile, the kind that reached his eyes, the kind Ilya hadn’t seen in months.

Ilya reached toward the screen without conscious thought, his fingertip touching the blurred image of Shane's smiling face.

"There you are," he whispered, the sound barely audible, devastated relief.

Then his attention dropped to Shane's stomach, to the hand curved protectively over it. He stared. Yuna's words from weeks ago returned, sharp as knives. *We've missed it all*. Now he understood. He had never seen Shane like this. Never watched his body change day by day. Never felt the baby kick. Never heard the heartbeat on a monitor. Never argued over names. Strangers in Pennsylvania had been witnessing it, standing beside him, sharing his space, while Ilya stared at maps in a silent room.

His eyes moved to Sam, standing so casually close in the photograph.

The softness vanished from his face, replaced by something bleak and sharp.

Before he could spiral further, Anatoly spoke into the phone. "We will call you back." He ended the call.

Silence descended, heavier than before.

Ilya continued to stare at the photograph. Then, without looking away, he asked, "How long to drive to Willow Creek?"

"Respectfully, I think we should wait," Anatoly said, the words firm. "We have found him. That changes everything. We need to think. We need to verify what Pavel knows, understand his medical situation, decide how to approach this without making him run."

Ilya finally looked at Anatoly. The blue of his eyes was arctic. "You expect me to wait after so long? Would you if your mate had disappeared?"

Anatoly said nothing for a moment. Then, “No. I would not wait willingly.” Ilya's mouth tightened.

“But I would hope,” Anatoly continued carefully, “that if I were behaving as you have been, someone would make me.”

Ilya went still.

Anatoly nodded toward the photograph. “Look at him, Ilya. He is pregnant. He is healthy. He is safe. If you arrive at his door tonight like this, what happens when he becomes frightened?”

“I would not hurt him.”

“I know.”

“Then what are you afraid of?”

Anatoly held his gaze. “What *you* are afraid of.”

Ilya's fury was immediate, a white-hot core inside the ice, but beneath it was the horrible, humiliating recognition that Anatoly's reasoning was not entirely wrong. He had confessed the same fear to Galina. He didn't trust himself.

Ilya's voice was low, final. “I have waited all these months. I'm leaving in the morning. ”

“Waiting one more night,” Anatoly insisted, holding his ground, “could be the difference between seeing him and frightening him into disappearing again. For good.”

That got through. Ilya's jaw worked, the muscles taut. He looked back at the laptop screen, his resolve warring with the primal pull toward the photograph, toward the living proof of Shane's existence.

He didn't agree. But he didn't immediately reach for his car keys.

Instead, he zoomed the photograph in closer, isolating Shane's figure. He studied the lines of his face, the curve of his stomach, the casual intimacy of his own hand upon it. He traced the pixels that formed Shane's smiling mouth.

Then his gaze shifted to the edge of the frame, to the man standing nearby.

His voice, when he finally spoke, was quiet, stripped bare of all but a single, consuming question.

“Who the fuck is Sam?”

Anatoly arrived back at the Ottawa house just after dawn, the sky a dull, bruised grey promising more snow. He found Ilya already in the foyer, dressed in dark jeans, a black sweater, and a heavy winter coat, a single carry on bag at his feet. He was not pacing. He was not shouting. He stood perfectly still, but the stillness itself was a kind of scream. Anatoly took him in with a single, assessing glance: the pallor beneath his tan, the shadows like fingerprints pressed beneath his eyes, the almost imperceptible tremor in the hand that held his phone. The screen was lit, displaying the festival photograph of Shane. Ilya had clearly slept little, if at all. The medication Galina had prescribed performed its function; it kept the volcanic rage banked, the panic suppressed. What remained was a terrifying, laser-focused intent, humming just beneath the surface of his skin. His attention snapped to Anatoly the moment the door opened, and Anatoly saw in his eyes the absolute, unswayable certainty of a man who had already crossed an internal boundary.

“The car is waiting,” Anatoly said, his voice carefully neutral. He wanted to talk about approach, about contacting Yuna and David, about having Pavel confirm Shane was home and alone. He wanted to suggest, gently, that perhaps someone less emotionally volatile should make first contact. But looking at Ilya’s face, at the way his fingers kept tracing the edge of his phone, the way his knee gave a minute, restless bounce even as he stood rigidly, Anatoly knew any such suggestion would be interpreted as another barricade, another betrayal. The time for caution had evaporated the moment Pavel said Willow Creek.

In the car, riding through the muted, holiday-quiet streets toward the airport, Ilya made a call. He put it on speaker, his gaze fixed on the passing cityscape. “Galina,” he said, his voice flat.

“Ilya. It’s early.” Her voice was alert, professional.

“We found him.”

There was a beat of silence on the line, then the sound of a chair shifting. “Where?”

“Pennsylvania. A small town.”

“Does he know you found him?” Her tone was cautious, probing.

“No.”

“Have you spoken to the Hollanders? Has anyone considered making contact with him first, rather than appearing unexpectedly?”

Ilya’s jaw tightened. “He is carrying my child. I have spent every fucking day wondering if he was alive, sick, frightened, alone. I am done sitting in rooms discussing him like an abstract concept while he is somewhere else living our life without me.” The words were clipped, each one bitten off.

Galina’s concern became audible. “Ilya, finding him does not erase the reasons he left. You need to give him a choice about contact. If you force this-”

“I am not forcing anything,” Ilya interrupted, but his voice was rising, the control beginning to crack at the edges. “I am going to see my mate. That is not a negotiation.”

“You are headed to the airport now?” she asked, and when he didn’t deny it, her sigh was heavy with disapproval. “This is exactly what we discussed. The instinct to claim, to ensure safety, is overpowering your judgment. You need to slow down.”

“I have given him months!” The fury finally broke through, sharp and cold. “You do not understand. You sit in your office and talk about choices and autonomy. He took my choice. He took everything. And I am going whether you approve or not.”

There was another pause. When Galina spoke again, her voice had changed, shedding its therapeutic cadence for something more direct, almost urgent. “How many of the pills do you have left?”

The question was so abrupt it momentarily derailed Ilya’s anger. He fumbled in his coat pocket, retrieved the orange vial, and shook it. A faint rattle. “Three.”

“Take them. Before you see him.”

Ilya went still. Three at once was more than his prescribed dose. “Why?”

“Because you sat in my office and told me you were afraid of what you might do if Shane were suddenly standing in front of you while you were this angry,” she said, her words precise and relentless. “Shane is heavily pregnant now. A confrontation, panic, extreme stress- it could be dangerous for him, for the baby. You told me you loved him. If you love him, then make sure the man who walks through that door is someone he is safe with.”

In the driver’s seat, Anatoly felt a cold knot form in his stomach. The logic was sound, protective even, but the instruction felt... clinical. Calculated.

Ilya stared at the vial in his hand. The argument from his own mouth, weaponized by her. The fear of himself, of what his love might become in its raw, unfiltered state. “Fine,” he said, his voice gone hollow.

“Good,” Galina said, her tone softening back into its professional register. “Call me after. Regardless of what happens.”

Ilya ended the call without another word and stared out the window. Anatoly waited a moment before speaking. “Ilya...”

“She is my doctor,” Ilya cut him off, not looking at him. “You wanted me calm, did you not?”

There was nothing more to say.

The trip was agonizing, tension thick in the air. On the plane, Ilya was a statue of impatience. He didn’t speak. He opened the photograph on his phone, zooming in until the pixels blurred: Shane’s smiling face, the curve of his stomach, his resting hand. Then he would zoom out, his gaze lingering on Sam’s proximity before snapping away. He researched Willow Creek on his laptop, absorbing dry facts about population, main streets, municipal services. He pulled up the Fischer address on satellite view, studying the layout of the house, the barn, the single visible external door to the basement. He noted the location of the nearest hospital thirty miles away without seeming to realize he was doing it. His mind was a machine, processing data, eliminating variables, plotting coordinates.

Shortly before they began their descent into the regional airport, he remembered Galina’s instruction. He fetched a bottle of water from the flight attendant, shook out the three small white pills into his palm, and swallowed them. He leaned back in his seat, closing his eyes.

At first, nothing changed.

Then, gradually, a shift occurred. It was not sleepiness, nor numbness. It was a distancing. The frantic, pounding anxiety that had been his constant companion for months receded, as if someone had turned down the volume on a shrieking alarm. The emotional static quieted. His thoughts, which had been a chaotic storm of fear and rage and longing, arranged themselves into cool, clear lines. When the plane landed Anatoly asked, “Are you all right?” Ilya answered, “Yes.” And he believed it. He felt serene. Purposeful. Detached.

But Anatoly, watching him gather his bag, seeing the unnatural calm in his blue eyes, felt distinctly less reassured.

The drive from the airport to Willow Creek was a journey into a different world. Christmas decorations, faded and wind-tattered, still hung from porch railings. Snow was piled along the sides of narrow roads. They passed a general store, a post office, a church with a white steeple. It was painfully, insultingly ordinary. This tiny, unremarkable place, this cluster of houses surrounded by dormant fields and bare trees, had contained the center of Ilya's universe for months. It had held Shane's laughter, his quiet moments, the kicking of their child, while Ilya's own world had collapsed into a silent, map-covered hell.

They turned onto a rural route, the car bouncing on the uneven pavement. Anatoly navigated using the coordinates he'd pulled. "The house is just ahead. Ilya, we should-"

Ilya was already unbuckling his seatbelt.

"We should knock. We should wait. We should confirm he is home."

"Go away until I call for you." Ilya pushed the car door open and stepped out into the cold afternoon air. He stood for a moment, his breath fogging, his gaze sweeping over the modest farmhouse, the large barn, the quiet fields. Then he inhaled, deeply.

And he smelled it.

Honeysuckle. Rain. *Shane*.

It was faint, carried on the brittle winter breeze, but it was unmistakable. It was a scent woven into his soul, the essence of home and peace and belonging. For months, Shane had existed as photographs, maps, memories, medical calculations, search reports. An idea. A ghost. Now his scent was molecules in the air, real and tangible. It destroyed the last remaining abstraction.

Ilya followed it.

Anatoly got out of the car. "Ilya!"

The scent led around the side of the house, toward the basement entrance Pavel had described- a simple wooden door set into a concrete foundation. Ilya approached it. The windows were dark. Shane wasn't home.

He tried the handle. Unlocked. How trusting.

Anatoly was at his side in an instant, his face a mask of furious disbelief. "This is exactly what we agreed we would not do!"

Ilya turned to look at him, his expression eerily placid. "I am not going to hurt him. I only want to see him." He gestured vaguely toward the car. "You can wait elsewhere. Now."

Then he stepped across the threshold and into Shane's hidden life.

He closed the door behind him, leaving Anatoly standing in the cold.

The apartment was warm, dim, and saturated with Shane's scent. It was overwhelming, a perfume of memory and present absence that made Ilya's head swim for a moment. He stood still, allowing his eyes to adjust.

He saw everything.

The shoes by the door- worn boots, sneakers, not the designer brands from his previous life. The careful order. In the bathroom, the lineup of expensive skincare products, arranged with fastidious care on the counter. Prenatal vitamins beside the sink. In the main room, a dresser with tiny, folded clothes stacked neatly. A rocking chair. Books on pregnancy and childcare. Evidence not of a temporary hideout, but of a life being built. A life preparing to continue.

Then he saw the crib.

It was set up in the corner, simple and sturdy, already made up with a fitted sheet patterned with little stars. A soft, cream-colored blanket was folded at the foot. And an old plush chair right next to it, barely fitting.

Ilya stopped breathing.

There was going to be a baby here. *His* baby. Shane had assembled a nursery. He had built a place for their child, a future, without him.

He moved toward it as if pulled by a magnetic force. He reached out and touched the smooth, sanded wood of the railing. His fingers trailed over the tiny blanket. The domesticity of it was a physical blow, but the medication held the full force of the pain at bay. He felt it as a pressure, a profound ache, but it was muffled, observed through layers of thick glass.

His gaze drifted to the small desk. A notebook was open, a pen beside it. He moved closer.

On the page, in Shane's precise, angular handwriting, were lines of Cyrillic script. Vocabulary lists.

Ilya picked up the notebook. He traced the shapes of the letters Shane had painstakingly formed. He imagined him here, alone, practicing these words for a child who would never hear them from Ilya's own mouth. The emotions swelled, grief, wonder, a terrible, rending love- but they arrived muted, filtered through the chemical haze. He knew he should be shattered. Somewhere deep inside, he was. But on the surface, he was calm. He placed the notebook back exactly as he had found it.

He chose a corner near the crib, where the shadows were deepest, and sat down on the floor, his back against the wall. He would wait.

Anatoly checked on him twice through texts, his messages growing increasingly grim, but Ilya merely told him to stay away, a command to leave him be. Eventually, Anatoly retreated.

Time lost meaning. Ilya sat immersed in Shane's scent, surrounded by the quiet evidence of the life he had carved out from nothing. The serenity granted by the pills allowed him to simply exist within the reality of it. The fear, the rage, the desperate yearning were all still there, but they were distant mountains on the horizon of his consciousness.

Then he heard it, footsteps crunching over the gravel outside.

Ilya's entire body went still. Not the unnatural stillness the pills tended to give him. Something deeper. Instinctive. His head lifted before he consciously understood why, every part of him suddenly straining toward the sound beyond the door.

A voice carried faintly through the wood.

Shane.

Ilya stopped breathing. He had heard that voice thousands of times. Sleepy against his chest. Irritated across a kitchen. Breathless beneath him. Laughing through a phone from another country. He had replayed old voicemails just to hear it during the months when Shane had been absent. Now it was ten feet away.

"I'm turning in!" Shane called to someone outside. "My back is killing me."

Another voice, female, answered, too muffled for Ilya to make out. Then the handle moved.

Ilya could have stood.

He could have gone to the door. Could have announced himself before Shane crossed the threshold. Could have done any of the things Galina and Anatoly had told him a sane man should do.

He did none of them. The door pushed open and Shane walked in.

For one terrible second, Ilya's mind simply refused to understand what his eyes were seeing.

Shane. Not in a photograph. Not a memory. Not a shape reconstructed from security footage or a name on Anatoly's reports or the faceless pregnant figure Ilya had imagined every night while an app told him how large their child had become.

Shane. Alive. He was humming under his breath, distracted by the paper grocery bag balanced awkwardly against the pronounced curve of his hip. His coat was open. His hair had grown longer, curling slightly around his ears, and his cheeks were pink from the cold.

And he was so fucking pregnant. Ilya's gaze dropped and stopped.

The photograph had not prepared him for it. Nothing could have. Shane's stomach rounded proudly beneath his sweater, large enough now that his body had changed the way it moved around it. One hand automatically supported the bottom of the curve while he wrestled the bag with the other.

Ilya had imagined that stomach beneath his hands so many times that seeing it should have felt familiar.

It did not. Something inside Shane must have moved.

Shane stopped halfway through the door and grimaced, shifting the grocery bag higher.

“Okay, okay, settle down, m-um... *malysh*,” he muttered affectionately, rubbing his stomach. “We’re home. You can stop using my bladder as a trampoline. Are you happy in there, Bean? You’ve never been this active before. Maybe we need to see doc tomorrow to see what you’re fussing about in there hmm?”

Malysh.

His eyes flicked toward the Russian notebook on the desk and then back to Shane. Shane had learned it. For their baby.

Something enormous tried to tear through the chemical quiet inside him. Love, grief, rage, relief, he couldn’t separate one from another. His mate was standing six feet away. His child was moving beneath Shane’s hand. They were alive. They were right fucking there.

And Ilya could not make himself move.

Shane shoved the door closed with his shoulder. Then shuffled toward the kitchenette and heaved the grocery bag onto the counter with a relieved grunt. He shrugged out of his coat and hung it on the hook by the door, still humming faintly to himself.

Ilya watched every movement. The longer hair. The fuller curve of his face. The hand that kept returning unconsciously to his stomach. The tiny adjustment of his stance- was that how he moved now or just when his back hurt? All the changes that had happened without him.

Months of them. Shane had become this person while Ilya had been staring at maps. Then Shane reached for the light.

Click. Warm yellow light flooded the small apartment.

Shane turned and saw him. Everything stopped. The faint smile disappeared first. Then the color drained from Shane’s face, his eyes widened.

Ilya watched recognition hit him, watched disbelief become comprehension, watched comprehension become something that made the distant place inside his chest twist painfully despite the drugs. Fear.

Shane’s hand flew to his stomach. Not toward Ilya. Toward their child. The gesture was instantaneous. Protective.

Ilya remained beside the crib, his arms resting loosely over his knees, the medication holding him inside that terrible, unnatural calm while months of longing screamed somewhere too far beneath it to reach his face.

Shane stared at him. Ilya stared back. Neither spoke.

After all those months, all those miles, all the maps and investigators and sleepless nights and unanswered questions, there were only six feet between them.

Ilya's gaze dropped once to the hand spread over the curve of Shane's stomach.

Then returned to his face.

"Hello, omega."

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I'm retreating to the bunker now. 🙄

Someone wave a little white flag when it's safe for me to come back out. 🚩😭

Until then... please direct all complaints, threats, and emotional damages to my attorney.



Until next week!

Chapter 44: Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

First, a huge thank you to Lisa, Anna, B, and Tony for helping me wrangle this chapter into something resembling controlled chaos. ❤️

And thank you SO much to everyone reading, commenting, all the things. I read every single one, and you guys make writing this way too much fun. 😂❤️

Unfortunately, I am currently sick and running on approximately three functioning brain cells, so I'm posting this and crawling directly back into bed.

Enjoy the chapter.

See you on the other side. ❤️

Chapter Notes

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

The walk back from the festival felt longer than it was, the cheerful noise fading behind them until there was only the crunch of their boots on the frozen gravel and the occasional sigh of wind through bare branches. Shane's body ached with a deep, bone-tired heaviness. His lower back throbbed with each step, a persistent complaint from muscles strained by the new, forward weight of his stomach. He moved slowly, consciously, and Sam unconsciously matched his pace without comment, his hands tucked into his jacket pockets, his breath pluming in the cold air. Shane was quiet, too quiet, and he knew Sam could feel the tension coiled inside him. It wasn't about walking together alone. It was about what had almost happened on the porch steps, the gentle opening Sam had offered and Shane had gently, firmly closed.

He kept replaying it. The softness in Sam's hazel eyes, the fact that it was so easy for them to be friends so quickly. It had been an invitation. And Shane, with a frankness that felt clumsy even to himself, had shut it down. Now the silence between them felt charged with the ghost of that rejected possibility. This was what happened. People didn't stick around after you told them no. They drifted away. The friendship became polite, then distant, then nothing. Shane had seen it before, in other ways, with other people. He couldn't bear the thought of losing this, the first real, easy connection he'd forged in this new life.

“I hope...” Shane began, the words brittle in the cold air. He stopped, cleared his throat. “I hope things aren’t going to be weird now.”

Sam glanced at him, his brow furrowing slightly. “Weird how?”

Shane winced inwardly. He had to say it. “Because... you know. Because you like me. And I don’t... like you. Like that.” The clarification was painfully adolescent, and heat crept up his neck despite the chill.

To his surprise, Sam didn’t look wounded or embarrassed. A small, understanding smile touched his lips. “Evan. Yeah, I’m attracted to you. You’re a good-looking guy, you’re kind, you’re funny when you forget to be so serious. Under different circumstances, I probably would’ve asked you out as soon as I met you.” He shrugged, the gesture effortless. “But you said no. That’s the end of that particular conversation.”

Shane stared at him, genuinely surprised. The simplicity of it, the lack of expectation or negotiation, felt foreign. It settled over him like a clean, cool cloth on fevered skin. There was no pressure, no hidden tally of debts, no sense that his ‘no’ was a temporary obstacle to be worn down. It was just... accepted.

“So we’re still friends?” Shane asked, the question tinged with a vulnerability he hadn’t intended.

Sam looked at him as if he’d asked whether the sky was still blue. “Unless you were planning on getting rid of me.”

A real laugh escaped Shane, loosening the tight knot between his shoulders. “No. No plans.”

They walked on. When the path dipped into a shadowy hollow where black ice glistened treacherously, Sam offered his arm without fanfare. “Here, careful.”

Shane took it without hesitation, his pride thoroughly outweighed by the pragmatic fear of falling while six months pregnant. Sam's arm was solid, steady, and the contact was purely functional, devoid of the electric charge or possessive weight Shane had come to associate with an alpha's touch. It was just to help. It was nice.

After a stretch of comfortable quiet, Sam spoke again, his voice thoughtful. "You don't have to answer this, but... does Bean's other dad know? About them?"

Shane's hand, of its own accord, settled over the curve of his stomach. As if on cue, Bean shifted within, a slow, rolling turn. *Of course*, Shane thought with a bitter inner sigh. The baby possessed some infuriating, supernatural radar for moments when Ilya entered his thoughts. Usually, he was very still when Sam was around which he liked since some of the movements

"Yes," Shane said, his voice quieter. "He knows."

Sam waited, giving him space.

"It's... complicated," Shane added, the understatement of the century.

"I figured." Sam kicked a pebble off the path. After a few more steps, he asked, gently, "Was he someone you were with? Was he your mate or something casual?"

The past tense hovered between them. Shane hesitated, the truth a tangled knot in his chest. The present felt so absolute here, so separate from everything that came before. But it wasn't the past. Not really. "Is," Shane finally corrected, the word leaving his mouth before he could stop it. It surprised him, the firmness of it.

Sam heard the correction but didn't pounce on it. He just nodded, absorbing the information.

Shane found himself talking, the words spilling out in low, halting confession. "We were together for a long time. Almost nobody knew until last year. Things got... complicated. He

loved me.” He swallowed. “Loves me.”

The present tense this time was deliberate, and it hurt to say it aloud. Bean delivered a swift, approving kick. Shane muttered under his breath, “Yeah, I know. Thank you.”

Sam gave a faint, understanding smile but didn’t make light of it.

Then he asked the question that had likely been forming since Shane arrived in Willow Creek, a solitary, pregnant omega building a nursery alone. “If you still love him... why are you here?”

The night seemed to grow colder, stiller. Shane searched for a clean answer and found none. He loved Ilya. He missed him with a physical ache that never fully subsided. Some nights he still woke up reaching for the empty space beside him, his hand finding only cool sheets. He was learning Russian because of him. He was carrying their child. Dr. Alvarez had warned him about allowing himself to spiral into prolonged yearning this late in pregnancy, when hormones and the bond were already volatile.

“His version of love... was intense,” Shane said, the words careful, measured. He didn’t want to sound like some victim or give too much away. “Sometimes so intensely that I stopped knowing where his fear ended for me being in danger and my choices began. He believed, he *believes*, he was protecting me. That’s what made it so hard to...” He trailed off, the sentence too big to finish. “Intent doesn’t erase what something does to you, I just felt as if I was drowning and the one person who could help me was the one holding me under water. When we were together, I was happy and everything felt great for the most part. When he went to work or we had to be apart, my mind focused on everything that I felt was wrong.” he finished softly, more to himself than to Sam.

Sam listened. He didn’t offer platitudes. He didn’t tell Shane he’d done the right thing or the wrong thing. He just absorbed the pain and let him speak.

Eventually, his voice quiet in the vast, dark countryside, he asked, “Do you want to go back?”

Shane looked ahead toward the warm lights of the house, Ruth and Walter's home, his temporary sanctuary. His mind conjured Ottawa. The frozen lake. Ilya's disastrous, affectionate attempts at cooking breakfast. The way he took up too much space on every couch, in every bed. His scent, which was the definition of home. The half-finished nursery in the home that he'd thought they would always share, the one they'd picked out wallpaper for but never hung. Ilya talking to Shane's stomach before there was even a bump, his voice a low, Russian rumble Bean would now recognize.

Then the other memories surfaced, cold and sharp. The tracker. The lies spun for 'his own good.' The terrifying, soul-crushing realization that he'd started acquiescing to things simply because fighting Ilya's certainty was exhausting.

His eyes stung. "I don't know. I know I shouldn't. Part of me says to just wait for the birth and sever the bond. That I could live here forever, get a little job and live just fine. But the other part of me feels like I ripped out half of my soul."

Sam accepted that. "When Anthony died, I thought I died with him," Sam said after a while. "For years, honestly. You remind me of him sometimes. Too kind. Always worrying about everybody else." He looked down at the path. "I don't know if it's the same. Probably not. But eventually I could remember him without it hurting every second."

After several more steps, Shane shook his head. "No. That's not true." He spread his hand over the active mound of his stomach, feeling the life within press against his palm. "I still love him. It took so long for us to get things right, and when they were good, I can't help but know that I'll compare him to whoever else might come into my life. I can be alone, I'll have a baby to focus on so for the next 18 years, that'll be my life."

The admission was quiet, almost ashamed, as if confessing to a weakness he should have overcome by now. He'd spent months trying to convince himself that leaving should have killed the love, that it was a necessary severance. It hadn't.

"But I needed to leave," he finished, the statement simple and final.

Sam didn't ask for reasons. He didn't offer predictions about the future of Shane's heart. He simply nodded, his shoulder brushing Shane's briefly in a gesture of pure, uncomplicated solidarity.

“Okay.”

The simplicity of it, the lack of demand or judgment, nearly undid Shane. They reached the path that split toward the Miller house’s main door and the exterior stairs leading down to Shane’s apartment. Sam stopped. “Still on for helping me sort that paperwork on Thursday?” he asked, his tone deliberately normal.

“Yeah,” Shane said, a real smile touching his lips. “Yeah, of course.”

“Good. Get some rest, Evan. You look beat.” With a final, easy wave, Sam turned and walked toward his truck parked on the street.

Shane watched him go, the tight anxiety in his chest finally easing. He had told the truth, and the world hadn’t ended. The friendship remained. For the first time since he’d driven away from Montreal, he had spoken the dual, warring truths aloud and been met with nothing but quiet acceptance.

I still love him. And I needed to leave. Both things could exist. Both things were true.

He made his way down the exterior stairs, his body protesting every step. Inside his apartment, he went through the comforting ritual of his skincare, the familiar products soothing his senses. He changed into soft sweatpants and an old t-shirt, his movements slow with fatigue. He was so tired he expected to fall asleep the moment his head hit the pillow.

But sleep wouldn’t come.

He arranged the pillows meticulously, one beneath his stomach, one supporting his back, one wedged between his knees. He lay on his left side. Bean kicked sharply, as if objecting to the compression. He rolled carefully, agonizingly, onto his right. Bean responded with a series of rapid, agitated jabs.

“Seriously? Behave in there, bean.” he groaned into the darkness.

Another kick, high under his ribs.

Bean had been unusually active since the conversation with Sam. Shane blamed the festival food- the sugar, the cider, the fried dough. He blamed the walking, the strange positions, the cold. Anything except the obvious, superstitious connection his mind kept making: Bean did this when Shane thought about Ilya.

And tonight, he couldn't stop thinking about Ilya.

Sam's questions had opened a floodgate. Memories surfaced, unbidden and vivid. Ilya asleep beside him, his face relaxed in a way it never was awake. The weight and warmth of Ilya's hands on him, a claim and a comfort. Ilya's laugh, rough and surprised. The way his accent thickened when he was tired or emotional. Ilya talking to Shane's stomach when it was still flat, whispering Russian endearments to a cluster of cells.

Shane finally muttered into the dark, “Your timing is really creepy, you know that?”

A solid thump against his bladder was Bean's only reply.

“Yeah. Okay.”

Exhaustion eventually pulled him under into a fitful sleep, and he dreamed. It was a good dream, which made it worse. He was back at the cottage, Ilya was beside him in bed, a solid, warm presence along his back, one arm wrapped heavily around him, one enormous hand spread possessively over the full curve of his stomach. Bean was moving beneath that palm, and Ilya was speaking, his voice a low, familiar rumble against Shane's spine. The Russian words were clearer now than they would have been in waking life, and Shane, in the logic of dreams, understood them.

Ilya kissed the nape of his neck, his breath warm, and Shane felt utterly, perfectly safe. Then he woke up.

The apartment was dark and silent and empty. The space beside him in the bed was cold. The absence was a physical punch to the chest, stealing his breath. Bean immediately kicked, a hard, insistent movement as if seeking the hand that was no longer there.

“I know,” Shane whispered, his voice cracking.

He fumbled for his phone on the nightstand, the screen blinding in the darkness. He hadn't deleted Ilya's number, for no real reason, he'd programmed the number every time he switched prepaid phones. He'd told himself there was no point; he knew it by heart. But now his thumb scrolled through his contacts, past Ruth, past Sam, past Dr. Alvarez, until he found it.

Ilya R.

His thumb hovered over the call button. In the heavy, lonely silence, the urge was overpowering. He just wanted to hear his voice. He could picture it perfectly, the stunned silence, would Ilya realize who was calling, the way he'd breathe Shane's name, half-question, half-prayer. Would he be angry? Would he cry? Could Shane hang up after hearing that sound?

A more dangerous thought whispered: *I don't even have to tell him where I am.*

Just one call. Thirty seconds. Just to know he was still there, still alive, still Ilya. *Just to hear him say hello or even just his name. Five months of hiding and he'd only heard his name twice when talking to his mother.*

Bean rolled heavily beneath his hand, a somersault of agreement or protest, he couldn't tell.

Shane's resolve trembled. His thumb pressed down, the screen registering the touch. He was a millimeter from connecting.

Then he remembered why he left. Not because he'd stopped loving Ilya.

Because he hadn't. That was the whole problem.

With a shuddering breath, he locked the phone instead. He placed it facedown on the nightstand, then, feeling foolish and desperate, he picked it up and carried it to the dresser across the room, setting it down as if it were a live grenade.

"No," he whispered to the dark room, to the child inside him, to the ghost that haunted them both.

He crawled back into bed, rearranging the defeated pillows. Bean continued its restless dance. Shane stared at the shadowed ceiling, irritation and despair twisting together. "Could you please stop campaigning for him?"

A particularly strong kick answered him.

"Traitor," he whispered, but his voice broke on the word.

Sleep, when it came again, was thin and troubled, threaded with fragments of dreams where Ilya was always just out of reach, turning a corner, disappearing through a door, his voice echoing down a long hallway.

He woke frequently, each time with a strange, prickling sense of unease, a feeling that something was approaching. He blamed it on pregnancy, on hormones, on the emotional upheaval of the day. He blamed it on the spicy chili. He blamed it on anything but the quiet, instinctual knowledge thrumming in his blood and in the bond that was never truly silent, only muted.

As the first grey light of dawn began to seep around the edges of the blinds, Shane finally fell into a deeper, exhausted sleep, one hand curled protectively over the curve of his stomach. His phone sat silent on the dresser across the room.

Bean finally went still.

Shane woke late, the weak winter sun already filtering through the blinds, striping the bed in bars of pale gold. He felt awful. Not ill, not feverish, just very *unsettled*. His body ached as if he'd played a double-header on poorly prepped ice. A dull headache pulsed behind his eyes. Worse than the physical malaise was a skittering, restless energy under his skin, a feeling that he'd forgotten something vital or was waiting for an appointment he couldn't remember. He lay there for a long minute, trying to orient himself, but the strange, anticipatory buzz wouldn't fade.

Bean, apparently sharing none of his fatigue, was already in motion. A slow, rolling shift made his stomach lurch. Then a sharp, definitive kick landed just beneath his ribs, hard enough to make him grunt. "What has gotten into you, love?" he muttered, pressing a hand over the spot. Another kick answered, this one lower, a painful thump against his bladder that had him scrambling awkwardly out of bed with a hissed curse.

He tried all the usual remedies. He drank a full glass of juice. He ate a piece of toast, which tasted like ash. He paced the small apartment, his hand massaging the taut curve of his stomach and tight knot of his lower back. He lay back down on the couch, propped with pillows. Nothing worked. Bean continued its relentless gymnastics, stretching, turning, kicking with a vigor that felt punitive. His skin felt hypersensitive; the brush of his t-shirt against his nipples was irritating, the waistband of his sweatpants an intolerable pressure. His attention kept snagging on the door, the windows, as if expecting a visitor. Once, he caught a whiff of his own scent in the still air, stronger, sweeter, more pronounced than usual, and felt a flush of irrational embarrassment, as if his body was betraying some private agitation. He made his way to the bathroom and slapped another pregnancy safe scent patch.

When he went upstairs around mid-morning, Ruth took one look at him and set down her tea. "You look peaky, honey. Everything alright?"

"Fine," Shane said, too quickly. He leaned against the kitchen counter, trying to appear normal. "I just didn't sleep well. Bean has decided to practice mixed martial arts in there today. Pregnancy. Hormones. You know."

Ruth's eyes held a knowing, sympathetic glint. "The third trimester's a charm, isn't it? Well, you're in luck. Me, Betty, and Marion are heading to Millersburg. They've got a proper supermarket, a few decent shops. Get you out of the house. Maybe some fresh air will settle the little prizefighter."

Shane had been complaining all morning that he wanted something, but he couldn't pinpoint what. Sweet made his teeth ache at the thought. Salty wasn't right. The idea of chicken was appealing until someone said "roast chicken," and then it immediately became repulsive. It was a familiar, frustrating puzzle.

"I'm coming," he announced, surprising himself. "Maybe seeing stuff will help."

The trip was, for a while, a welcome distraction. The car was filled with the warm, gossipy chatter of the three older women. They treated Shane's mysterious craving as a communal detective project.

"Pickles?" Betty suggested.

"Too obvious," Shane said.

"Ice cream?" Marion offered.

"Too cold."

"A nice steak?" Ruth tried.

Shane considered it, then shook his head. "No. Not steak."

Betty chuckled. "The baby's placing an order without giving you the menu."

As if on cue, Bean delivered a vicious kick to Shane's side. He winced. "Yeah, apparently customer service is terrible," he muttered, rubbing the spot.

They browsed a craft store, a kitchen shop. Shane enjoyed the normality of it, picking up a soft baby blanket, examining wooden spoons. But the underlying tension never fully dissipated. Twice, he stopped and glanced over his shoulder, convinced he'd heard a particular footfall or caught a familiar timbre of voice. Once, an unfamiliar alpha scent—woody and sharp—wafted past as a man exited a hardware store, and Shane's entire body went rigid, his breath catching, before his brain caught up and identified the stranger. He was furious with himself afterward, shoving his trembling hands into his pockets. *He was safe. No one knew.*

Then, as they walked down the main street of Millersburg, he stopped dead.

A smell hit him, bypassing all thought and going straight to a deep, *yes*. It was rich, savory, fragrant with dill and onion and meat and dough. His mouth watered instantly.

"What is it?" Ruth asked, following his gaze.

Shane didn't answer. He followed the scent like a compass needle, several storefronts down, until he stood before a small, unassuming restaurant with a simple sign in both English and Cyrillic script, *Yaya's Table*.

He actually let out a short, disbelieving laugh. Of course. Of fucking course. He had spent months running across a continent to escape Ilya Rozanov, and Ilya's unborn child was apparently demanding Russian food.

"Well, problem solved," Ruth said, smiling. "Lunch is here."

Inside, the place was warm and cozy, checkered tablecloths over wooden tables. Shane's eyes scanned the menu, and a quiet, proud ache bloomed in his chest. He recognized words. *Pelmeni*. *Borscht*. *Blini*. He pointed to one section before the server could translate. "That's... dumplings, right? With meat?"

The young beta server smiled. “Yes! Pelmeni. Very good.”

He ordered the pelmeni with sour cream and dill, and at the server’s recommendation, a side of dark, dense rye bread. When the food arrived, steam rising in fragrant curls, the first bite was a revelation. The tender dough, the savory filling, the cool tang of the sour cream- it was exactly, perfectly what he hadn’t known he needed. His shoulders slumped, a tension he hadn’t even fully registered melting away.

Ruth raised an eyebrow. “Well,” Ruth said, watching him demolish another dumpling. “Apparently Bean knew exactly what they wanted.”

And Bean? Bean finally, blissfully, settled. One contented little roll, a soft nudge against his ribs, and then peace.

Shane stared down at his stomach, then at his forkful of dumpling. “Seriously?” he whispered.

“What’s that, dear?” Marion asked.

“Nothing,” Shane said, taking another bite. Bean gave a final, satisfied wiggle and became still. Shane ate steadily, each bite a comfort, but underneath the relief, a quieter pain threaded through. The flavors were echoes. He remembered Ilya attempting to make syrniki, the kitchen dusted with powdered sugar, his exaggerated indignation when Shane laughed. He found himself wondering what Ilya would order here, then forcibly stopped the thought before it could form fully.

After lunch, buoyed by a full stomach and a temporarily placated baby, the grocery store was a field of newfound possibility. Now that the specific craving was satisfied, everything suddenly sounded good. He loaded the cart with fruit, cheese, crackers, ingredients for a stew, and a bag of oranges that he couldn’t wait for so he opened the bag and started eating one. Ruth and the women teased him mercilessly as he waddled slightly down the aisles, his back protesting the change in weight distribution.

“Let me get that bag,” Betty said, taking a heavier one from his hand.

“I’m pregnant, not an invalid,” Shane protested, but without heat.

“Pregnancy has turned everyone around you into dictators, hasn’t it?” Ruth observed, grinning.

“Apparently,” Shane sighed, but he was smiling.

The good mood lasted through the checkout and the loading of the car. But as they drove out of Millersburg, the farmland giving way to forested hills, Shane grew quiet again. The familiar, restless movement began anew within him, not the violent kicks of the morning but a persistent, agitated shifting. He pressed his palm against his side, trying to soothe the baby. “Come on, little one. What is going on with you today?”

Ruth glanced at him from the driver’s seat. “Do you want me to call Dr. Alvarez when we get back?”

“No,” Shane said, too quickly. “Bean’s moving plenty. That’s a good thing. Just... uncomfortable.” It was more than discomfort. It was a creeping, formless dread. His heart skittered in his chest for no reason. The fine hairs on the back of his neck prickled, as if someone were watching him. He stared out the window at the passing trees, their bare branches like cracks against the grey sky.

You almost called him last night, that’s all. Your brain is making connections that aren’t there.

The rationalizations felt thin, brittle.

When the familiar landmarks of Willow Creek appeared, the church steeple, the general store, the turn onto their rural route, Shane expected to feel the usual softening of relief, the safety of known boundaries.

He didn't.

His pulse, instead of calming, began to hammer against his ribs. A cold sweat prickled down his spine. As Ruth pulled into the driveway of their house, everything looked precisely as it had that morning. The same porch, the same dormant flower beds, the same curtained windows of his basement apartment. Utterly normal.

And yet every cell in his body was signaling *something*.

He sat in the passenger seat for a long moment after Ruth had turned off the engine, listening to the women chatter as they gathered their bags from the back.

Ruth paused, her hand on his door. "Evan? You sure you're okay?"

Shane dragged his gaze from the quiet, innocuous facade of his home. He forced his lips into a smile. It felt like cracking plaster. "Yeah. I just feel... weird today. Off."

"Let me help you carry these down," Ruth said, hefting one of his grocery bags.

"No, I've got it. Really." He took the bags, his movements deliberate, fighting the inexplicable urge to flee. "Thanks for today. And for lunch. Good evening ladies." The other two women blushed and chuckled and he walked slowly to the door with Ruth. "I think I'm just going to turn in for the night. I'll settle down with a book and hopefully just go to sleep a bit early." The sun was just beginning to set so it wouldn't be too out of the norm.

"Ok, Honey. Call us if you need anything. I can bring you a snack later if you want." Ruth called out as he veered to the left to go to his door.

He managed the stairs slowly, one hand beneath the grocery bag and the other pressed against the underside of his stomach as Bean continued whatever violent protest had occupied them for most of the day.

The moment Shane entered the dim apartment, he stopped. He smelled Ilya. His heart gave one painful, stupid thump. Damn, he'd left the old shirt from last night out. Now the smell would be even more faded. Of course.

He'd taken it out again last night after the dream. He must not have put it away properly.

"Jesus," Shane muttered, pushing the door closed behind him with his hip. "I'm losing my mind."

Bean kicked him. "You aren't helping."

He didn't turn on the overhead light. He knew the apartment by memory now, knew exactly how many steps carried him from the door to the little kitchen. He shrugged out of his coat, hung it on the hook and carried the grocery bag toward the counter.

"Okay, okay. Settle down, m-um... *malysh*," he murmured, rubbing the hard curve beneath his sweater. "We're home. You can stop trying to break out through my ribs."

Another vicious movement. Shane sucked in a breath, and froze. The scent. He inhaled again. Cedar. Leather. Ilya. Not the faded ghost trapped in an old shirt. Fresh. *Impossible*.

Shane's fingers slowly loosened around the grocery bag and reached down to clutch his belly.

A violent roll beneath his palm, followed by a kick so hard it stole his breath. *Oh*.

Very slowly, Shane turned. The rocking chair beside the crib had been empty when he'd left that morning. It wasn't empty now. Ilya sat there. Bigger than Shane remembered.

Terrifyingly still.

His blue eyes were fixed on Shane.

For one impossible second, neither of them breathed.

Shane's hand flew over his stomach.

Ilya's gaze followed it.

Then lifted back to Shane's face.

His expression didn't change.

"*Hello, omega.*"

The world had narrowed to the space between them, to the scent of Shane real, alive, *here*, filling the dim apartment. Ilya felt strangely disconnected from his own body, as if he were standing several feet behind himself, watching the scene unfold through a thick pane of glass. The three pills Galina had insisted he take performed their function with clinical precision. They banked the volcanic fire of his emotions, turning the screaming chaos inside him into a distant, muffled roar. He was calm. He was in control. It was an unnatural, chilling serenity.

Inside, however, he was anything but calm.

Seeing Shane in front of him after five months was a physical shock that reverberated through every cell. Shane was *here*. He looked even more beautiful than before somehow. His body had changed, curved and heavy with their child beneath a simple sweater. He was the most beautiful thing Ilya had ever seen. A part of him, the part that had spent months surviving on photographs and memories, wanted to cross the room and simply touch him. To put his hands on Shane's face, to feel the warmth of his skin and prove he wasn't a figment of his imagination. He wanted to check every inch of him, assure himself he was healthy, that his baby was thriving. He wanted to bury his face in the junction of Shane's neck and shoulder and breathe him in until the scent overwrote the pale, fading ghost that had haunted Ilya's every waking moment. He wanted to ask, in a voice cracked with hope, *Did you miss me? Do you still love me? Did you still need me?*

He wanted him back so badly the wanting was a humiliating, raw ache in his throat.

None of this showed.

Because wrapped around that desperate, starving love was five months of concentrated rage. Ilya looked at the pronounced curve of Shane's stomach, at the hand instinctively splayed over it in protection, and he saw everything that had been stolen from him. Shane had left, carrying their child. Shane had decided Ilya would not be there. Shane had decided Ilya didn't deserve to know where they were, to witness the transformation of his own mate's body, to feel his child move. And now Shane was looking at him with wide, terrified eyes, as if **Ilya** were the intruder, the monster who had broken into this carefully constructed, Ilya-free life.

Something inside him went cold and hard, a diamond forming under pressure.

He slowly stood up from the rocking chair.

Shane backed away, a single, stumbling step that spoke volumes.

That retreat, that instinctive fear, hurt more than any knife could. Ilya refused to show that, either. The instinct that rose to the surface, clean and brutal through the chemical haze, was simple: **Obey me.**

After five months in which Ilya had possessed absolutely no control over whether Shane lived or died, returned or vanished forever, whether he would ever know his own child, Shane's immediate obedience became irrationally, vitally important. He needed to say something and have Shane do it. He needed proof, however small, that Shane could not simply make another unilateral decision and disappear from the face of the earth.

"Put the bag down," Ilya said, his voice low and flat.

Shane's fingers, which had been white-knuckled around the grocery bag, loosened. It thudded to the floor at his feet, a can rolling away under the table. He had already been doing it, or he did it automatically at the command. Ilya noted it. A tiny, dark part of him settled. *Good.*

He watched every minute movement, the rapid flutter of Shane's pulse in his throat, the tremble in his hands, the way his eyes darted toward the door and then back, calculating hopeless odds.

But what caught hardest in Ilya's chemically flattened mind was the change in Shane's scent, thick now with fear. Some vicious part of him registered it as proof. Shane finally understood that something between them had changed. He finally understood that Ilya was angry.

Instead, he said, "Turn around."

That was when Shane hesitated. His body tensed, his shoulders drawing back a fraction. It was a tiny thing, a mere second of resistance, but it affected Ilya far more than it should have. It was a spark thrown onto the dry tinder of his fury. Five months of defiance, condensed into one silent pause.

“Turn around, omega.”

Shane didn't. His hand moved behind his back, fumbling along the countertop. Ilya's eyes tracked the movement, and he saw the gleam of the knife handle a moment before Shane's fingers closed around it. Rather than erupting into visible rage, Ilya felt his lips curve into an unsettling, humorless smirk. The glass between him and his own emotions held.

“Better aim to kill, omega,” he said, his tone almost conversational.

Shane's eyes filled with tears, shimmering in the low light. “Ilya- ”

That name. His name in Shane's voice, after so long. It nearly destroyed him. For one second, internally, he was *Ilya* again. Shane's Ilya. The man who would have crossed continents because Shane asked him to. The man who wanted to hear his name again and again, just because Shane was alive to say it.

But outwardly, his expression became colder, the smirk vanishing. “No.” He took another deliberate step forward. “You do not call me that again. You've killed that man when you left.”

“Ilya, please- ”

“I gave you an instruction.”

This was the dynamic now? Pared down to its essential, terrifying core. He wasn't demanding Shane beg for reconciliation or declare his love. He was demanding compliance.

“Put the knife down.”

Shane's grip tightened. He didn't.

Ilya's anger spiked, sharp and hot behind the pane of glass. Not because he was frightened of the knife. He could take it from him in a heartbeat. It was because Shane had disobeyed him. *Five months. Five fucking months you did exactly as you pleased while I woke every morning wondering if you were alive. You can obey one fucking sentence.*

He stepped directly toward the blade, closing the distance between them. Shane's hand was trembling violently. The tip of the knife caught Ilya's sweater as he moved, snagging the fabric and making a tiny, inconsequential scratch against the skin beneath. Ilya glanced down at it, then back up at Shane's pale, terrified face.

"Again," he said, his voice dropping to a near whisper. "Put it down."

The knife clattered to the linoleum.

The satisfaction that washed through Ilya was immediate and profound, and somewhere, deep beneath the medication, it bothered him. It felt wrong. But it was drowned out by the simpler, more primal relief. *He listened. Finally.*

He moved closer, until he could feel the heat radiating from Shane's body. Shane tried to retreat, but the edge of the counter dug into his back. Ilya raised his hand, wanting to run his fingers across the constellation of freckles that he had dreamed about after so long but something made him follow his other train of thought and Ilya wrapped his hand around his throat instead, but he resisted the urge to squeeze, for now. His palm settled against the column of Shane's neck, his thumb resting over the frantic beat of his pulse. It was about control. Anchoring him. Possessing the space he occupied.

Shane whispered his name again, a broken sound. "Ilya..."

Internally, something inside Ilya surged painfully, thinking: *Say it again. Please. Just like that.*

But he only managed to voice “I told you not to call me that. We tried it your way before, now address me as Alpha.”

He leaned in, close enough that his nose almost brushed Shane’s temple. He inhaled, deeply. Shane. Not the faint trace of his scent in a sweater. Not the memory on a pillow. *Him*. Honeysuckle and rain and the unique, underlying sweetness that was his omega, deepened now by pregnancy. It was almost too much. His instincts screamed at him to press his face into Shane’s neck, to nuzzle, to scent him properly, to relearn and reclaim.

Instead, his fingers tightened, just a fraction. A warning. “You are going to listen to me now.”

Shane’s eyes squeezed shut, long lashes dark against his skin.

“Open your eyes.”

They flew open, wide and wet and fixed on him. Immediate obedience.

Ilya felt that awful, quiet pulse of relief again. “Good.”

That good hung in the air, quietly chilling. It was an evaluation. A reward for compliance. It showed exactly what he was seeking from him.

Then the anger, simmering beneath the unnatural calm, began to boil over. His grip gradually became too tight. He could feel the delicate structures of Shane’s throat under his hand. He started talking, his voice a low, relentless stream about the five months. The searching. The silence. The hollowed-out hell of not knowing. He wanted Shane to understand the magnitude of what he had done. His fingers tightened further.

But internally, the loving part of him, the part that was still Shane’s Ilya, was shoving against the glass, becoming frantic. *Stop*.

His fingers tightened. ***Stop.*** A small, frightened sound escaped Shane's lips. *You are hurting him.*

Yet Ilya's mouth was still moving, saying something cold and final about Shane never disappearing with his child again. He stepped closer, eliminating the last inch of space between them.

Their bodies touched. Shane's rounded stomach pressed against Ilya's abdomen.

Kick. A solid, unmistakable thump against him. Ilya froze. Every thought, every word, every ounce of rage vanished. Another hard kick, directly against him, a deliberate push from within.

His hand loosened around Shane's throat because his body reacted before his mind could, the shock overriding the command for control. He looked down, his gaze dropping to where their bodies met.

Bean kicked him again.

That was his baby. *His.* The life he and Shane had made together. The child he had dreamed of, feared for, longed for. Everything he had suppressed for months, the yearning, the grief, the wonder, flooded upward, a tidal wave threatening to shatter the glass. He wanted to drop to his knees. He wanted to put both hands on Shane's stomach. He wanted to talk to their little Bean, to feel every movement, to ask Shane when this started, what it felt like, *everything*. He wanted to know every single thing he had missed.

But he still needed control. The fear of Shane slipping away again was a vise around his own heart.

So when Shane instinctively shifted backward, trying to put space between them, Ilya's hand dropped from his throat and immediately caught Shane's wrist, his grip firm.

“Don’t you dare move.” He growled out.

His eyes remained fixed on Shane’s stomach, waiting. Another kick, a softer roll this time. Ilya’s internal thought was devastatingly simple: *Hello, bean.*

But he didn’t say it. Not yet. Part of him yelled out in his brain that Shane didn’t deserve softness from him. Not yet.

After several seconds of silent communion, feeling the proof of life through the layers of clothing, he finally raised his eyes to Shane’s face. Shane was watching him, tears tracking silently down his cheeks, his expression a mask of fear and confusion and something else Ilya couldn’t bear to name.

His voice, when he finally spoke, was quiet, devoid of its earlier sharpness but leaving no room for argument.

“Sit.”

Because even after the first touch from his child had nearly cracked him open, the only way this version of Ilya- medicated, terrified, and raging, knew how to keep Shane from disappearing again was to make him stay exactly where he was put. Shane had no idea what he had unleashed by running away. If he thought he was being controlled before, he wouldn’t be able to even comprehend what was to come.

The command had left his mouth and Ilya saw the flicker of indecision in Shane’s eyes, a microsecond of weighing defiance against survival. It was too much. Before Shane could choose to obey on his own, Ilya caught him roughly by the wrist and pulled him toward the small sofa against the far wall.

Shane stumbled, off-balance from the sudden motion and the unfamiliar distribution of his own pregnant weight. Ilya's other hand shot out instinctively, bracing Shane's elbow, steadying him. The movement was pure muscle memory, an autonomic response drilled into him over years of protecting what was his. His body still knew how to take care of Shane, how to prevent a fall, how to cushion an impact. The realization sliced through the chemical haze, a clean, sharp cut of self-loathing. *Even now. Even like this.*

He hated the contradiction. To punish it, he shoved Shane down onto the sofa cushions harder than necessary, though his hands still guided the descent, still ensured the landing was controlled, the jolt to Shane's body and the life within it minimized. The rage and the care existed in the same gesture, inseparable and sickening.

Before either could draw breath to speak, a quick, firm knock rattled the interior door that led upstairs to the main house.

Shane's panic was instantaneous, a visible jolt that tightened every muscle. His eyes flew to the door, wide with a terror that had nothing to do with Ilya and everything to do with exposing the fragile fiction of this life.

Ilya went completely still. Every sense focused on the door, his body coiling with a predator's readiness, though he remained seated, a dark statue in the dim room.

The door cracked open just enough for a slice of warmer, brighter light from the hallway to cut across the floor. A cheerful, maternal voice called through without Ruth Fischer actually looking inside. "Honey, make sure you take your pills, and I left a piece of cake in the fridge if you get hungry later! Remember, Sam is taking you to the doctor tomorrow. Goodnight!"

The door clicked shut.

The silence that followed was thick enough to choke on. Shane had closed his eyes, a portrait of despair.

Then Ilya heard it: a low, rumbling growl vibrating in his own chest. He hadn't consciously summoned it. It simply emerged, a seismic reaction to a single word.

Sam.

He knew the name. He had seen him in the photograph, standing too close to the firelight, his posture casual beside a smiling, pregnant Shane. Pavel had mentioned him. A local alpha. Protective. Comfortable.

But hearing it here, in Shane's secret space that he had created away from him, attached to the mundane logistics of Shane's life, pills, cake, a ride to a *doctor's appointment*, was different. It was intimate. It painted a picture that Ilya's mind instantly colored in with devastating detail: another alpha driving Shane through these quiet streets. Sitting beside him in a sterile waiting room. Hearing the whoosh-whoosh-whoosh of their baby's heartbeat on a monitor. Knowing the due date, the baby's position, and the results of tests. Helping Shane in and out of a car when his back ached. Carrying bags of baby things. Being present for milestones Ilya had been erased from.

Somewhere in his mind, Ilya recognized that he should step away and cool off for a few minutes before he said or did something that he wouldn't be able to take back. He was thankful to Galina letting him know that he would be in better control of himself if he took the extra pill- otherwise he was sure that Shane would've been seriously hurt.

But what surfaced through the numbness, shaped by the pills and the five-month wound, was colder, harder. "You had another alpha near my child."

Shane's head snapped up, his fear sharpening into something more urgent. He understood the lethal direction of Ilya's thoughts immediately. "Please don't hurt them. They're good people. They've done nothing wrong."

Ilya's attention snapped fully onto him, the blue of his eyes glacial. "You let other people around what is mine." The words were flat, final.

Shane opened his mouth, a familiar name forming on his lips by instinct. "Il-"

Ilya's expression changed. Not a flinch, but a subtle hardening, a warning light flashing in the depths of his chemically-stilled gaze.

Shane caught it. Swallowed. Corrected himself, the word a whisper laced with shame and strategy. "Alpha. Please."

That correction, the submission in it, the acknowledgment of hierarchy, sent a dark, satisfying pulse through Ilya's veins. He despised how much he craved it, how essential that tiny proof of fealty felt after months of powerlessness, but he craved it nonetheless. It was like a drop of cool water after a drought.

Shane rushed on, his voice low and pleading. "Ruth, Walter, Sam, everyone here... they've helped me when I had nowhere else to go. They fed me. They drove me to appointments when I couldn't. They helped me get the crib, the clothes... they've been nothing but kind. Please. Don't punish them for helping me."

Ilya made a quiet, dismissive *tsk* sound, the kind reserved for a child presenting a feeble excuse. "You are not in a position to ask anything from me." He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, his voice dropping to a deadly calm. "You shut up. You obey."

And Shane did. His jaw clenched, his lips pressed into a thin line. He looked down at his own hands, folded tightly in his lap to try to stop the shaking, and fell silent.

The silence should have been a victory. It was what he'd demanded. Instead, it curdled in the space between them. For months, Ilya would have traded anything, his career, his fortune, own life just to hear Shane's voice again. He had played old interview clips on a loop just to listen to the cadence of his speech. He had hallucinated that voice in empty rooms. Now Shane sat two feet away, alive, and Ilya had ordered him into muteness. A part of him, the part still screaming behind the glass, wanted to rescind the command, to beg for any sound, even a sob.

He didn't.

His gaze dropped instead to the gentle full curve of Shane's stomach, obscured by the soft wool of his sweater. It was in the way. Without a word, Ilya leaned over him, his movement deliberate. Shane flinched violently, his whole body tensing, his arms coming up in a weak, instinctive cross over his torso. He misunderstood. He thought Ilya's intent was violence, something worse.

That reaction, that expectation of brutality from *him*, briefly pierced the fog. Some buried, horrified part of Ilya registered it: *He thinks I would hurt him. He believes I am capable of that.*

But it wasn't really out of the realm of possibilities. He felt crazed, out of control and the tether to his sanity was very thin at that moment. Rather than reassuring him, the shock of it fueled a perverse need to assert the opposite. He wasn't here to maim. His fingers hooked into the hem of Shane's sweater and tore it upward, not gently, just enough to expose the rounded, taut skin of his stomach.

And then everything shifted again.

The anger didn't vanish, but it receded, becoming a dim roar in a distant chamber. All that existed was the reality before him. There was their child.

Shane's stomach was a perfect, firm dome, the skin stretched smooth and shiny over the curve. Ilya's eyes, which knew every plane and angle of Shane's body with intimate precision, catalogued the changes: the faint, cute silvery stretch marks beginning to radiate from his navel, the darker line bisecting the curve, the subtle shift in the texture of his skin. Each tiny change was a monument to time Ilya had lost, a milestone he'd missed. It devastated him to know that he'd miss so much.

Slowly, he sank down onto the sofa beside Shane, the cushions dipping under his weight. His hand hovered for a moment, then settled, palm flat, against the warm, tight curve.

Bean moved.

A distinct, rolling push directly into the center of his palm.

Ilya froze.

Another movement, a slower, dragging turn beneath his hand.

Internally, he fractured completely. The stupid app with its blueberries and lemons. The hollow, cartoonish images he'd stared at alone in the dark. All the nights spent imagining this exact sensation, the living proof of his child, right here, answering his touch. His first instinct was a wave of tenderness so vast it threatened to drown him. He wanted to whisper *privet, malysh*. He wanted to ask Shane a hundred questions: *Does it always move this much? Do you know if it's a boy or a girl? Is it healthy? Have you been eating enough? Sleeping at all? Have you been scared?* The questions piled up behind his racing mind, a desperate interrogation.

But the medication, the resentment, the wounded pride, they formed a dam. Everything remained locked behind the cold exterior.

A faint wince tightened Shane's features. His breath hitched.

Ilya's eyes flicked upward, instantly alert. Shane said nothing, his face carefully neutral again. He'd been told to shut up. He was following orders.

The realization hit Ilya: Shane was in pain, and he was afraid to say so because Ilya had commanded silence. The absurd, cruel contradiction of it hung in the air. For one second, the old Ilya, Shane's Ilya, strained against the chemical restraints, almost breaking through.

Instead of an apology, his voice came out clipped, impatient. "Why did you make that face?"

Shane hesitated, his eyes darting to Ilya's and away.

“Answer me when I ask you a question,” Ilya grated out, the irrationality of his own dictates curdling his tone.

“Baby’s been... really active all day,” Shane said quietly, his voice hoarse. “My ribs ache. My back hurts. It’s just... uncomfortable. Nothing’s wrong.”

Ilya immediately began cataloging the information. Shane was in pain. There were pills here for him. He had a doctor’s appointment tomorrow. Sam was supposed to take him.

His jaw tightened, the possessive fury returning in a fresh wave. “He will not take you.”

Shane looked at him, a question in his exhausted eyes.

“I will.” The statement hung in the air, surprising them both. Ilya hadn’t planned to say it. Hadn’t planned on being in this place for longer than it took to haul Shane into the car and get him on a plane to go back home. It wasn’t an offer of care or reconciliation but it would be best to get a debriefing on the progress of the pregnancy before a flight.

More importantly, Shane was thinking about escape. Ilya could see it in the slight tension in his shoulders, the way his eyes flicked once, briefly, toward the exterior door. He knew the old couple who owned the home were upstairs. He knew Shane had enough people on his corner in the town. He also knew, with terrible clarity, that if Shane went screaming right now, it’ll bring them running, and even with all the anger and rage he felt right now, he wouldn’t want to hurt people who only thought they were doing good.

Ilya’s hand was still spread over Shane’s stomach. He felt another slow, deliberate movement roll beneath his palm. And for the first time, one soft, unbidden thought escaped the inner prison and floated, clear and untouched by the chemical dam, into the forefront of his mind.

Ya zdes’, malysh. He didn’t say it aloud. The words remained trapped inside, a secret between him and the child he could finally feel, separated from the man carrying them by a chasm of his own making.

The connection was there, solid and undeniable beneath his palm. A life, his life, entwined with Shane's. He did not speak out loud what he really wanted to say, he did not soften his expression. He simply held his hand there, while inside, the war raged silently. The part of him that was still *Ilya* wanted to pull Shane into his arms, to murmur apologies against his hair, to promise everything would be different. The part of him that was five months hollowed out and furious wanted to demand answers, to make Shane feel even a fraction of the helplessness he'd endured.

He did neither. The medication made the choice for him, turning the storm into a distant rumble. He just sat, hand splayed, feeling the slow rolls and shifts, cataloging this new reality with a clinical detachment that felt like someone else's.

A quiet, firm knock at the exterior door broke the silence. Ilya didn't move. The door opened, and Anatoly stepped inside, his sharp eyes taking in the scene in an instant. Shane on the sofa, frozen, sweater torn, face pale and tear-streaked. Ilya beside him, too close, his hand a possessive weight on the exposed curve of Shane's stomach. The baby chose that moment to push against Ilya's palm, a visible ripple beneath the skin.

Anatoly's gaze flicked from the movement to Shane's frightened eyes, then to Ilya's impassive face. He addressed Ilya in rapid, low Russian. "Ilya. He is heavily pregnant, look at him. He is terrified. Whatever this is, it can wait. Stress like this is not good for him or the child. We did not search for months only for you to endanger him the moment we found him."

A flash of defensive heat surged in Ilya's chest. *Another one telling me what to do with what is mine.* But the words "endanger him" hooked into something deeper, cutting through the chemical chill. *The child.* Such a clinical way of referring to his baby. His hand stilled, he looked at Shane properly, beyond the fact of his presence, and saw what his rage had blinded him to: the fine tremor in Shane's clasped hands, the shallow, controlled breaths, the tracks of salt drying on his cheeks, the rigid way he held himself beneath Ilya's touch, bracing for the next blow.

The revulsion was sudden and nauseating. He was the cause of that tension. He was the threat Shane was braced against.

He needed to leave. Now. Before the dam holding back the chaos inside him cracked.

He stood abruptly, the motion making Shane flinch. Ilya ignored the fresh pang that caused and spoke to Anatoly in Russian, his voice flat. “Stay with him. Do not let him leave this room. Do not let him near the phone. Call me if he tries anything.” The commands were absolute, born of a fear so profound it could only manifest as total control.

He didn’t look at Shane again. He couldn’t. He stalked out the door into the biting cold, fumbling a cigarette from his pocket. His hands shook as he lit it. The first drag did nothing to steady him. He pulled out his phone and called Galina.

Inside, the space Ilya vacated felt both safer and more charged. Anatoly remained near the door, respecting the distance. He felt like an intruder in a deeply private conflict. For years, Shane Hollander had been data points and digital ghosts. Seeing him now, a young man, visibly pregnant, curled into himself on a worn sofa in a small, shabby basement was very disorienting. The fear in his eyes was real, and Anatoly’s role in delivering Ilya to this doorstep sat heavily in his gut.

“Mr. Hollander,” he began, his voice quieter, less formal than it was with Ilya. “I am Anatoly. I work for Mr. Rozanov.” He paused, searching for words. “I am sorry. This was not how I thought this would happen.”

Shane’s wary eyes studied him. “Are you going to stop me if I try to leave?” His voice was hoarse.

Anatoly did not insult his intelligence with a lie. “He ordered me not to let you leave. I work for him.” He saw the hope drain from Shane’s face and added, the words chosen carefully, “I will not stand by and let him physically harm you, though. I cannot promise you much right now. But I can promise I will do everything I can to make sure neither you nor the baby is physically hurt.”

The word “physically” hung in the air, a stark admission of all the other ways Shane could be harmed. It wasn’t comfortable, but it was a line in the sand. Shane absorbed it, his body uncurling slightly from its defensive hunch.

Outside, the cold was a slap. Galina answered on the third ring. "Ilya?"

The words spilled out of him in jagged fragments, punctuated by sharp pulls on the cigarette. He told her about finding the apartment, waiting, Shane pulling a knife. "I grabbed his throat," he confessed, the admission ugly in the cold air. "I was angry. I wanted to strangle him. Then the baby kicked me." He pressed his free hand to his own stomach, as if he could still feel the gentle impact. "He's been living with these people. There's an alpha. Sam." The jealousy and betrayal curdled the words. "I don't know what to do. One second I want to... hold him. Next I want him to understand what he did to me. I want to hurt him as badly as he hurt me."

Galina's initial response was swift and clear. "Putting your hands on his throat was unacceptable, Ilya. You broke into his home. Of course he was terrified. His fear *matters*." Her condemnation was a lifeline to sanity, affirming the part of him that was horrified.

Then her tone shifted, becoming clinical, probing. "How far along is he? Does he seem physically well? Is he eating? The baby is moving?"

Ilya described the frantic activity, how it had spiked with Shane's fear but continued, strong and insistent, beneath his own hand.

Galina was quiet for a moment. "Don't romanticize it," she cautioned, but her voice was thoughtful. "Pregnancy, separation from a bonded alpha, prolonged fear... it makes an omega's instincts volatile. He's been making every survival decision alone for months while carrying your child." She said slowly. Full with compassion for Shane, then gently pivoted. "He may not need gentleness right now, Ilya. He may need stability. Firm is not cruel. He's exhausted, hormonal, and scared. If his panic leads to him running again, or refusing care, that isn't good for anyone. Someone has to be calm enough to make practical decisions."

"You think I should control him?" Ilya asked, the words tasting both wrong and desirable.

“No,” she said sharply. “I think you need to stop thinking about winning.” A deliberate pause. “But I also don’t think allowing a terrified pregnant omega that’s been exposed to other alpha’s during a very vulnerable time, has done who knows what to keep from pining, we need to exert our better judgement.”

“Did you take the medication?” she asked when Ilya didn’t reply.

“The last three. Before I landed.”

He heard her exhale, a sound of relief. “What happened with his throat proves how necessary they were. Without them, it could have been much worse before you even realized.” The statement disturbed him because he knew it was true. She was protecting Shane from him.

Then she pushed further. “Until I can arrange another prescription, you need to treat yourself as potentially dangerous after the 24 hour active period. No drinking.” She listed the complications that could happen if he mixed alcohol, then seamlessly provided the mandate. “But you also cannot let him disappear, make impulsive decisions, isolate himself, or dictate everything from a place of pure fear. This is temporary. Just until he is calmer, medically evaluated, and through the pregnancy.”

“You don’t need his obedience because you’re his alpha, Ilya. You need his cooperation because right now, neither of you is thinking clearly. If he cannot give you cooperation voluntarily, then you make the safest decision available, and you accept that he may hate you for it for a little while.”

Finally, she circled back to the baby. “The extreme movement... it could be a response to the distress, yes. Or to the sudden return of your scent, your presence. Did the baby settle when you touched him? Did Shane’s scent change?”

Ilya thought of the kick against his abdomen, the immediate roll beneath his palm. “Yes.”

Galina let the silence sit between them, heavy with implication. “Then perhaps you should consider that your family needs your stability right now more than it needs your anger.”

They need their alpha. She never said the words. She didn't have to. He heard them anyway.

He felt calmer. Grateful. She had talked him back from the brink again. "Spasibo, Galina."

"How many pills do you have left?" she asked, her voice casual.

"None."

A beat of silence. A tiny, almost imperceptible gap on the line. "All right," she said, smooth once more. "I'll take care of it."

He ended the call, crushed the cigarette under his heel, and looked back toward the basement window. Through the glass, he saw Anatoly, sitting respectfully apart, and Shane, who had pulled his sweater down and now sat with his arms wrapped around his middle, a look of dread still on his face.

The sight was a physical ache. But Galina's words settled over it, making sense of the chaos.

No violence. No rage. Keep him safe. Keep him calm. Keep him here.

A temporary, safety-driven necessity. He walked back to the door, the cold clarity settling deep into his bones. He would not hurt him. But Shane was not leaving. However he had to ensure that, for now, was just a practical detail.

The cold clarity from Galina's words was like a balm around his mind as Ilya pushed the door open and stepped back inside. The frantic, red-edged rage had been filed down to a cool, manageable resolve. He was calm, he was in control. He would not hurt Shane. In his mind, these facts coalesced into a single, inevitable conclusion, Shane was coming with him. Tonight. It was not a discussion; it was the next logical step in securing what was his.

“Get whatever you need,” Ilya said, his voice devoid of its earlier sharpness but leaving no room for negotiation. “We are leaving.”

Shane’s head snapped up from where he sat curled on the sofa. The fear that had momentarily receded flooded back into his eyes, raw and immediate. But he didn’t shout or refuse. Instead, his voice emerged strained, tactical. “I can’t. Not tonight.” He gestured weakly toward the ceiling. “Ruth and Walter... they’ll notice. They’ll come down. And I have my appointment with the doctor tomorrow.” He swallowed, his hands pressing against his stomach. “They’ve spent months... if they wake up and this place is empty, they’ll think something terrible happened to me.”

Ilya’s first response was a cold curl of his lip. “Something did happen. Your alpha found you.”

“Please,” Shane whispered, the word cracking. “I’m not trying to run. Just... give me one night. Let me tell them something tomorrow. Let me go to the appointment. Let me leave without terrifying people who did nothing but help me when I had nothing.”

The plea, framed around the innocence of strangers rather than his own desire, struck a chord Ilya hadn’t expected. He didn’t care about their worry, but he remembered the affection in Ruth’s voice through the door. He remembered Shane’s desperate begging: *Don’t hurt them*. More critically, Galina’s voice echoed in his head: ...allowing a terrified pregnant omega to run into the night... isn’t good judgment. Forcing Shane, exhausted, distressed, and visibly uncomfortable, into a car for a multi-hour drive in the dark felt like the opposite of the stability he was now tasked with providing.

Anatoly, who had been observing silently from his post near the door, chose that moment to speak, his tone carefully neutral. “It is late. We have nowhere prepared for him tonight. The doctor tomorrow... it may be useful to have current information before travel.”

Ilya’s gaze flicked between Anatoly’s pragmatic expression and Shane’s pale, pleading face. The internal calculation was swift. Delaying was a tactical concession, not a surrender.

“Fine,” Ilya said, the word clipped. “Until morning.” He then turned his full attention to Anatoly. “Leave.”

Anatoly didn’t move immediately. “Ilya-”

“There was an inn. Several miles back. Go there. Sleep. Come back in the morning.”

A tense silence stretched. Anatoly’s eyes shifted to Shane, then back to Ilya. When he spoke again, it was in rapid, firm Russian, deliberately excluding Shane from the exchange. “Promise me you will not hurt him.”

Ilya’s posture stiffened, irritation flaring at the supervision. “I said I would not.”

“Don’t frighten him. Not punish him. Nothing. Think of the child.” Anatoly’s voice was low but unyielding. “Promise me.”

Ilya’s jaw clenched. Shane was sitting right there, a living testament to the marks Ilya’s fingers had left. The humiliation of being extracted like this warred with the colder part of him that recognized Anatoly’s demand as a barrier against his own worst impulses. “I promise,” he ground out, each word distinct.

Only then did Anatoly nod. He moved toward the door, but paused one last time, his gaze settling on Shane. It wasn’t reassuring, it was grim, apologetic, a silent acknowledgment that he was leaving him in the lion’s den by necessity, not choice. Then he was gone, closing the damaged door as best he could behind him.

The silence that descended was absolute and utterly different. The buffer of a witness was gone. They were completely alone again.

Ilya had fantasized about this moment a thousand times. None of the fantasies resembled this chilling quiet.

On the sofa, Shane shifted. Then shifted again, a subtle, pained adjustment. One hand crept around to press into the small of his back. His face contorted in a brief, uncontrolled wince before he smoothed his expression.

“What is wrong?” Ilya asked, his voice flat.

“Nothing.” Shane’s reply was automatic, defensive. Then, reluctantly: “My back hurts. My ribs. I’m tired.”

Ilya’s eyes tracked to the bed against the far wall. “Go lie down.”

Shane hesitated, his body language screaming reluctance to put himself in a more vulnerable position.

“That was not a suggestion,” Ilya said, the hardness returning to his tone.

With obvious effort, Shane obeyed. Getting off the low sofa was a production. He braced a hand, twisted his torso awkwardly to avoid compressing his stomach, and tried to lever himself up. A soft grunt of pain escaped him as the movement pulled at sore muscles and protesting joints.

Ilya stood automatically.

Shane froze, his entire body locking in expectation of being grabbed or yanked.

The reaction was a tiny, fresh wound. Instead of grabbing him, Ilya closed the distance and caught Shane’s elbow only as he wobbled, his grip firm but steadying. The moment Shane found his balance, he jerked his arm away.

He walked the few steps to the bed with slow, careful movements. When he reached it, he turned, and his breath hitched slightly upon finding Ilya had followed him to the bedside.

An awkward, painful beat throbbed between them.

Then Shane asked, so quietly it was almost inaudible, “Can I have some privacy?”

Ilya knew exactly what he meant. He wanted to change into sleep clothes without Ilya’s eyes on him. A smirk, unnerving in its lack of warmth, touched Ilya’s lips. “Privacy from me?” he murmured. “Bit late for modesty, no? I know every inch of you.”

Shane flushed, but this time anger simmered beneath the embarrassment, lending a rare heat to his voice. “You haven’t seen *this* body.”

The words were stark, seeming to acknowledge how fractured and wrong this entire situation had been. Because Shane was right. Ilya knew the athlete’s body, the lover’s body. He had missed every gradual transformation. The expanding curve, the new marks, the subtle shifts in proportion, this was a body that had lived an evolutionary chapter without him. For half a second, the smirk vanished, revealing a stark, hollow ache.

He covered it with arrogance. “Still you.”

Shane seemed to realize arguing was futile. With a resigned stiffness, he sat on the edge of the mattress, laboriously lifted his legs, and lay down fully dressed on top of the blankets, denying Ilya even the glimpse of skin changing clothes would allow.

Now, everything slowed.

Ilya watched, initially interpreting Shane’s restlessness as continued nerves. But it quickly became apparent this was something else entirely. Shane tried lying on his left side. Almost immediately, he adjusted, a hand going to his side where Bean had clearly lodged a protest. He tugged a pillow beneath the heavy curve of his stomach. His face tightened as his lower

back objected to the new position. With a muffled sigh, he rolled carefully, agonizingly, onto his right side, only to wince again as pressure shifted somewhere else.

This was Ilya's first prolonged, unobstructed view of the mundane, unglamorous reality of Shane's pregnancy. Not the serene, glowing image from commercials or the abstract updates from an app. His ankles were swollen over the tops of his socks. Simple acts like turning over required a lot more effort. Bean's movements made him flinch internally. Pillows were arranged, rejected, rearranged. A frustrated huff escaped Shane when one refused to stay put.

And Ilya knew none of it. Five months ago, he would have known Shane's routine instinctively, which side he preferred, how many pillows he needed, the exact spot on his back that ached. Now, he was a spectator to a foreign ritual.

Finally, Shane managed to wedge a pillow solidly beneath his stomach and another between his knees. He let out a long, exhausted breath, his eyes closing.

Ilya remained standing beside the bed.

After a minute, Shane's eyes opened. He found Ilya still there, watching. "Are you seriously going to watch me sleep?"

"Yes."

The answer was simple, devoid of explanation. Because beneath the medication, the domination, the seething anger, hummed one humiliating, unspeakable truth: If Ilya closed his eyes, Shane might disappear again. The terror of waking to another empty space, another five months of silence, was greater than any need for rest.

He dragged the wooden rocking chair from beside the crib and positioned it a few feet from the bed, where he could see Shane's form beneath the patched quilt.

As he settled into the vigil, a fresh, restless stirring began within Shane's stomach, visible even through the layers of clothing. Bean, it seemed, was not done for the night.

The grey dawn light seeped into the basement apartment, a slow bleed of reality into the stagnant night. Ilya hadn't moved from the rocking chair. Sleep had been impossible, a series of micro-naps, his eyelids sliding shut for seconds at a time before snapping open, heart hammering, to confirm Shane was still there, a dark shape beneath the blankets. The fear was irrational, humiliating, and absolute. If he slept, Shane would evaporate. It was the only truth his exhausted mind could hold onto.

Throughout the night, his mind went back and forth between the rage and the joy that had been warring in his mind all day. He wanted to crawl into the tiny bed and hold his mate. He wanted to wake him up and force him to beg for forgiveness. He had wished he had a couple more pills to push the rage down but he'd just need to make due until the morning.

On the bed, Shane stirred. A soft, pained sound escaped him as he shifted, one hand automatically going to the curve of his stomach. For a few blessed seconds, his face was soft with sleep, confusion clouding his features. Then his eyes opened fully, landing on Ilya sitting sentinel in the corner. Memory crashed back in. Shane's breath hitched, his body going rigid beneath the quilt. He didn't speak. He simply looked, the exhaustion and dread in his gaze more eloquent than any accusation.

He pushed himself up slowly, wincing as his back protested. The mundane mechanics of his pregnancy were a silent rebuke. He rubbed his stomach, waiting, his brow furrowed. A tiny, internal shift finally answered him, and some of the tension leaked from his shoulders. Bean was quiet this morning, spent from yesterday's frenzy.

The silence stretched, thick with everything unsaid. Finally, Shane spoke, his voice rough with sleep and strain. "I need to go upstairs. Ruth and Walter will expect me for breakfast. Sam... the appointment is this afternoon."

Ilya nodded once, a curt acknowledgment. He stood, his own body stiff from the long night sitting in a crapped chair. As Shane moved toward the interior door, he paused, his hand on the knob. He turned back, and the look on his face was pure, undiluted anxiety.

“Please,” Shane said, the word barely audible.

Ilya waited.

“Please be... cordial with them.” Shane took a shaky breath, the words tumbling out faster now. “They don’t know who I am. They don’t know who you are. All they know is that I showed up pregnant and alone and that the baby’s other parent wasn’t in the picture. That’s it. That’s all I ever told them.” His voice cracked. “Ruth took care of me. Walter fixed things. They fed me, they helped me get ready for Bean, they drove me places, they included me... and they never, ever pushed me when I didn’t want to talk.” His eyes were bright with unshed tears, not of fear now, but of a fierce, protective guilt. “They’re good people. They helped me when they didn’t have to. Please don’t hurt them.”

Ilya listened, absorbing the plea. He saw the genuine emotion, the loyalty Shane felt for these strangers who had offered a kindness he himself had failed to provide. Galina’s voice filtered through his tired mind: *Stability. Practical decisions.*

“I can do that,” Ilya said, his tone unnervingly calm.

Shane’s shoulders slumped in visible relief.

Ilya let that relief hang for a second before adding, “If you do something for me.”

The hope drained from Shane’s face, replaced by weary resignation. He’d expected a price.

“I will play along with your story,” Ilya continued, methodical, as if outlining a business arrangement. “I will be polite. I will not threaten them. I will not reveal anything. I will behave exactly as you wish me to behave upstairs.” He took a step closer, his voice dropping,

not to a whisper, but to a low, indisputable register. “In exchange, until our child is born, you submit to me. In all things. Doctors. Travel. Where we stay. Who you speak to. What is safe? No more negotiations. No more decisions made from fear.”

Shane stared at him, his expression blank with shock. This wasn't a demand for reconciliation or a declaration of love. It was a cold, nothing warm in the blue eyes, no hint that this was just a bad joke. His Ilya, the one who he loved desperately, was still gone.

“And if I don't?” Shane asked, his voice hollow.

Ilya didn't answer. He didn't need to. His gaze lifted deliberately to the ceiling, to the floorboards above which Ruth and Walter Fischer were presumably beginning their day.

A single tear tracked down Shane's cheek. He swiped at it angrily, furious at his own display of weakness. He looked at the door, then back at Ilya, the calculation clear in his exhausted eyes. The cost of defiance was written on the ceiling.

“Fine,” he whispered.

Ilya's gaze remained fixed on him. “Fine, what?”

Shane swallowed, the muscle in his jaw working. When he spoke, the words were ash in his mouth. “Fine, Alpha.”

The submission should have been a victory. For months, a feral part of him had craved this exact acknowledgement, this restoration of the natural order Shane had shattered by leaving. But hearing it now, extracted under duress, fueled by Shane's fear for innocent bystanders, it gave him nothing. It felt hollow and sick. He pushed the feeling down, deep beneath the chemical calm. The goal was stability. Safety. This was the method that he needed to follow for now until Shane would accept him back and stay willingly by his side.

Shane turned away, moving to the small dresser. He began pulling out clothes, soft pants, a long-sleeved shirt.

“You won’t need to pack anything,” Ilya said, watching him. “I will replace whatever the baby needs. Everything here.”

Shane’s hands stilled. He looked slowly around the room, at the physical evidence of the life he’d built. The crib with its handmade blanket. The tiny, folded clothes in the drawer, some new, some gifted, some bought second-hand. The ultrasound picture tucked into the edge of the mirror. The knitted hats from well-meaning neighbors. The dresser Walter had helped him carry down the stairs.

He picked up one of the hats, a tiny blue thing with a lopsided pom-pom. His thumb brushed over the uneven stitches.

“You can’t replace pictures,” he said quietly.

“I can provide everything my child needs,” Ilya repeated, the words logical to him. Better quality. Finer materials. Anything money could provide.

Shane looked at him, and for the first time, the dominant emotion wasn’t fear, but a profound, weary sadness. “You can’t replace things people made for me.”

Ilya frowned, not comprehending. His money could buy much more superior versions.

Shane seemed to read his confusion. He placed the hat gently back in the drawer. “Nothing you buy can take its place.” He didn’t say it to wound. He stated it as a simple, devastating fact. These people had been here. They had witnessed the progress he had missed. Their kindness was woven into the fabric of this version of his life. Ilya’s fortune was irrelevant. It could not buy back those five months.

Shane gathered his chosen clothes and turned toward the bathroom. Ilya started to object, the refusal of privacy from the night before still his default.

Shane stopped at the door and looked back at him, a flash of his old, familiar irritation breaking through the numbness. “I’m changing my underwear, Ilya.” A beat. “Unless submitting to you means I don’t get to pee alone either.”

The bluntness, the faint echo of the man who used to sass him without fear, caught Ilya off guard. His jaw tightened. After a tense moment, he conceded. “Five minutes.”

The door closed. Ilya stood motionless, listening to the faint sounds within. The rustle of fabric. The running of water. He imagined Shane at the sink, splashing cold water on his face, staring at his own reflection, perhaps seeing the faint shadows left by Ilya’s fingers and choosing a shirt with a higher collar. He didn’t know why he said his condition would be. Submitting in the bedroom was something that just had naturally happened since the very start and it hadn’t ever been an issue. Ilya loved when Shane used to stand up to him. Loved that after a while, the little quirks that made Shane *Shane* would come out and they could joke around together. He loved that Shane was strong and brave when he needed to be. But that had to be put aside now. Their relationship was at risk and no matter what Galina thought, there was no way that he would really let Shane go. The thought was another small, hollow ache.

When the door opened, Shane emerged. He looked more composed, the signs of tears washed away. He met Ilya’s eyes, his own flat, determined and steady. He walked to the interior door, paused with his hand on the knob, and looked back one final time.

“You promised,” he said.

Ilya held his gaze. “And you promised me.”

Shane took a deep, steadying breath, and opened the door.

The change in atmosphere was immediate and jarring. The dim, tense basement gave way to a wave of warmth, light, and the rich smell of coffee and frying bacon. From the kitchen

came the comfortable murmur of Walter's voice and the clatter of dishes.

Ruth looked over as she heard the door, a warm smile already on her face. "Morning, honey. How's your ba-" Her words cut off as her eyes landed on the large, unfamiliar alpha following closely behind Shane. The smile didn't vanish, but it froze, solidified into something more careful.

Silence pooled in the sunny kitchen.

Shane took a half-step forward, a subtle movement that placed his body slightly between Ilya and the older couple. "Ruth. Walter. This is Ilya." He paused, the next words clearly rehearsed, necessary, and painful. "He's the baby's father."

Ruth's eyes widened almost imperceptibly. Months of unasked questions, of respectful silence, suddenly rearranged themselves. Her gaze swept from Shane's tense posture to his turtleneck, to the shadows under his eyes that spoke of a sleepless night, to the way Ilya stood just inside Shane's space, a possessive, looming presence.

Ilya watched her. He could immediately see why Shane liked her so much, she was very much like Yuna. She saw everything. "Good morning. Apologies for the intrusion but Shane's parents miss him and so did I."

Her smile returned, softening into something that looked genuinely welcoming, though her eyes remained sharp and watchful. "Ilya," she said, her voice warm and steady. "Well. We've heard absolutely nothing about you."

The greeting was perfectly polite. The subtext was a masterpiece of understated hostility. Ilya almost admired it. He inclined his head, the picture of civilized restraint. "A pleasure to meet you," he said, his voice carefully neutral. "Shane has told me of your kindness." He used the real name deliberately, a small test, a claim laid in the open.

Ruth's gaze flickered to Shane, then back to Ilya. She accepted the name without comment, another piece of the puzzle clicking quietly into place. "Well," she said again, turning back to the stove. "You're just in time for breakfast. Walter, set another place, please."

The performance had begun.

The breakfast that followed was nervewrecking. The warm, sunlit kitchen, fragrant with bacon and coffee, had Shane feeling on edge, his appetite gone. Ilya took the seat beside Shane at the crowded table, his large frame making the space feel suddenly smaller. He accepted a mug of coffee from Walter with a polite nod.

Ruth watched, her eyes missing nothing as she moved between stove and table. She saw the way Shane's gaze flicked toward the sugar bowl, then immediately away. She saw Ilya notice it too.

"No sugar," Ilya said, his voice casual, almost conversational, as he nudged the cream toward Shane instead. "The doctor in Ottawa said to avoid it in the third trimester. Makes the baby too active." It was said in a calm manner, his voice almost pleasant.

Shane's hand, halfway to the sugar, stilled. He pulled it back into his lap. "Right," he murmured.

Ruth's smile didn't falter, but her knuckles whitened slightly around the spatula. She remembered Evan's fondness for a little sweetness in his tea. She remembered him, just last week, laughing as he sprinkled sugar over his grapefruit, saying Bean demanded it.

Walter, bless him, remained cheerfully oblivious. He focused on heaping eggs onto plates. "So, Ilya, was it? Curious where you've been all this time. We were starting to think we would need to find Evan a stand in when the time came." He said casually in between bites of food, clapping Ilya amiably on the shoulder. "Glad you're here. A man should be with his omega at a time like this."

Ilya offered a thin, perfunctory smile. "Da. My mistake, taking so long."

The conversation limped forward. Ruth asked Shane about his sleep, her tone deliberately light. “You look tired, honey. That back keeping you up?”

Before Shane could form a reply, Ilya answered. “He slept poorly. The bed is inadequate.” He said it as if commenting on the weather, but the implication was clear: he knew how Shane had slept. He had been there, watching.

Shane’s eyes dropped to his plate. He pushed eggs around with his fork.

Then Ruth asked, her voice carefully neutral, “Sam’s still taking you to your appointment this morning, right? I told him to be here in half an hour.”

Ilya’s head turned slowly toward her. He didn’t look at Shane. “I will take him.”

The words weren’t loud, but they silenced the sunny kitchen with the weight of a decree. Ruth’s pleasant mask slipped for a single, telling second. Her gaze shot to Shane, who was staring fixedly at a knot in the wooden table, his jaw tight. He didn’t contradict Ilya. He didn’t say, *Actually, Sam is taking me*. He just sat there, a passive participant in the erasure of his own plans.

The front door opened then, and the sound of boots stamping off snow echoed in the hall. “Morning, all!” Sam’s voice, cheerful and familiar, called out.

Ilya went very still. Every muscle in his body locked, but under the table, Shane placed a trembling hand high on his thigh, and Ilya eased slightly though his expression remained a bland, polite mask.

Sam walked into the kitchen, bringing a gust of cold air and easy confidence. He went straight to the cupboard, pulled down his usual mug and poured himself coffee. He leaned against the counter, smiling at Ruth. “Smells amazing.” Then his eyes found Shane. “Hey, Evan. Back any better?” His concern was natural, friendly, born of the times they’ve spent together over the past few months. .

He hadn't even noticed Ilya yet.

This man knows what hurts when Shane wakes up, Ilya thought, the ice in his veins burning cold. Shane had deprived him of being there through the growth of his child. That would need to be a discussion for when they were alone again.

"A little," Shane said, his voice strained. He finally looked up, his eyes darting nervously from Sam to Ilya. "Sam, this is... Ilya. The baby's father."

Sam's easy smile faded into surprise, then a cautious, assessing neutrality. His eyes swept over Ilya, taking in his size, his posture, the way he dominated the space simply by existing in it. An alpha's recognition passed between them, a silent sizing up. Sam extended his hand. "Sam Fischer. Good to finally meet you."

Ilya stood, unfolding to his full height, and took Sam's hand. His grip was firm, crushing without being overtly aggressive. His smile was a flawless, empty curve of lips. "Ilya Rozanov. Thank you for looking after my mate." He used the real name again, a deliberate flag planted in Sam's territory.

This man knows where Shane's doctor is, Ilya's mind supplied, venomous. He has driven my omega.

"Just being a neighbor," Sam said, retrieving his hand. He glanced at Shane again, and Ilya saw the exact moment Sam's perception shifted. He saw Shane's pallor, the unnatural stillness, the way his shoulders hunched slightly. He saw the high collar of his shirt. Sam's own posture straightened, his affable demeanor cooling into something more guarded.

Ruth, watching this entire exchange with the focus of a hawk, smoothly interjected. "Sam, would you like some eggs? There's plenty."

"No, thanks, Grams. I already ate." Sam's attention was now divided between the offered food and the palpable, choking tension in the room. "I just wanted to confirm the time for the

appointment, Evan.”

Shane opened his mouth, but Ilya spoke first, his voice smooth as polished stone. “I will be taking him. Your assistance is no longer required.” It wasn’t rude. It was a simple dismissal.

Sam’s eyes hardened. He looked at Shane, a direct, unspoken question: *Is this what you want?*

Shane met his gaze for a fleeting second, and what Sam saw there, not love, not welcome, but a trapped, desperate plea for non-interference, made him close his mouth. He gave a single, tight nod. “Okay. Well. If you need anything, you have my number.” The words were for Shane, but his eyes were on Ilya, a clear, unflinching message- *I am not blind.*

He finished his coffee in silence, rinsed the mug, and placed it carefully in the dishwasher. With a final, general goodbye, he left. The kitchen seemed to exhale a breath it hadn’t realized it was holding, but the air remained thick with unresolved threat.

The rest of the meal passed in a blur of clinking cutlery and stilted small talk. Walter chatted about the weather. Ilya gave monosyllabic replies. Shane ate little. Ruth cleared plates with brisk, efficient movements, her mind clearly racing.

By the time the meal was over, Ruth Fischer knew three things with absolute certainty:

Evan Mercer had not invited Ilya Rozanov into his life in Willow Creek.

Evan was now afraid to speak for himself in his own home.

And whatever story Ilya Rozanov had brought into her kitchen, Shane was afraid of contradicting it.

She just didn’t know yet what, exactly, he intended to do. But as she watched Ilya rise and place a guiding, possessive hand on the small of Shane’s back to steer him toward the basement door, she knew her role was no longer that of a hostess, but of a witness. And she would be watching. Closely.

The drive to the clinic was conducted in a silence so thick it felt like a third passenger after Shane gave the very simple directions to get there. The only words spoken. Ilya navigated the unfamiliar roads with waves of anger he couldn't quite suppress- he'd need to get to the airport soon and really hope that the pills were there waiting, his attention split between the gray slush of the Pennsylvania backroads and the man beside him. Shane had fastened his seatbelt with careful deliberation, threading the strap beneath the curve of his stomach, adjusting it twice. He shifted minutely every few minutes, a hand going to his lower back, his face tightening before smoothing out again. Each movement was a tiny beacon in Ilya's peripheral vision. He wanted, with a sudden, violent ache, to reach over and settle his own palm there, to feel the life within, to offer the steady pressure Shane was clearly seeking.

He didn't. Shane had denied him five months of this. He would not give him the satisfaction of seeing how starved he was for it. The medication ensured his hands stayed at the stirring wheel, his gaze fixed ahead.

When they walked into the small, tidy medical clinic, the shift in atmosphere was immediate. Ilya felt it, the curious glances from the receptionist, the nurse who did a double-take. These people knew "Evan." Knew him as a solitary figure, or one accompanied by kindly older neighbors. They did know this enormous, unsmiling alpha shadowing his every step, a palpable force field of possession and tension. The professionalism never wavered, but curiosity hummed in the air.

Dr. Alvarez entered the exam room, her warm, competent demeanor faltering for only a fraction of a second when her eyes landed on Ilya. She recovered quickly, her gaze sliding to Shane, reading the story in his stiff posture and averted eyes.

"Well," she said, closing the door softly. "I wasn't expecting to meet the other half of this equation today." She addressed Shane directly. "Evan, are you comfortable with him being present for today's examination?"

Shane hesitated. A beat too long. The hesitation was a tiny knife slipped between Ilya's ribs. "Yes," Shane finally said, the word quiet but clear.

Dr. Alvarez nodded, her eyes thoughtful. As she reviewed Shane's chart, she brought up the bond. Her tone was matter-of-fact, clinical. "Given our previous discussions about your

options, and considering the stage of pregnancy, I want to reiterate that even with consent from both parties, I would strongly advise against any attempt at severing the bond until well after delivery. The physiological stress on your system would be significant, and it could pose risks to the baby.”

The words stopped the quiet room with the concussive force of a bomb. Ilya hadn't ever contemplated that Shane had considered severing their bond. Hearing this stranger, this doctor in this small town, discuss clinically cutting the tether that was the last living part of Shane he'd possessed for months... it ignited a white-hot fury that surged against the chemical dam inside him. He felt Shane flinch beside him, bracing for the explosion.

It didn't come. The pills did their work. Ilya's voice emerged flat, unnervingly even. “That will not be necessary. We have decided to work things out.”

Shane's head turned sharply toward him, disbelief etched into his features. Dr. Alvarez's gaze flickered between them, her expression neutral but her eyes missing nothing. She said nothing, simply moved on. “Let's get a look at this little one, then. Hopefully they're not feeling shy today.”

They moved into the next room with the ultrasound machine and turned the lights down. Ilya remembered the first one, in Ottawa. He'd been incapable of looking away from Shane then, the wonder on his face, the vulnerability of his body on the reclined chair, the shocking intimacy of it all. He'd asked ridiculous questions, his hand constantly finding Shane's, his joy a tangible, expanding thing in the room.

Now, he didn't look at Shane at all.

He watched as Shane lay back, as the technician lifted his shirt to expose the taut, rounded dome of his stomach. When Shane flinched at the cold gel, Ilya kept his eyes fixed on the dark monitor. When Shane adjusted uncomfortably on the paper-covered table, Ilya studied the ceiling tiles.

Then the image was on the screen. And Ilya stopped breathing. Bean was... a baby. Not a blurry peanut, not a vague seahorse shape. A fully formed, unmistakably human baby filled the screen. He could see the curve of a spine, the perfect, tiny outline of arms and legs, the distinct profile of a face. It was life changing. It was real, and now it was really his.

And he had missed it all.

He stared, his concentration absolute, almost frightening. He didn't smile. He didn't make a sound. He devoured the pixels, as if memorizing this single frame could compensate for the months of growth he hadn't witnessed. He saw the heart, a frantic, blinking light, and counted the beats himself before the technician announced the rate. He saw the baby yawn, a slow, deliberate motion, and something primal and tender tore at his chest.

Shane kept glancing toward him, his eyes searching. Ilya could feel the weight of that gaze, the unspoken question, the memory of a different man in a different exam room. He ignored it.

When Dr. Alvarez returned to review the scan, Ilya spoke. His questions were if the current level of movement was within normal parameters given Shane's description of recent hyperactivity. He inquired about the correlation between Shane's lower back pain and the baby's positioning.

Dr. Alvarez answered, her initial surprise giving way to professional acknowledgment. "You've done your reading," she remarked.

From the chair, Shane was watching him now with a different kind of stillness. The anger was gone, replaced by a dawning, horrified understanding. Ilya hadn't just been searching for him. He'd been studying. Preparing. Learning about pregnancy, amassing knowledge for a child he couldn't find but somehow knew that he'd still have it.

Then Dr. Alvarez's tone shifted, becoming more serious. She pulled up Shane's latest bloodwork on a different screen after cleaning the gel. "Your iron levels are trending downward, Evan. You're not anemic yet, but you're heading in that direction. It's uncommon in the second and third trimester, but we need to get ahead of it. I want you on a specific supplement protocol, and we'll repeat the labs in two weeks. Fatigue and dizziness are your biggest indicators right now."

Before Shane could respond, Ilya spoke, his voice calm and final. "We will follow up with his regular physician in Ottawa. He has a complete history there. I will ensure the follow-up

happens immediately.”

Shane’s head turned sharply again, a protest forming in his tightened jaw, but he said nothing. He looked back at the doctor, a silent apology in his eyes.

Dr. Alvarez paused, her gaze resting on Ilya for a long moment before returning to Shane. “The important thing is that it gets monitored and managed,” she said, her words careful. “Wherever you are.”

The rest of the appointment passed in a blur of instructions and paperwork. As Shane sat up, Dr. Alvarez printed several ultrasound images from the machine. Shane reached for them automatically.

So did Ilya.

Their fingers brushed over the warm, glossy paper. Both froze. After a charged heartbeat, Ilya withdrew his hand, letting Shane take them. He watched as Shane looked down at the images, his thumb tracing the ghostly outline of their child’s face, his expression unreadable.

While Shane dressed behind the curtain, Dr. Alvarez quietly keyed a command into the computer. The printer hummed once more. She pulled a fresh, identical set of images from the tray and, without a word, slid them across the counter to Ilya.

He looked at them. Then at her. Her expression was neutral, he could tell that she was thinking about what this would mean.

With movements that were almost absurdly careful, Ilya folded the pictures and slipped them into the inner pocket of his wallet. He didn’t look toward the curtain where Shane was buttoning his shirt. He simply stood, waiting, the new weight against his chest both a treasure and a condemnation.

The silence in the car after leaving the clinic was different from the tense quiet of the drive there. It was heavier, saturated with the ultrasound images now folded in Shane's pocket and the unspoken words about bonds and bloodwork hanging between them. The landscape blurred past, a monotony of dormant fields and skeletal trees that matched the numbness settling in his bones. He was so tired. The emotional whiplash of the last twelve hours- the shock of finding Ilya in his apartment, the terrifying confrontation, the strained breakfast, the clinical exposure of the ultrasound, had left him hollowed out. His back ached in a deep, persistent throb, and Bean was quiet, perhaps as exhausted as he was.

Ilya drove back to the farmhouse. After several miles, he spoke, his voice cutting through the quiet without ceremony. "Anatoly packed your things while we were at the appointment." He paused, his gaze fixed on the road ahead. "I told him to leave all your cash and the prepaid cards on the kitchen counter. The money stays."

The statement was so blunt, so utterly transactional, it took Shane a moment to process. Then a hot rush of disbelief and anger cut through the fatigue. "What? No. Ilya, that's thousands of dollars. They'll never accept it. You can't just... leave a stack of cash in someone's house."

"Ilya? Really? I let it go because you wanted to put a good face in front of these people, but never forget that things are not the same anymore. It is staying," Ilya said, his tone leaving no room for debate. "They housed you. Fed you. Helped you. Took you to appointments. Kept you safe when I could not." He glanced over, his blue eyes glacial in the gray light. "It is payment for their hospitality. For everything they did for you and my child."

The phrasing of *payment*, made Shane's stomach turn. "You can't just pay people for caring about you," he said, the words sharper than he intended.

For a long moment, Ilya said nothing. The only sound was the hum of the tires on asphalt. Then, quietly, almost to himself, he replied, "I don't care. The money stays. They can use it or donate it. Does not matter."

That simple, unguarded admission caught Shane completely off guard. It wasn't defensive. It wasn't angry. It was just a quiet acknowledgment of a truth he seemed to understand but felt powerless to act upon in any other way. It revealed, for a fleeting second, the complicated man beneath the controlled exterior, the one who understood the language of contracts and obligations better than the grammar of gratitude. The glimpse was there and gone so quickly Shane almost wondered if he'd imagined it.

“You will say goodbye,” Ilya continued, his voice resuming its flat, pragmatic tone. “Then we leave for the airport. You may call them. If you behave, perhaps visits later can be arranged.”

Behave. The word echoed in Shane’s skull, sparking a viciously sarcastic internal monologue. *‘Oh, wonderful. Is this a kidnapping again or an adoption? Do I get a chart for gold stars?’* He bit the words back so hard his jaw ached. The memory of the doctor’s office was too fresh, the way Ilya had gone utterly, terrifyingly still at the mention of the bond severance, the rage Shane had felt vibrating beneath the surface like a trapped animal, yet never unleashed. That calm was a lid on a boiling pot. Shane didn’t know what was holding it down- willpower, the remnants of the man he’d loved, or something pharmacological, and he had no desire to be the one to test its strength.

He made his voice neutral, submissive. The words tasted like ash. “Yes, Alpha.”

He saw it then, the minute relaxation in Ilya’s shoulders, the slight unclenching of his jaw. The visible proof that his obedience was a necessary drug to Ilya’s turmoil was somehow more humiliating than the command itself. Shane looked out the window, swallowing against the tightness in his throat.

When they pulled into the Fischer driveway, Ruth was already on the porch, her arms crossed against the cold. She took in the rental car, Shane’s pale face through the windshield, and the determined set of Ilya’s profile as he parked. Her expression shifted from concern to a deep, sad understanding. She knew.

The goodbye was a quiet, heart-wrenching tear in the fabric of the life Shane had painstakingly woven. Inside the warm, familiar little apartment, the evidence of Anatoly’s efficient work was already present, the absence of Shane’s favorite mug from its hook, the empty space where his boots usually sat. His entire existence here, months of slow accumulation and small comforts, had been condensed into a set of luggage by the door. The sight was like a physical blow.

Ruth hugged him fiercely, her strong, capable arms tight around him. “You write, you hear me? Every week. And pictures. The minute that baby is born, Walter and I want a picture.”

“I will,” Shane promised, his voice cracking as he finally let the tears fall. They were for her, for Walter, for the safety of this kitchen, for the version of himself, Evan- who had been allowed to exist here, scared but autonomous. “I’ll call. I’ll send so many pictures you’ll get sick of me. I’ll visit. I promise.”

Walter, his eyes suspiciously bright, clapped a heavy hand on Shane’s shoulder. “You take care of yourself, son. And you give ’em hell if they give you any trouble.” He didn’t look at Ilya as he said it, but the message was clear.

Ruth, ever practical even through her tears, pressed a paper bag into Shane’s hands. “Some snacks for the road. And the good prenatal vitamins, not the cheap ones you were eyeing.” She managed a wobbly smile.

The attempt at humor made Shane cry harder. He hugged her again, breathing in the scent of lavender detergent and baked bread, committing it to memory.

When they turned to Ilya, the atmosphere cooled several degrees. Ruth’s warmth didn’t vanish, but it solidified into something formal, protective. She looked Ilya directly in the eye, a petite omega facing down a mountain of an alpha without flinching. “You take care of him,” she said, and it wasn’t a request.

Ilya inclined his head, the picture of polite deference. “You have my word.”

Walter shook Ilya’s offered hand, his grip firm, his expression unreadable. There were no threats, no dramatic pleas. Just a silent transfer of responsibility, the polite thank-yous, the promises to keep in touch, somehow made the entire leaving feel more sinister, but more irrevocable.

The private airport was a small, sleek building forty five minutes away from town. While a staff member dealt with their bags, Ilya spoke quietly with a concierge, who handed him a small, discreet pharmacy bag. Shane, pretending to adjust his coat, watched from the corner of his eye. He saw Ilya open the bag, remove a familiar orange vial, and shake three small orange pills into his palm. He dry-swallowed them with a practiced ease. Ilya, *his Ilya* hated pills because of his mother. He avoided them to his own detriment. When he had started talking to his therapist, he rarely took the prescribed medicine after they were back together.

A cold trickle of unease, separate from his fear of Ilya's anger, went down Shane's spine. But there was something about the timing, the deliberate way Ilya took them *now*, as if fortifying himself for the next phase, that felt ominously premeditated. Ilya's gaze lifted and met Shane's watching eyes. For a heartbeat, they simply looked at each other across the room. Shane quickly looked away, his heart pounding for reasons he couldn't fully name.

On the plane, Shane chose a seat with a table between him and the rows Ilya would likely prefer. He busied himself with Ruth's care package, arranging the snacks, studying the vitamin bottles, anything to avoid looking at the man now settling into a seat across the aisle. Ilya didn't comment on the distance. He pulled out his phone, his attention absorbed by the screen, finally free to confront the backlog of a world that had continued spinning while he'd been focused on a single, desperate search.

Shane stared out the window at the ground crew, trying to quiet the storm in his head. He failed.

Then, from his peripheral vision, he saw it. A tiny, undeniable change. Ilya's lips, usually set in a stern line or a cold smirk, softened. The barest upward curve. A smile, small, private. Directed at his phone.

An immediate, hot, and utterly irrational spike of jealousy lanced through Shane, so intense it stole his breath.

He was horrified at himself. What was *wrong* with him? He had run away. He had hidden. He had considered severing the bond that connected them. He was furious, terrified, and trapped. He had absolutely no right, no moral, logical, or emotional ground to stand on, to care who was texting Ilya Rozanov.

And yet he cared. He cared so much it felt like a physical ache beneath his sternum.

His mind, traitorous and frantic, began cycling through possibilities. Svetlana, checking in. Fine. Someone from the Centaurs' front office. Fine. His own parents. Okay.

Then the thought, cold and slithering: *It could be someone else.*

Five months was a long time.

The realization struck him with dizzying force. He knew, with absolute certainty, that Ilya had spent those months searching for him. But he had no idea what the rest of Ilya's life had looked like. Who had been there in the empty spaces Shane left behind? Who had offered comfort? Who had he spent his time- his nights with? Was there another omega, a beta, someone less complicated, who had seen Ilya raw and grieving and tried to put him back together?

Bean chose that moment to stir, a slow, rolling somersault that made Shane's stomach lurch. He pressed his hand over the spot, a helpless, weary frustration rising. *Don't you start too*, he thought silently at the baby. *You're supposed to be on my side.*

He couldn't help it. He stole another glance across the cabin.

Ilya was still looking at his phone.

And he was still, faintly, smiling.

Shane turned back to the window, the darkened glass now reflecting the dim interior of the cabin and his own troubled expression. A fresh, bitter wave of anger washed over him, not at Ilya this time, but at his own heart, his own omega instincts, his own biology, and the baby currently kicking his ribs, all of whom had apparently failed to receive the detailed memo that they were supposed to be unequivocally, righteously, and intelligently angry at the man who had broken into his home and was now taking him away. The contradiction was a live wire in his chest, sparking with fear, resentment, and a possessiveness he wished he could surgically remove.

Ilya felt the cold relief of the medicine taking effect quickly thankfully. He sat in his seat, phone in hand, the glow of the screen felt nice with him finally being able to give their friends and family some good news. Across the aisle, Shane had turned stubbornly toward the window, presenting Ilya with his profile and absolutely nothing else. It didn't matter. He was here. He was contained.

He'd opened the group chat, seeing that the last time he'd answered anyone was weeks ago, of worried questions with no answers, of jokes that fell flat without Shane there to roll his eyes. He typed, his movements precise.

Ilya- Found him. He is safe. Baby is safe. Coming back to Ottawa.

The response was instantaneous, a cascade of notifications that lit up his screen.

JJ- HOLY SHIT

Worst Player in League- Oh thank god. Is he okay? Is he hurt?

Grandpa- Proof of life. I need a picture. Now.

Rose- Is he talking to you? Is he mad? Oh my god ILYA.

JJ- Where was he? Did you have to fight someone?

Grandpa- Everyone shut up. Ilya, is he medically stable?

Troy- Give the man space, for fuck's sake. He just said he's safe.

Sveta- Ilya, we are here. Whatever you need.

JJ- Can we see him? When?

Ilya read the torrent of messages, a faint, unguarded softening touching his lips. For the first time in months, he could answer **Ilya-** Here. With me. Coming home. Let me get him settled and we can have visits. I'll have him on the phone tomorrow if he feels up to it.

He didn't provide details. Didn't mention the location, the terror in Shane's eyes, the crushing weight of his own hands around his throat. They didn't need to know how close he'd come to

breaking the very thing he'd crossed a continent to retrieve. They just needed to know the search was over.

He switched to a private message with Yuna and David.

Ilya- We have him. He is unharmed. The baby is healthy. Ultrasound this morning showed good growth. Doctor monitoring for low iron. We land soon. You can visit once he is settled.

Yuna's reply came in seconds, stripped of all her usual professional poise.

Mama Yuna- Thank you. Oh god, Ilya, thank you. Is he speaking to you? How is he? Really?

Dad- Tell him we love him. We're here. Whenever he's ready.

He assured them he would, the act of providing reassurance itself a strange comfort. He was the conduit of safety again. The fixer. Shane was home. Now he simply needed to be kept safe, healthy, and prevent any further ill-advised flights into the unknown.

Finally, he messaged Galina.

Ilya- We are in the air. Heading to the house. He is compliant.

Her reply was swift, calibrated, different from the emotional outpourings of the others.

Galina- You maintained control. That is what matters. After a shock like that, hearing about severing the bond... Ilya, you did extremely well. You didn't hurt him. The medication is doing its job. It allows you to be the stability he needs right now.

The praise felt good after all the darkness he felt all these months in a hollow part of him and filled it with a grim sense of validation. She was right. He hadn't hurt him. Not really.

She was right. He hadn't *hurt* Shane. Not really. The marks on his throat were already fading. Ilya had held him harder than that during sex before, and Shane had trusted him then. The thought settled easily into the space Galina's reassurance had opened.

Too easily.

Galina- I've arranged for Dr. Vasiliev to meet you at the house. A private omega doctor specializing in pregnancies. It will spare Shane the stress of a public clinic after travel. He's excellent, very discreet. Just tell me when you land.

Ilya- Spasibo, Galina.

He put the phone away, the plans solidifying in his mind. A clean, efficient transition. He looked across the aisle again. Shane hadn't moved. The deliberate distance was a petty defiance, but one Ilya could allow for now. He unbuckled his belt and crossed the aisle in two strides, lowering himself into the seat directly opposite, forcing Shane to either look at him or pointedly ignore him.

Shane's head turned slowly. His eyes were wary, deeply tired.

"I think we need to establish some ground rules," Ilya said, his voice low and even, the tone he used in contract negotiations.

Shane tensed, his knuckles whitening where they gripped the armrest.

Ilya laid them out, methodical, and cold. "You do not leave the property without telling me where you are going. You are to have my men with you at all times. The house has been fitted with cameras all around. Anything you need to purchase will be done through me, no new phones, no hiding. You attend all medical appointments. You eat what is prepared for you, take the supplements, follow the restrictions. You do not make decisions about my child without discussing them with me. If I ask you a direct question about your health or the baby, you answer honestly." He paused, watching Shane absorb the dictates. "In return, you may speak to Ruth and Walter whenever you wish. You may see your parents. Your friends. Once

you have settled, they can visit. I am to know your every move going forward until I can trust you again.”

He saw the protest in Shane’s eyes at the words, watched him bite it back, the calculation visible. Shane remembered the cost of defiance in the basement apartment. He chose his words with obvious care, his voice flat. “Fine.”

It was progress. It was obedience. The part of Ilya that was still a man, and not a curator of a captive omega, recoiled at the sight of Shane measuring every syllable before releasing it. The rest of him, the part fortified by pills and professional advice, saw a necessary recalibration. A return to a sane hierarchy.

When they landed, the transition to the car was silent. Anatoly handled the bags, his gaze occasionally flicking to Shane with an unspoken apology. The drive to the house in Ottawa was through familiar streets, under a sky heavy with unshed snow.

Ilya pushed the front door open, the familiar scent of cedar polish and clean linen washing over him. *Home*. He stepped inside, a profound, almost spiritual sense of correction settling in his bones. The universe had been off its axis; now it clicked back into place because Shane was back and he’d never leave again.

Shane followed, but his steps slowed on the landing, then stopped altogether. He stood just inside the doorway, his bag at his feet, looking around the grand, quiet foyer, the living room beyond, the staircase leading to the rooms upstairs. His face changed. The anger and fear melted into something else: a bewildered, profound dislocation. This was not a homecoming, it felt as if he was being led to serve a lifetime prison sentence. The downstairs was pretty empty- he passed the formal living room and dining room and no furniture was there. The kitchen had the barstools he’d had delivered before he left.

Ilya mistook the silence for exhaustion. “You can rest upstairs. The doctor will be here soon.”

As if summoned, the doorbell chimed, a polite, piercing sound in the quiet house.

Dr. Vasiliev was exactly as advertised: older, impeccably dressed, carrying a sleek medical bag. His demeanor was one of respectful, subdued authority. He greeted Ilya with a firm handshake and a few murmured words in Russian. His glance toward Shane was cursory, a clinical assessment.

“Mr. Rozanov,” he said, turning his attention fully to his host. “Shall we?”

The examination took place in the downstairs guest room, converted temporarily for privacy. It was efficient, thorough, and deeply uncomfortable in its social dynamics.

“How far along is he?” Dr. Vasiliev asked, opening his chart.

“Twenty-eight weeks,” Ilya answered, standing near the head of the bed where Shane lay, looking at the ceiling.

“What supplements is he currently taking?”

Ilya listed them, the dosages exact, gleaned from the bottles Anatoly had packed.

“His appetite?”

“Variable. He craved sweet foods yesterday, something he wouldn’t normally indulge in.”

Shane, when asked directly about dizziness or pain, answered in monosyllables.

“Sometimes.” “No.” “A little.” The doctor noted the responses but directed his follow-ups and his perceptible concern to Ilya. All in Russian. He was barely acknowledged. Shane was a vessel, an interesting but ultimately passive subject. The alpha was the relevant decision-maker, the source of stability. He managed to catch a few words but it was mostly unintelligible to him.

Blood was drawn. Blood pressure checked. The fetal heartbeat found and deemed strong. Shane's swelling ankles were examined, his abdomen palpated. Through it all, he was silent, shrinking into himself under the dual gaze of the doctor and his mate, like a specimen under evaluation.

Ilya felt a layer of anxiety peel away. This was competent, proactive care. This was what Shane needed. The doctor was leaving nothing to chance.

Finally, the doctor patted Shane's knee. "Rest now. I will speak with your alpha."

They left Shane in the room, the door clicking shut behind them. In the hallway, the doctor's manner shifted from clinical to confidential.

"The anemia is a concern, but manageable with strict protocol. The exhaustion, the stress... it is not uncommon, given the circumstances." He lowered his voice. "How long was the omega separated from his bond?"

"Five months."

Dr. Vasiliev nodded slowly, as if this explained everything. "A bonded pregnant omega, alone for so long... it creates instability. Physically, emotionally. His nervous system becomes dysregulated without the alpha's stabilizing presence." He used the phrase *taken in hand*, and Ilya's initial distaste was quickly overridden by the doctor's pragmatic tone. "He needs routine. Firm boundaries. Reduced stress. Your consistent presence. Most importantly, he cannot be permitted to continue making impulsive decisions that heighten his anxiety or endanger the pregnancy. For the health of both of them, he needs to be brought under control before the final trimester progresses further. It will minimize delivery risks."

Two medical professionals, independent of each other, had arrived at the same logical conclusion. Shane's best chance at a healthy delivery was through structure. Through control. Through *him*.

Ilya asked sharp, intelligent questions about iron infusion options, nutritional benchmarks, warning signs of pre-eclampsia. The doctor answered patiently, impressed by his

engagement. Ilya wasn't a blindly possessive alpha; he was an informed one, assembling a plan to optimize outcomes.

When Dr. Vasiliev left, promising updated lab results and a detailed regimen, Ilya stood in the quiet hall, already mentally restructuring the household schedule, the meal plans, the supplement timings. The path was clear. All that was required now was following it.

Outside, Dr. Vasiliev walked to his car, and slid into the driver's seat. He sat for a long moment, the professional veneer dissolving from his face, leaving behind an expression of weary complicity. He checked the rearview mirror, observing the dark windows of the large, silent house. Then he took out his personal phone, scrolled past family photos and routine contacts, and selected a number saved without a name.

He placed the call. It connected after two rings. He did not say hello. He simply said, "It's done."

Chapter End Notes

Now please behave yourselves in the comments and be gentle.

Actually, never mind. Absolutely do not behave. I want to see the chaos when I wake up. 😂

Back to bed I go. 😊❤️

Chapter 45: Chapter 45

Chapter Summary

Some of my favorite stories are the ones that make me feel all the feelings. Angry, defensive, conflicted, uncomfortable, hopeful, and occasionally wanting to throw my Kindle across the room. That's always been what I wanted here. Ilya and Shane are two deeply flawed, traumatized people who love each other, but love doesn't magically erase trauma or the damage people can do to each other.

I know the last chapter was uncomfortable. It was supposed to be. I came VERY close to changing my outline after reading the reactions, but after talking it through with my lovely people who get first dibs on the drafts, I decided to trust the story and keep going.

Special shoutout to SlytherinBadGirl, Nana20268324, KarenGApeach, RidersTown, kidelf, and SunKissed77. You picked up on pieces of exactly what I'm trying to explore. Ilya being manipulated doesn't erase what he did to Shane. Shane needing to leave doesn't mean his choices didn't devastate Ilya.

Chapter Notes

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

The front door clicked shut behind Dr. Vasiliev, sealing the house in a profound, watchful silence. Ilya remained in the foyer, the doctor's words arranging themselves into a clean, actionable list in his mind. *Consistent presence. Brought under control.* Saying the words in agreement to the doctor left a bitter taste in his mouth but if it was true that Shane needed it even if he didn't realize it, he'd comply. He mentally reviewed the supplement schedule, considered the grocery list that would need updating, calculated the optimal times for meals to combat fatigue. His thoughts were orderly, linear, focused entirely on the problem at hand: getting Shane healthy, getting the pregnancy stable, getting them both safely to the birth. If control and consistency were what that required, then Ilya would provide both.

He stood there for another moment. His skin felt wrong. Too tight, somehow. His mind was racing beneath the strange orderliness of his thoughts, dozens of impulses trying to surface at once before being flattened back into something manageable. It took some effort but he realized the silence had persisted too long. No sound of movement, no water running, no rustle from the guest room. A spike of something cold, fear, shot through him. He took the stairs two at a time.

The door to the guest room was ajar, Shane was on the bed, exactly as he'd been left, but asleep now. He hadn't even made it to their room. He lay fully dressed on top of the duvet, curled in on himself, one arm pillowing his head, the other draped heavily over the curve of his stomach. In sleep, the guarded tension had leaked from his face, leaving behind only a deep, bone, weary exhaustion. His lashes were dark smudges against pale skin, his lips slightly parted. He looked shattered.

Ilya stopped in the doorway.

For five months, the fantasy of this moment had been a polished, perfect thing in his mind. Shane, home, safe, always within reach. The nightmare was over. He had imagined relief, triumph. A fierce, possessive joy.

He had not imagined this hollow ache, this sight of his omega so worn down that the mere act of being found had broken some final reserve of energy. This was not the victory he'd pictured.

He moved into the room, his footsteps silent on the thick carpet. He considered waking him, ordering him upstairs to a proper bed, *their* bed. But the exhaustion was too absolute. Instead, he bent, sliding one arm beneath Shane's knees and the other behind his shoulders. Shane was heavier now, the solid weight of the pregnancy new in his arms. As he lifted him, Shane made a sound, a soft, irritated grumble in the back of his throat, a noise Ilya hadn't heard in five months and which resonated in some deep, forgotten part of his heart. It was the sound Shane always made when being moved in his sleep, a protest against the movement that always reminded Ilya of a kitten growl.

Then, still deeply unconscious, Shane's sleeping body remembered him. His head lolled, his face turning to press against Ilya's chest, seeking warmth. His fingers, loose in sleep, curled faintly into the fabric of Ilya's shirt. His nose nudged almost imperceptibly against the hollow of Ilya's throat, where his scent would be strongest.

Ilya froze halfway to the door, his breath catching.

For a suspended second, the coldness in his heart and the reminders of what the new rules in his mind vanished. There was no control, no anger, no five-month gap. There was only this: the solid weight in his arms, the trusting press of a sleepy face against him, the scent of his

own mate, always honeysuckle and citrus, deepened by pregnancy filling his lungs. This was Shane. *His* Shane. The man whose absence had been like a living death. The love he felt since that first day, sharp and overwhelming overtook all his thoughts for a few seconds, but he managed to calm them.

Then the moment passed. The love was categorized as a biological impulse, a bond response, irrelevant to the practical necessities at hand. He continued up the stairs to the master bedroom.

He laid Shane down on the side of the bed that had been his, the sheets still smelling faintly of the lavender detergent Shane preferred. Out of pure, ingrained habit, Ilya's hands went to the hem of Shane's sweater. He would undress him. He would make him comfortable. He had done it plenty of times before. After heats, when he fell asleep during movies at the cottage, after night games when they'd meet up if only to sleep in each other's arms. It was just something that he'd always done before.

His fingers touched the soft sweater, and stopped.

Something was wrong. A dissonant note resonated in the back of his mind. He looked at his hand, at the fabric, at Shane's vulnerable, sleeping form. He was his mate. His omega. There should be no hesitation. This was a practical step towards making him comfortable.

His hand refused to move.

A flicker of frustration ignited in his chest. This was illogical. *Shane is asleep. He will be more comfortable. This is what you do.* The memory of a different time surfaced, Shane, laughing and pliant, letting Ilya peel his clothes away after a long flight, his body a familiar landscape of lean muscle and warm skin. This body was different. A territory Ilya had not charted yet. To undress him now didn't feel like he was taking care of him, but like a violation of a boundary Shane had erected by leaving. It felt like claiming a prize that was lying defenseless, rather than tending to a partner.

Not like this, the thought came, clear and unbidden from a place deep in his mind.

With a suppressed growl of irritation at his own inexplicable softness, Ilya withdrew his hand. He compromised, removing only Shane's shoes and socks, his touch clinical. He pulled the duvet up over him, leaving him fully dressed, a decision that felt both like a failure and a strange, unwelcomed show of respect.

He stood there for a long time, staring down at the shrouded form of the man he had crossed a continent to reclaim. The question echoed in the silent room, dissonant and troubling: *You wanted him home. He is home. Why does this feel like a mistake?*

Later, in the deep silence of the night, Ilya was pulled from a thin, vigilant sleep by shifting beside him. Shane was restless, trapped by the discomfort of his own body. A soft, frustrated sigh. The rustle of fabric as he tried to turn. A hitched breath as the movement pulled at an aching muscle. The sounds were small, but in the dark, they were sirens to Ilya's instincts.

Before he was fully awake, he was moving. Old patterns, older than anger, took over. His hands were gentle as they guided Shane onto his side. He rearranged the pillows, one tucked firmly beneath the heavy curve of his stomach to take the weight, another slid between his knees to align his hips, a third braced against his lower back. He did it in the dark, by touch and memory, his body remembering the lectures on pregnancy omega care.

Shane stilled almost immediately, a long, deep exhale of relief leaving him. For a moment, peace.

Ilya's hand lifted, drawn by an impulse as fundamental as breathing. His palm hovered inches above the blanket covering Shane's stomach, yearning to connect, to somehow let their baby feel that he was there now.

Slowly, deliberately, he pulled it back. He folded it against his own chest, a fist clenched tight enough to ache. He sat back down, staring at the ceiling, the doctor's words now mixing with the ghost of that unborn kick in his mind. With the sadness in Shane's eyes whenever he had to look up at Ilya.

The silence returned, thicker now. Beside him, Shane slept on, unaware that the hands he had learned to fear had spent the night arranging pillows beneath his aching body. Ilya sat rigid beside him, staring into the darkness. Shane was home. Their baby was safe. He had gotten exactly what he wanted. So why, for the first time since finding him, did Ilya have the terrible feeling that he was the thing Shane needed protection from?

Ilya's eyes opened to the pale grey light filtering through the blinds, and his body, trained by five months of grief, immediately rose out of the chair and went over to Shane.

Shane.

He couldn't resist though. His fingers gently traced over the freckles, down his nose and dragged his lower lip.

The contact was electric. After so long, he had his mate next to him. His hands didn't meet cold sheets anymore, but the soft cotton of Shane's t-shirt, the firm curve of a shoulder beneath. Ilya's breath caught, his entire being seizing in a moment of pure, uncomprehending shock.

Shane was there. Asleep, facing away from him, the line of his back a familiar shape beneath the duvet, his hair dark against the pillow. Real, present. *Here.*

For several heartbeats, the world consisted only of that fact. The hollowed-out ache that had lived in his chest since Shane disappeared didn't exist for those few seconds, replaced by a surge of relief so profound he felt lightheaded from it. He stared, drinking in the reality: the slow rise and fall of Shane's breathing, the faint scent of him permeating the air.

Then, like a cold tide, everything else returned. The memory of Shane's terrified eyes in the basement. The feel of his panicked pulse under Ilya's hand. The doctor's clinical voice outlining a regimen of control. The relief curdled, hardening into a different, more complicated substance, possession, yes, but also a grim sense of duty, and beneath it, a persistent, nagging wrongness.

He slipped from the room, leaving Shane to sleep. He needed to do something, to help slow his mind. Shane needed to eat. That was something he could provide without upsetting him.

In the kitchen, surrounded by the fully stocked fridge and pantry Yuna insisted he keep, Ilya encountered a problem his months of obsessive research had not prepared him for. He had no idea what Shane liked for breakfast.

The Shane he knew, the one before, had a strict diet to optimize his performance. Oatmeal with protein powder. Egg whites. Organic everything. Green teas. Ilya could have prepared that meal in his sleep.

But that Shane was gone. This Shane was twenty-eight weeks pregnant, his body changed, his cravings mysterious and shifting. Ilya knew the baby was the size of a large eggplant. He had committed to memorizing the optimal ratio of omega-3 to omega-6 fatty acids for fetal brain development from dozens of books and articles he read.

He did not know if Shane currently tolerated eggs. The gap in his knowledge felt like a failure. It was unacceptable to him. He stood in front of the open refrigerator, its cool light doing nothing to illuminate the answer.

He found the menu for one of the local restaurants that Shane had liked to stop in while on his runs. He ordered everything. Scrambled eggs, poached eggs, an omelet with every possible filling. Buttermilk pancakes, Belgian waffles, brioche French toast. Crispy hash browns and rosemary roasted potatoes. Steel-cut oatmeal with twelve toppings on the side. Greek yogurt, granola, a fruit platter so elaborate it included starfruit. An assortment of pastries. Sourdough toast, rye toast, gluten-free toast. Bacon, sausage, ham. Fresh-squeezed juices, coffee, a selection of teas. He sent one of the security guards to go pick the order up and he hoped he had enough to give Shane options.

It was absurd. It was an insane amount of food that now covered the kitchen island an hour later. When Shane finally came downstairs an hour later, moving slowly, his hand on the banister, he stopped at the entrance to the dining area. He blinked, his tired eyes scanning the feast. Then his gaze lifted to Ilya, who stood stiffly beside the barstools, a carafe of orange juice in hand.

“What is all this?” Shane’s voice was hoarse with sleep, edged with wariness.

“I didn’t know what you eat now,” Ilya said. It was not an apology. It was a simple statement of the problem and his solution.

Shane’s guarded expression flickered, just for an instant, with something else, recognition, perhaps, or a deep, weary sadness. He saw the man who used to know him perfectly, now reduced to guessing. Shane said nothing. He pulled out a chair and sat, surveying the options quietly. He chose some berries, a scoop of yogurt, a single piece of bacon, and a slice of toast. He avoided the eggs completely.

Ilya watched carefully. *Berries. Yogurt. Bacon crispy, he’d pick the one piece that was almost burnt. Wheat toast, lightly buttered.* He filed each piece of information away, making a list for the next day. When Shane reached for the berries a second time, Ilya noted it. When he pushed the pastry plate farther away, Ilya memorized that, too.

They ate in a silence that was almost peaceful, punctuated only by the clink of cutlery. The bond, once a humming wire beneath everything between them, felt almost dead now. Physical proximity couldn’t replace it. If anything, having Shane sitting three feet away and feeling nothing from him made its absence more pronounced.

“Your parents,” Ilya said finally, setting his coffee cup down slowly. “They want to see you. If you are feeling well enough, they can come this afternoon.”

Shane’s head lifted. The change was immediate and visceral. A light entered his eyes, a genuine, unguarded hope that brightened his whole face before he could suppress it. “They can?”

The sight sent a sharp, irrational bolt of jealousy through Ilya’s chest. Shane could still look like that. That happiness still existed in him. It just wasn’t for Ilya anymore. Not now. Maybe not ever again. He forced the feeling down, locking it behind the calm facade.

“Da. I will allow you time alone with them.”

The hope in Shane’s eyes instantly clouded with suspicion. “Alone?”

“As long as you know how to behave,” Ilya added, his voice cool.

The light vanished completely, shuttered away. Ilya saw the exact moment it happened, the slight tightening around Shane’s mouth, the way his shoulders drew in. It was like watching a door slam. He felt a strange, hollow pang at the sight, a dissatisfaction he couldn’t explain. This was the compliance he demanded, so why did it feel like a loss?

He laid out the conditions, his tone that of a negotiator outlining a truce. “You may tell them how you feel about the baby. I am not demanding you pretend. But you will not ask them for help to disappear. No money. No transportation. No secret phones. No planning.”

Shane studied his plate. When he spoke, his voice was very quiet. “And if I tell them I’m scared of you?”

The question stopped Ilya’s breath. His first, instinctive reaction was a hot denial. *You should not be. I would never*, but the memories presented themselves in a brutal parade: the knife clattering to the floor, the tears, the bruises left by his own fingers. He could not say the words. They would be lying.

“You can tell them how you feel,” he repeated, the words feeling rigid in his mouth. “You cannot ask them to help you run.”

He believed it was reasonable. A fair exchange. Transparency within secure boundaries.

Shane was silent for a long moment, his gaze distant. Then he nodded once, a short, accepting dip of his chin. “Okay.”

Something in the defeat of that agreement pricked at Ilya. A defensive need to justify himself rose up. “I am not trying to isolate you from them,” he said, the words coming out stiffer than intended. “They... they were important. While you were gone. Yuna drove me to therapy. David helped me stay human, go not so crazy. They fed me. They kept me... functioning.” It

was the closest he had come to admitting his own vulnerability since Shane's return. "I do not wish to destroy that."

Shane listened, his expression unreadable. When Ilya finished, he looked up, meeting his eyes directly. The sadness in them was deep and clear.

"What is the plan for us, Alpha?" he said, so softly it was almost a whisper. "Are you just going to keep me a prisoner until you, what? Grow tired of me?"

The sentence didn't spark anger. It settled inside him like a stone, cold and heavy. Because some newly waking part of him heard the truth in it. *Prisoner*. But that wasn't what this was. He was protecting Shane, protecting his child. He was keeping them safe and stable until the birth. Every decision had a purpose behind it. *So why did explaining these reasons to himself suddenly feel so much like making excuses?*

Without replying, Ilya pulled out his phone. He navigated to his messages with Yuna.

Ilya- He is awake now, Ma. You can come this afternoon.

He sent the text. Yuna and David would come. Shane would see his parents without him being in the same room but he had cameras in there now that if he needed, he'd access. He could be reasonable, generous.

He glanced at Shane, who had returned to pushing a berry around his plate. The morning sun caught the dark golden brown flecks in his eyes, the elegant line of his neck, the protective curve of his hand over his stomach. He was the most beautiful thing Ilya had ever seen, and he was sitting right here, in the home Ilya had gotten for them.

And instead of triumph, or peace, or even the grim satisfaction of a job well done, Ilya felt only the vast, echoing silence of a man standing in the center of a life he no longer understood how to inhabit.

The afternoon was tense, there was no other way to describe it. Shane moved through the quiet house like a restless ghost. He changed his shirt twice, ran a hand through his hair until it lay just so, and checked his reflection in the dark television screen. When passing by, Ilya heard Shane murmuring something from the bathroom. He asked twice when his parents were coming, his voice carefully neutral, though Ilya had already told him. Ilya recognized the nervous energy thrumming beneath the surface, the hope, the fear, the desperate need for a familiar anchor, and chose to leave him to it, retreating to the study under the pretense of work. Hovering would only sharpen Shane's wariness.

When the doorbell chimed, Shane was already pacing in the foyer. Ilya heard the quick, unsteady footsteps and emerged from the study in time to see Shane reach for the handle. The instinct to caution him, Slowly, ty malysh, you are heavy, I don't want you to lose your balance, rose and died in his throat. He stayed back, a spectator in his own home.

Shane opened the door.

For a few seconds, there was only silence. Yuna stood on the threshold, her sharp eyes taking in every detail: the pronounced curve of his stomach, the longer hair, the new softness in his face, the shadows that spoke of sleepless nights. Her composure, usually ironclad, shattered. She made a small, choked sound and reached for him.

Shane crumpled into her arms with a broken cry, his own arms coming up to clutch at her back as best he could around the barrier of his stomach. He didn't sob, he shuddered, silent tears soaking into her coat shoulder.

David joined them, his movements more careful, his own eyes bright. He tried for a joke, something about his new hair, but his voice cracked halfway through. He wrapped one arm around his wife, the other around his son, and simply held on.

Ilya watched from the archway, his hands shoved into his pockets. The jealousy he'd felt at breakfast was there, a cold ember in his gut, Shane melted into them with a trust that had once been his. But it was overshadowed by a deeper, more complicated ache. He was glad for

Shane. He had come to love these people, too, in their own fierce, flawed way. Yet the scene carved out a hollow space where he used to stand. He mourned it.

Eventually, Yuna pulled back, her hands coming up to frame Shane's face, her thumbs brushing away tears. The motherly inspection began immediately: scanning his eyes, touching his hair, her gaze dropping to his stomach. "You're eating? You're sleeping?"

Shane gave a wet, weak laugh, batting her hands away half-heartedly. "Mom, stop. I'm fine."

That familiar, irritable protest did more to reassure Yuna than any platitude could have. *There he is.*

For a while, it was almost normal. They moved to the living room. Shane asked about the team, about people in Montreal. David spoke about a new restaurant. But beneath the surface, Ilya could feel the current shifting. Yuna noticed everything.

She noticed how Shane was quieter, how his answers sometimes had a beat of hesitation, as if he were running them through a filter. When David asked, gently, "So what's the plan now, kiddo? For the next few weeks?" Shane's eyes flicked, just for an instant, toward Ilya before he said, "We're... figuring it out."

She noticed when she offered tea and Shane, who had always been very particular over his food, simply said, "Whatever's fine."

She noticed when David asked about the next obstetrician appointment and Shane, just shrugged, "Ilya had someone come here yesterday, I didn't understand what they were saying so you'll have to ask him." David didn't correct him. He didn't even look at him.

The room grew subtly colder.

Ilya took a deep drag from his cigarette. His own behavior was full of contradictions, even to the point that he was thinking that maybe there was something seriously wrong with him

mentally. When Shane shifted on the sofa, a slight wince tightening his mouth, Ilya was moving before he thought, taking a cushion from a chair and tucking it behind Shane's lower back. Shane leaned into it with a soft exhale, accepting the comfort without acknowledgment. It was an old, tender instinct, pure and unmediated.

Ten minutes later, watching the clock, Ilya said, his voice reverting to that flat, authoritative tone, "Your iron supplement. You need to take it with food." He held out the pill and a glass of water.

Shane took them silently.

Yuna watched both exchanges. Her eyes narrowed slightly. The first had looked like the Ilya she'd come to know in his better moments. The second... didn't.

Keeping his promise felt like swallowing glass, but Ilya did it. He stood. "I will give you privacy," he announced. The surprise that flashed across Shane's face, genuine, unguarded shock, was a tiny, sharp puncture in Ilya's chest. He didn't let his expression change. "I'll be outside."

The door clicked shut behind Ilya. For several seconds, none of them spoke. Shane kept his eyes fixed on the glass of water in his hands, turning it slowly between his palms. He could feel both of his parents looking at him, and somehow that was worse than if they had immediately started with questions. His mom had always been patiently good at waiting him out.

David lasted less. "Okay," he said, leaning forward with his elbows braced on his knees. "Please, tell us what the hell is going on."

"David..."

"What? Honey, our kid disappears and we barely hear one word. That's not you, Shane."

Shane's mouth twitched despite himself, but Yuna saw it.

There he was. Just for a second. She reached across the small space between them and rested her hand over his. "We don't have to talk about anything you don't want to, but honey, we were so scared."

Shane looked up at his parents and saw Ilya smoking from the window. So Shane took a deep breath and started talking.

Not everything, and not in perfect order. But he told them about his little apartment. About the Fischers and all the townspeople who took him in like their own. He touched on how he felt like he was drowning sometimes with Ilya. he told them about the house and his bank accounts. He tried to explain how the lies had made him feel but didn't quite manage to articulate the right way.

The more he spoke, the better he felt. His shoulders loosened. His answers got longer. He told them about the sweet things that Ruth had done for him. How he learned to build his own crib from Walter.

It was the most animated Yuna had seen him in so long, she almost felt jealous.

Shane's smile faded a bit. "It was different. I didn't feel the pressure to always be 'on'. I could sit back and relax and walk around in sweats the whole day and nobody was thinking worse of me for it.

"Sweetheart," she said eventually, "are you here because you wanted to come home or were you forced?"

Shane's breathing changed. Slightly but she heard it. His thumb rubbed repeatedly along the side of the glass. "I..."

Yuna waited, trying to take in every detail of her baby's demeanor.

“Not exactly.” David stiffened.

Yuna felt something cold settle into her stomach. “What does that mean?”

“Mom,”

“Sweetheart, I’m not angry with you.”

“I’m not angry with you.”

“I know, but mom-”

“Then tell me.”

Shane finally looked at her. “Ilya found me.”

“Okay....”

“He came into the apartment while I was out.”

Something in David's expression sharpened and Shane saw it immediately. “Dad.”

“Shane.”

“Please.”

David's jaw worked, but he leaned back. Yuna never took her eyes from Shane. "Keep going."

Shane swallowed. "He was waiting when I got home."

"And?"

"And he was angry."

Yuna almost laughed at the inadequacy of the word. She'd seen Ilya angry over the past five months. She'd seen him put a fist through drywall. She'd watched him come off the ice with blood on his knuckles and a murderous look in his eyes. *Angry* could mean almost anything where Ilya Rozanov was concerned.

"Did you agree to come back with him?"

Shane looked down again. "No."

David stood. "Dad."

"No." David's voice was dangerously quiet now. "No, Shane. What do you mean, no?"

"Sit down."

"He took you out of there against your will?"

"Dad, sit down."

“David.” Yuna's voice cracked through the room. He looked at her.

“Sit.” David sat, but barely. He perched on the edge of the chair, every muscle in his body rigid.

Yuna moved closer to Shane. “Did he threaten you?”

Another silence.

“Shane.”

“He was upset.”

“That isn't what I asked.” Shane's eyes closed, Yuna felt her heartbeat begin to pound.

“Did he hurt you?” Shane's hand moved before he could stop it. His fingers rose toward his throat but they didn't quite touch. He seemed to realize what he was doing halfway there and quickly dropped his hand back into his lap.

But Yuna and David had seen it. The room changed, the air felt heavy with tension. Yuna's voice became very quiet. “Shane.” She went closer and took his face in her hands gently when he just stared at the floor. “Look at me.”

Slowly, he did. “What did he do?”

Shane's eyes filled. “He stopped.”

For one terrible second, Yuna couldn't understand the sentence, but then she did.

David was on his feet again so quickly the chair scraped backward across the floor. “Where is he?”

Shane grabbed his father's wrist.

“Dad, no.”

“Where the fuck is he?”

“Dad, please.”

“Shane, he put his hands on you.”

“I know.”

“You're pregnant.”

“*I know.*” The word cracked out of Shane so sharply that David stopped. Shane's face crumpled. “I know, okay? I was there.”

David's fury seemed to collapse inward. He sat beside his son instead, his hand closing around the back of Shane's neck the way he had when Shane was a boy. “I'm sorry,” he whispered. Shane shook his head.

Yuna's own anger was climbing now, hot and almost blinding, but something was bothering her. “Do you want to leave?” she asked.

Shane looked at her.

“We can take you,” David said immediately. “Right now.”

“David.”

“What?”

“Let him answer.”

Shane looked between them. For one heartbeat, Yuna expected yes. Instead, his face twisted with misery. “I don't know. He'd just find me again.”

“You don't know if you want to leave?”

“I don't know what I want.”

“Are you afraid he'll stop you?”

Shane didn't answer. Yuna reached for his hand again. “Shane, if you want to leave this house, you tell me. I don't care what Ilya says. I don't care what agreement you made with him. Your father and I will figure it out.”

“I know.”

“Then why aren't you asking us?”

Shane's eyes moved toward the windows. Because Ilya was somewhere beyond them. "I still love him."

Yuna closed her eyes briefly.

Of course he did.

"I know."

"No, Mom." Shane shook his head, frustrated tears spilling over now. "I mean I *love* him. I was so angry with him when I left. I was scared of what everything between us was turning into, and I needed to get away before Bean came because I couldn't..." He dragged a hand over his face. "I couldn't think when he was around. Everything was always so intense. The bond, him, me. I needed somewhere quiet enough to figure out what I actually wanted."

"And did you?" Yuna asked.

"I thought I was starting to."

"Until he found you."

Shane nodded. Then, after a moment: "But something's wrong with him."

David gave a short, humorless laugh. "Yeah. I think we've established that."

"No."

The certainty in Shane's voice made both of them look at him.

“No,” he repeated. “I mean something is *wrong* with him.”

Yuna frowned.

Shane struggled visibly for the words. “I know how Ilya is when he’s angry, jealous. I’ve known asshole Ilya since I was seventeen.”

Despite everything, David made a strangled noise that might have been a laugh.

Shane ignored him. “I know what he's like when he gets possessive. I know what he's like when he's scared. I've seen him grieving. I've seen him drunk. I've seen him completely fucking irrational.” His voice softened. “This isn't the same.”

Yuna's anger cooled by a degree. “What isn't?”

“Him.”

She waited.

Shane looked toward the back of the house again.

“Sometimes he's there.”

“Who?”

“Ilya. *My* Ilya.”

A faint chill crawled along Yuna's arms.

Shane looked down at their joined hands. "This morning he ordered enough breakfast for twenty people because he didn't know what I liked anymore."

David blinked. "That sounds like Ilya."

"I know right?" Shane looked up. "He watched what fruit I ate so he'd know what to get again. Last night..." He hesitated. "I woke up and someone had fixed all the pillows around me. I know it was him."

Yuna said nothing.

"And then he'll say something to me and it's like..." Shane shook his head. "It's like someone shut a door."

"He'll look right at me and tell me I need to obey him. Or that I can't leave. Or he'll start talking about what an omega needs from an alpha like he's reading it out of a fucking textbook."

Yuna's stomach tightened. She thought of Galina. The thought came so quickly she almost didn't register it. A perfectly composed face, a polite smile. *He did well today*. She had pushed it aside. Not yet. "Has he always talked like that?" she asked.

"No." Shane answered immediately. Then he hesitated, "I mean, not like this. He's always been a little on the obsessive side, but some of it I liked. He's changed. I don't even recognize him most of the time anymore."

Yuna's thumb moved slowly over the back of his hand. "Shane... when did you notice it?"

“I don't know.” Of course. “But since he found me...” Shane's brow furrowed. “Sometimes he'll be furious and then suddenly he's just... calm. Not normal calm, but more like as if he's not even there.”

Yuna stopped moving. Shane noticed. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“*Mom.*”

“I said nothing.”

Shane's voice dropped. “I don't want you to hate him.”

Yuna's chest tightened. “Oh, sweetheart.”

“I mean it.”

“I know.” Yuna turned back to Shane. “I don't hate Ilya.”

Shane searched her face. “But I am very, very angry with him.”

“He's not okay.”

“That does not make what he did okay.”

“I *know*.”

“Do you?” Shane flinched. Yuna immediately softened her voice. “Because loving someone who's unwell doesn't mean you have to let them hurt you while you wait for them to get better.”

Shane's eyes dropped. “I know.”

This time Yuna believed he understood the words, she just wasn't sure he believed they applied to him. Yuna squeezed his hand and stood.

Shane immediately looked up.

“Where are you going?”

“To talk to him.”

His grip tightened around her fingers.

“Mom.”

“I am going to *talk* to him.”

“Don't make him angry.” The plea came too quickly. Yuna went completely still. There it was. Not *don't fight*. Not *don't upset him*.

Don't make him angry.

She bent and kissed Shane's forehead. "Don't worry sweetheart." But Shane still looked unconvinced.

Yuna straightened and looked at David.

"Stay with our son."

David's jaw tightened. "Yuna--"

"Stay with him." Something in her expression stopped the argument. She walked toward the back of the house. As she passed the windows, she saw Ilya outside on the patio, alone in the cold, cigarette burning between his fingers. For one brief moment, Yuna stopped.

She had spent the last several minutes listening to her frightened son tell her about a man he no longer entirely recognized.

Now she was looking at that man through the glass. And somehow, even from here, he didn't look like someone who had won. He looked lost.

It did absolutely nothing to lessen her anger. Yuna opened the door.

Alone on the back patio, the bitter cold seeping through his sweater, Ilya lit a cigarette. The relief of the reunion was already curdling into a sour anticipation. He knew what was coming. He walked out and texted Anatoly to make sure the room would be monitored via camera to make sure nothing happened.

He didn't have to wait long. The French doors opened and Yuna stepped out, her posture rigid with fury she'd been bottling since she first saw the caution in her son's eyes. She'd rehearsed this, he could tell. The accusations, the demands.

Then he turned to face her, and she paused. The look on his face gave her pause. He wasn't triumphant. He wasn't defiant. He looked utterly drained. And when he saw the storm in her eyes, a flicker of something like fear passed over his features before he could hide it.

"Did you put your hands on my son?" she asked, her voice low and deadly.

There was no point in lying. "Yes." Ilya looked away, toward the skeletal trees at the property's edge. Shane had talked about having a large kitchen garden there before everything went to hell.

The anger erupted then, hot and scalding. Ilya sat back and listened to his petite woman for a few minutes. He had grown to love her, she was one of the few people he had in his life who never demanded more from him, he had started to give him the love that reminded him of his mother.

Ilya absorbed it, his jaw tight. Finally, he ground out, "Please, Yuna. Stop."

She didn't. Her voice rose, sharp with maternal fury.

"He is my omega," Ilya said, the words steady but he didn't need to raise his voice.

"I am his mother," she fired back. "And you promised me he would be safe with you. Make me understand."

"You are beta," he said, frustration bleeding into his tone. "You cannot understand this. You don't know... you don't know what the bond felt like when it went quiet. Waking up every day and feeling the *absence* before you even open your eyes. Knowing your child is... is growing somewhere inside him and you have no right to even know if they are alive." He pressed a fist against his sternum. "The rage, Yuna. The terror. Now he is here, and everything in me screams to keep him close, to never let him vanish again, and then I look at him and I remember the empty house, and the months, and I get so... so fucking angry."

He ran out of words. The explanation, even to his own ears, was a threadbare thing. It explained the feeling, not the act.

“You love him?” Yuna asked, her voice quieter now.

Ilya looked at her as if she were insane. “More than anything.”

“Then why is he scared of you?”

He had no answer. The silence was his confession. His hands, which had been still, began a fine, barely perceptible tremor. He saw her notice. The familiar shame washed over him. He fumbled in his pocket for the orange vial, fighting with the child-proof cap until it popped open. He shook two white pills into his palm and dry-swallowed them. Then he lit another cigarette from the butt of the first, his movements jerky.

“Ilya,” Yuna said, her anger momentarily displaced by concern.

“Please don’t hate me,” he whispered, the words escaping before the medication could clamp down on his vulnerability. He took a harsh drag. “I am trying, Yuna. I am trying the best I can.”

The raw plea took the wind from her sails. The anger remained, but underneath it now coiled a new, cold fear. “Then why are you treating him like this?”

He stared at the glowing tip of his cigarette. The pills were beginning to smooth the jagged edges, spreading their chemical calm. When he spoke again, his voice was flatter, more detached. “I don’t know.”

“I get so fucking angry. I could be fine one second then I just get so angry and is hard for me to control.” A pause. “Then I say things. I do things. Afterward... it feels wrong, but I just can’t stop it.”

“Wrong how?”

He just shook his head, a lost gesture. “I don’t know.”

Yuna watched as the transformation completed. The shaking stopped. The agitated energy stilled. The fear and shame in his eyes receded, replaced by that unnerving, placid composure.

Her mind, always connecting dots, tried to race back. Something felt *off*.

Her eyes locked on the bottle he still held. “What exactly are those?”

Ilya glanced at it as if seeing it for the first time. “Medication for anxiety. Galina manages it and they help.”

“How often does she change your dosage?”

“When she thinks I need more,” he said, his tone implying the question was irrelevant.

The casualness of it chilled her. Her voice softened, but lost none of its steel. “I don’t hate you, Ilya, I don’t think I can at this point,.” She saw the faint sag of relief in his shoulders. “But loving you does not mean I will let you frighten my son.” She took a step closer, forcing him to meet her eyes. “He is pregnant, he is vulnerable. If you ever put your hand around his throat again, I don’t care if you’re an alpha, a beta, or the fucking King of Russia. You will have to go through me.”

A ghost of the old Ilya surfaced, a faint, almost imperceptible twitch at the corner of his mouth. “King of Russia?”

“Don’t test me,” she said, but the familiar rhythm of their banter was gone as quickly as it appeared, swallowed by the new, terrible gulf between them.

She turned to go inside. His voice stopped her, smaller now, stripped of all its earlier defenses.

“Ma?”

She looked back.

He wasn't looking at her. He was staring toward the house, his profile bleak in the winter light. “Does he hate me?”

The question was so quiet, so full of a hopeless need, that it bypassed her anger and went straight to her heart. She would not lie to him. “I don't think Shane knows what he feels about you right now.” She saw his throat work as he swallowed. “But I don't think you're making it any easier for him to remember.”

She went inside, closing the door softly behind her. Before turning away, she looked back through the glass. Ilya remained, a solitary figure in the gathering dusk, the orange pill bottle a bright, accusing spot of color on the stone railing beside him.

For months, she had believed the medication was a lifeline, one of the few things holding him together.

Now, watching him stand so still, so coldly composed in the freezing air, she wondered what, exactly, it was holding together, and what it was slowly dissolving away.

The quiet that settled over the house in the days after Yuna and David's visit was different. It was a heavy, pervasive stillness, giving the feeling of a heavy fog in the air. It seeped into the rooms, muffling the thoughts of the few people who came into the house.

Ilya stood by and watched, his initial relief at the cessation of open conflict and hostility had now turned, it felt like it was curdling into a deep, growing unease.

Shane withdrew. No rages, or arguments, bit in a slow, quiet leaching away of his presence. Most mornings, he didn't emerge from the bedroom until well past noon, moving with a weariness that had nothing to do with the growing belly. He would shower, dress in the first thing he touched and swallow whatever vitamin or supplement Ilya laid out for him. He picked at his food but still ate. Then he would migrate to the living room, settling into the armchair by the largest bay window and look out. He'd spend hours looking at what seemed nothing, his gaze unfocused.

He slept for hours now. Deep, leaden naps in the afternoons that left him groggy and no more rested. He showed no interest in anything, ignoring calls from his friends, only showing some type of interest when he was on the phone a couple times with the Fischers or his parents.

At first, Ilya thought it was normal. Blaming it on hormones and Dr. Vasiliev agreed, saying to just give him time. It was also suggested that Ilya should start thinking about giving birth at the hospital instead of using a doula, something that Ilya knew Shane wouldn't want to hear so he kept that development to himself until Shane started to feel better.

The flat, passive acceptance was a chasm worse than any shouted insult. Anything that Ilya offered was agreed to with no pushback. No original opinions or counteroffer. Ilya found himself missing the fire, the joking, the analytical way that Shane was used to thinking like over the most random things throughout the day.

"Stop doing that," Ilya snapped, his voice sharper than he intended.

Shane looked up, his eyes finally focusing on him with mild curiosity. "Doing what?"

"Nothing!"

A few seconds of silence hung between them.

“I’m not doing anything, Alpha.” Shane said, his tone flat.

They had stared at each other, both trapped in the same bewildering loop. Shane, because he was doing exactly what was demanded of him: being still, being quiet, being compliant. Ilya, because he had gotten what he thought he wanted and found it tasted like ashes.

Ilya began orchestrating calls. He’d hand Shane the phone, pre-dialed. “JJ wants to talk to you.” “Hayden is on the line.” Shane would take it, answer questions in monosyllables or soft, non-committal hums. *I’m okay. Just tired. Yeah. Soon maybe.* The calls seemed to drain him further, leaving him paler, more withdrawn afterwards. Ilya stopped forcing them. Every attempt to connect Shane to the outside world seemed to only bury him deeper inside himself.

Ilya was no longer angry. He was frightened.

Two weeks passed, Ilya was tempted to ask Galina to come have a look at Shane, to see if maybe she could help Shane come out of his mind like she had done with him when he received a text from Rose.

Rose- We’re coming over later today. We have Shane’s favorite foods and Svetlana, Kip and Marly have tagged along.

Ilya- Ok. Thank you.

He told Shane, thinking he’d be happy to see his friends in person. Shane just nodded and turned on the bed to face the window.

But when the small group poured into the foyer that afternoon, shedding their coats and removing their shoes, something shifted. Rose descended on Shane with a fierce hug that

showed the most movement Shane had done all week. They held each other tightly and he stayed clinging to her even as Kip and Svetlana hugged the other side of him.

Marly waved and greeted Shane warmly but stayed by the door. He didn't know everything that was going on, but he knew that no matter what, going near a pregnant omega while in their bedroom was a big faux pas no matter if he was one of Ilya's best friends.

They both watched by the doorway as Rose, Kip and Svetlana surrounded Shane and tried to get him to sit up and eat. Ilya thought the visit might go better if he left so he stepped away and Marly followed. While grabbing Marly a beer and a shot for himself, Troy called and offered to go over to hang out.

Ilya felt bad. He hadn't been much of a captain so he agreed and they went outside by the front door so Ilya could smoke. Once Troy got there and introductions were made, Ilya stood back and let them get to know each other a bit.

When it got too chilly outside, they made it down to the basement game room that had come with the house. More drinks were poured, the three of them becoming more relaxed. Marly pulled out a joint and motioned to Ilya if it was ok. He lit it when Ilya just shrugged and they were silent for a few minutes as they passed it along.

After the tenth time of seeing Ilya pull his phone out then shove it back in his jeans, Marly finally asked what was wrong with him.

"I think I am losing my fucking mind," he said as he covered his face with his forearm.

Neither man laughed. Troy flopped himself next to Ilya on the movie theater style chair, his expression serious. Marly just watched him. "Can't be that bad, man." Troy said, taking another hit and passing the joint back to Ilya.

"I am serious," Ilya insisted, his voice low. He stared out at the skeletal trees, silvered by moonlight. "Some days... I wake up and all I want is to take care of him. Make his food. Rub that spot on his back that aches. Just... be there. Feel the baby move. Tell him I am sorry until he believes me." He swallowed. "Then something... changes. I become furious. Cold. I

look at him and all I can think is that he needs to obey, that I need to make him obey me. That he has to listen, that it is the only way to keep him safe, to keep the baby safe. That everything I am doing is right.” He finally looked at them, his eyes stark. “Then later, I look at him sitting there, so quiet, and I do not understand why I said any of it. Maybe I am bipolar. Or fucking schizophrenic. Brain tumor. I don’t know. Something.”

“Don’t diagnose yourself with WebMD, you idiot,” Marly said, but his tone lacked its usual bite.

Troy, however, absorbed it all. “When did this start? This... switching. Maybe you took a hit to the head?”

“I don’t know,” Ilya admitted, the helplessness in his voice foreign even to his own ears.

“Hollander and you seemed fine over the summer though. I mean I’ve seen plenty of mated pairs fight more than you two.”

“Yes and no,” Ilya conceded. “I have always been... possessive. Jealous. Obsessive about him. I do not pretend otherwise.” He gestured vaguely toward the house with the hand holding the joint. “But this? This cold... certainty? This feeling that I am following instructions written on the inside of my own skull? No.”

He took another drag, the ember bright in the dimmed room. “I wanted him to obey me. Now he does.” He let the smoke out in a thin, weary stream. “I fucking hate it.” The admission, when it came, was stripped bare. “I don’t know how to fix this.”

Troy’s voice was firm. Troy stared at him for several seconds. “You don’t fix *this*, man.”

Ilya’s eyes narrowed. “Very helpful.”

“No. Listen to me. You don’t fix Shane. Shane isn’t the problem. You figure out what the fuck is happening to you. If I had this problem with Harris, I wouldn’t go crazy if Harris and I disagreed with something. We’d talk and figure out a middle ground.”

Silence.

Then Troy shook his head. “And seriously, how the hell do you fumble Shane Hollander? Do you understand how statistically fucking impossible your life is?”

It was the first real, unvarnished comment Ilya had heard that wasn’t filtered through Galina’s therapeutic language or his own twisted instincts. It hung in the air, simple and impossible.

Marly, ever practical, moved to the next step. “Are you still seeing your therapist?”

“Yes.”

“Taking your medication?”

“Yes.”

“Have you actually talked to your therapist about it? About what’s going on with you and Shane? I mean, a bonded relationship should be private.”

Ilya paused. The answer was obvious in his silence. “I mean, Shane and I have had problems before. I started seeing her when we broke up for a while and she helped but I don’t know. It’s harder now.”

Ilya stared at the glowing tip of the joint, his voice dropping to a near whisper, “I am scared that if I stop taking them, I will hurt him.”

Ilya’s face, hardened by tension, softened involuntarily. “Miss the sound of his laugh, of him looking at me,” he murmured, the ache of it palpable.

Marly studied him for a long moment, his sharp eyes missing nothing. “I’m not someone who likes to butt into another Alpha’s relationship, but if you don’t fix this and you lose Hollander, someone worse can get to him. Aside from everything else, I saw how you two were with each other and that’s worth fighting for.”

Ilya didn't answer. He laid sprawled the the sofa and looked up at the ceiling. Nothing was going as expected. Now Shane was sitting upstairs, safe, within reach. And Ilya, shivering on the outside looking in, was beginning to understand the terrible, simple truth he had been blind to all along.

Finding him had never been the same thing as getting him back.

The door clicked shut behind Ilya, and the room seemed to expand, breathing out a sigh it had been holding for so long. The heavy, watchful silence that had become the background hum of Shane's life lifted, replaced by the familiar, chaotic, *freeing* energy of his friends.

Rose was on him first, her arms wrapping around him with a ferocity that made his breath hitch. She didn't say anything, just held him, her face buried in his shoulder. "You're so big," she mumbled into his shirt after a minute, her voice thick.

"I'm aware," Shane said with a small smile, his own arms coming up to hug her back, the simple, unconditional affection a balm on his raw nerves.

Kip settled on the edge of the bed with a quiet, understanding smile, her presence calm and grounding. Svetlana, meanwhile, sank into the armchair Ilya had vacated, throwing one leg over the arm. "You look terrible," she announced. "Pregnancy is clearly a degenerative condition."

"Bean can hear you," Shane said, though a faint, real smile touched his lips. Svetlana's refusal to treat him like he was broken was its own kind of comfort.

"Good," Svetlana said, leaning toward his stomach. "Baby, I am only telling you the truth. You are causing dry skin and a pale face to your dada."

As if on cue, Bean delivered a swift, rolling kick to Shane's right side. He grimaced, shifting against the pillows. "See? They've decided my ribs are optional now thanks to you."

Kip, without a word, reached over and adjusted the pillow behind his back, providing better support. The gesture was so effortless, so devoid of fraught meaning, that Shane nearly teared up.

"Can I?" Rose asked, her hands already hovering near his stomach.

Shane nodded. She placed her palms gently on the curve, her eyes wide. A moment later, a distinct thump made her jump. "Oh! Hello in there!"

"My turn," Svetlana declared, standing.

"Ask nicely," Shane said, the old, teasing reflex emerging on its own.

Svetlana gave him a look of profound offense, then arranged her face into exaggerated solemnity. "Shane Hollander, may I please place my hand upon your cute but enormous belly to say hello to the tiny tyrant within?"

"You may."

She did, her touch surprisingly gentle. Bean, perhaps sensing a new audience, delivered a series of sharp, insistent jabs. Svetlana yanked her hand back as if shocked. "Bozhe moi! It attacks!"

"Bean has excellent instincts," Shane said, and the laugh that followed was small, but it was real. It felt strange in his throat, like a muscle he hadn't used in months.

He saw Rose and Kip exchange a glance over his head, but Svetlana barreled on, launching into a story about a pregnant friend who'd demanded a photoshoot in a bathtub full of pickles, and the spell was broken. They talked about nothing. About Shane's craving for frozen mango chunks that made his teeth ache, about how turning over in bed now required a solid five minutes to think if the movement was worth it, about how Bean's favorite time for acrobatics was precisely 3 AM.

"I miss my own feet," Shane sighed, looking down at his swollen ankles. "I have months left and it feels like I'm huge."

"You are a vessel of life," Svetlana said, waving a hand dramatically. "It is disgusting and noble."

"It's mostly disgusting," Shane corrected, and Rose snorted.

Rose said something then, something so absurd about a celebrity baby name she'd read online, that Shane laughed, a proper, surprised burst of laughter that immediately made him clutch his side. "Ow, stop, don't make me laugh. Even laughing hurts."

The room glowed with the sound of it, warm and bright. For a while, he was just Shane. Arguing with Svetlana, complaining to Rose, sharing a knowing look with Kip. He wasn't an omega in crisis, a patient, a problem to be managed. He was their friend, who was very pregnant and very done with it.

As the easy chatter settled into a comfortable lull, Kip reached over and smoothed the edge of his blanket. Her voice was soft, no pressure in it at all. "How are you really doing?"

The automatic answer was on his tongue. Fine. But the word wouldn't come. They were all looking at him, not with demand, but with open, patient space. Rose took his hand. Svetlana stayed quiet, for once. Kip added, "You don't have to talk about it."

That was the permission he needed.

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to do,” he whispered, the confession leaving him in a rush. “I still love him. That’s the stupid part. It never went away, which just makes everything... harder.” He stared at their joined hands. “Sometimes, he’s just... Ilya. He fixes my pillows in the night. He watches what I eat and remembers it the next day. He’ll help me up or say something and it’s so *him* that it...” He shook his head. “And then it’s like a switch flips. His voice goes flat. He starts talking about obedience and rules and what an omega ‘needs’. I don’t understand it.”

Rose’s jaw tightened, her anger a palpable heat, but Kip gave a slight shake of her head. Piling on Ilya might only make Shane retreat.

Svetlana was frowning, her conflict clear. “He has always been possessive asshole,” she said finally. “Is not news. But this... cold father-knows-best bullshit? The talking like he is reading from manual? No. That is not the Ilya I know. Something is wrong.”

“That’s what scares me,” Shane admitted, his voice barely audible. “What if there isn’t anything wrong?” He looked at each of them, his fear laid bare. “What if this is just him now?”

The question hung in the air, heavy and terrible.

“That’s not your job to figure out,” Rose said fiercely, squeezing his hand. “His... whatever this is, it’s not your responsibility to fix.”

“She is right,” Svetlana said, the admission clearly costing her. “Even if it hurts to say.”

Shane took a shaky breath. “My mom and dad offered to help me leave, but I don’t even know why I said no. I don’t know if it’s because I really don’t want to leave, or because I’ve given up, or because I’ve just... stopped believing leaving is possible.”

It was Kip who spoke then, her words a gentle, unwavering anchor. “You don’t have to know yet.” Shane looked at her, startled. “You don’t have to decide today if you forgive him. You don’t have to decide if you’re staying together. You don’t have to decide what your family

looks like after the baby gets here. You're pregnant, you're exhausted, you're scared, and the person you love is acting like a stranger half the time. You're allowed to just not know."

The relief that washed through him was so profound it felt like weakness. His eyes burned. He tried to cover it with a weak joke. "Great. So my official plan is... nothing."

"Honestly?" Kip said, a small smile on her face. "You've had worse plans."

Svetlana nodded sagely. "Running away while pregnant with famous Russian psychopath's baby was objectively terrible plan."

Shane stared at her. Rose sighed. "Svetlana."

"What? It worked for five months." Shane said. A laugh bubbled out of Shane, unexpected and cleansing. He didn't try to stop it this time.

The conversation drifted after that, into the mundane and the silly. Rose argued for classic names. Svetlana insisted the baby needed a name "with authority." Kip told a story about Scott trying to convince him to have a second baby during his next heat and Noah's latest disastrous attempt at solid foods. Shane listened, adding a comment here and there, feeling himself settle into the pillows, into the circle of their care.

He realized, after a while, that he hadn't glanced at the bedroom door once. He hadn't been tracking the sound of footsteps in the hall, bracing for the mood that would walk through the door. The constant, low-grade hum of vigilance had simply... switched off.

For the first time in days, wrapped in the easy, silly noise of his friends, Shane had forgotten to be afraid.

The house settled into a comfortable silence after the car pulled away, the echoes of laughter and overlapping conversations lingering like warmth in the empty rooms. Ilya remained on the patio for a while longer, the cold air sobering him slightly from the pleasant, fuzzy haze of the weed. His mind felt strangely spacious, uncluttered by the usual white-noise of the overwhelming anger and stress. It was only when he glanced at his watch, out of long-ingrained habit, that he realized with a slight jolt. He'd missed his medication.

The anxiety was immediate but short-lived, a conditioned flinch. Galina's voice was thick in his mind: *You need them to maintain stability. To keep him safe.* He waited for the familiar creep of agitation, the tightening in his chest that usually preceded the need for chemical intervention. It didn't come. Instead, he felt... calm. Tired, a little melancholic, but clear-headed. The thoughts he'd shared with Troy and Marly weren't shrouded in defensive fog, they just were. Ever since leaving Boston and trying to bond with his team, he missed just being able to relax with his friends and not be forced to be *the* Ilya Rozanov and having the whole team look up to him to uphold a high standard.

A new, radical plan formed. He wouldn't take the missed pills now. If, in the night, the rage returned, he would simply leave. Walk out to the guest house, lock himself in, ride it out alone. The solution, removing himself as a potential threat, rather than constraining Shane after he had a good day, felt so fundamentally obvious he wondered why it had never occurred to him before.

Maybe the pills had finally done their fucking job. Maybe Galina could start weaning him back down to his old dose.

He pulled out a cigarette and held it before trying to see if he should have another, but then he heard faint movement from the kitchen, he hesitated. The back of his mind whispered: *Go check. Shane shouldn't be awake this late.* But he stopped the thought and simply went back inside, making sure he made enough noise to not scare Shane. He had to press his hand against the wall a couple times to keep from tripping though. *What the hell with in the joint that Barnett got?*

The sight that greeted him was so bizarre it short-circuited any remaining pretense. Shane stood at the island, backlit by the under-cabinet lights, dressed in soft, worn sweats. His pregnant stomach pressed against the counter's edge, forcing him to stand awkwardly back. In his hands: a bowl of the fancy organic vanilla ice cream he'd taken a liking to, and a knife

poised over a cutting board pickled beets, their violent magenta juice staining the wood and marble.

“What the fuck are you doing?” The words left Ilya’s mouth before he could temper them, blunt with disbelief.

He saw the reaction instantly. Shane’s shoulders locked. The spoon stilled. His eyes flicked up, a quick, assessing scan, not of Ilya’s face, but of his posture, his tone, calculating the threat level. It was a prisoner’s reflex. The sight surprised Ilya, threatening to wash away some of the pleasant high.

“No. Sorry,” Ilya said, softening his voice, holding up a placating hand. “Relax, Shane. Please. I am not angry.” He pointed a finger at the culinary abomination. “I am only, uh, surprised at your choice of snack.”

Shane’s tension eased a fraction, but wariness kept his spine straight. “It’s good.”

“Is beets and ice cream? Is good for you?”

“Pickled beets. They need to be pickled or else they taste off.” Shane answered slowly, as if he was debating on whether he should leave the room without his snack. But he really, *really* wanted to finish the bowl.

“This does not improve situation, but as long as you like it I guess.”

“Bean wanted it.” Shane replied, shrugging his shoulder.

Ilya looked down at the pronounced curve of Shane’s stomach, addressing it directly in rapid, exasperated Russian. Shane only caught a few words like ‘criminal’, ‘waste’, ‘behave’ and the word Papa.

A tiny, involuntary twitch at the corner of Shane's mouth. Not quite a smile, though. Ilya noted it but said nothing. He pulled out a stool on the opposite side of the island and sat, deliberately creating distance. Shane watched him for a moment, then slowly resumed his work, chopping more of the beets into tiny, jewel-like cubes and stirring them into the creamy white. The *clink clink* of the knife was the only sound. Eventually, he sat across from Ilya, pulling the bowl close.

The silence stretched, thick with everything unsaid, but it wasn't the hostile silence of the last weeks though.

"I am sorry," Ilya said. The words felt inadequate, gravel in his mouth.

Shane's spoon paused halfway to his lips. He didn't look up.

"I am sorry for what has been happening. Since I found you." Ilya dragged a hand down his face, the exhaustion of the last months, the frantic search, their 'reunion', the bewildering self-betrayal, settling on him all at once. "I know saying I was hurt does not excuse it. When you disappeared... something broke. Inside. For months, I woke up furious. Terrified. Not knowing where you were. If you were safe. If our baby was safe." His voice grew rough. "By the time I found you, I had imagined it thousands of times. None of those... none of them included you being afraid of me."

He made himself look at Shane, who was staring into his bowl, his expression unreadable.

"Part of me wanted to punish you. For leaving. I wanted you to understand what those five months did. But another part..." He shook his head, the conflict visceral. "Another part wanted nothing except to fall on my knees, hold you, beg you never to disappear again. I don't... I don't understand why the cruel part keeps winning." He let out a shaky breath. "Sometimes I say something, and while I am saying it, it makes perfect fucking sense. Then later, I think about it, and I don't know why I said it."

Shane was silent for a long moment. Then, quietly: "Like telling me I have to obey you?"

The shame was a hot rush. "Yes."

“Like telling I’m not allowed to leave?”

“Yes.”

“Like putting your hand around my throat?”

The words were a precise, surgical cut. Ilya flinched, his gaze dropping to the marble countertop. “Yes. I am not a good man, Shane. I’ve done things I’m not proud of. Things I would still do again because I believed they needed to be done.” His jaw tightened. “But not that. Never that. If there is one thing in my life I could go back and change, it would be putting my hands on you. I don’t know why I did it. If I could take it back, I would.”

Shane stared down at the melting streaks of purple in his bowl. Part of him wanted to say that Ilya wasn't the only one who had suffered. That those five months hadn't been some extended vacation for Shane. He had been pregnant, terrified, alone and constantly looking over his shoulder. He had abandoned his career, his family, his friends, his name. He had built an entire new existence out of necessity because staying had felt impossible.

And yet, even as the defense rose inside him, something Ilya had said lodged painfully beneath it. *I didn't know if you were safe. If our baby was safe.*

Shane had spent months telling himself that Ilya would survive his absence. That someday, when everything was calmer, when Bean was here, when Shane understood what he wanted, there would be some way to explain.

Because despite everything, Shane had never actually imagined a future where Ilya knew nothing about those months.

That wasn't entirely true, though. He *had* thought about Ilya. The journal hidden among his things was proof of that.

Page after page. Ultrasound photographs carefully pasted between entries. Pictures of his stomach every few weeks with the dates written underneath. Bean's first real kick. The ridiculous cravings. The nights the baby wouldn't let him sleep. The first tiny clothes Ruth had helped him choose. Little moments Shane had documented because somewhere in the back of his mind, he'd always known who he wanted to show them to.

Ilya.

Someday.

Shane's fingers tightened around his spoon.

That was the part he'd never examined too closely.

Even while hiding from Ilya, he'd been preserving all the things Ilya was missing so he could give them back to him someday.

He'd thought about future Ilya constantly.

What he hadn't allowed himself to think about was the Ilya who had to survive long enough to become him.

Shane didn't regret leaving.

He couldn't.

He had needed to leave.

But sitting across from Ilya now, he finally allowed himself to understand something he hadn't wanted to before.

Something could have been necessary for him and still have devastated someone he loved.

Maybe that was the part neither of them had ever been particularly good at. Shane's pain did not erase Ilya's. Ilya's pain did not give him the right to punish Shane for causing it.

Both things could be true. Shane swallowed, staring at the purple mess slowly melting around his spoon. "I know leaving hurt you."

Ilya's eyes lifted to him.

"I knew it would," Shane continued quietly. "Maybe I didn't let myself think too hard about exactly what it would do to you because if I had..." He trailed off, his throat tightening. "I don't know if I would've been able to go."

Ilya went completely still.

"But I needed to go." The words weren't defensive this time, they were simply true. And maybe it was the wrong thing to say, but he needed to try to explain himself, at least while Ilya was still acting like *his Ilya*.

Ilya looked down at his hands. "I know."

Shane watched him for a moment. "Do you?"

Ilya's jaw tightened.

Finally, Shane spoke, his voice low but clear. "I'm still angry. Not just about Willow Creek. About everything before I left." He looked up, meeting Ilya's eyes, and the pain there was ancient, layered. "I loved you. But I felt like... more and more, you saw love as ownership. Every disagreement was something you had to win. Every fear I had was something you

needed to solve for me, not with me.” He took a slow breath. “I didn’t need an alpha to take control of me, Ilya. I needed my partner.”

The words landed, each one a hammer blow to a foundation Ilya had believed was solid. He had no rebuttal. He just listened.

“I wanted you to treat me as an equal. I didn’t want to be beneath you. I didn’t want to be protected like property. Or managed like I couldn’t make decisions because I’m an omega.” Shane’s knuckles were white around his spoon. “You kept saying I was yours like it was supposed to make me feel safe. After a while, it just made me feel like I didn’t belong to myself anymore.”

“I thought saying you were mine meant I would never abandon you. My mother left me. Your parents will leave me. When Svetlana finds a mate, she will too. I thought you were finally someone who could be mine. That we’d have a family that was really mine.”

Shane’s eyes held his, unwavering. “That’s what it used to mean.” A pause, filled with the memory of every clipped order, every possessive glare since his return. “Then it started meaning I wasn’t allowed to leave.”

The distinction was the heart of their ruin. Ilya absorbed it, the finality of it crushing. He didn’t know how to come back from that. He didn’t ask for forgiveness. He didn’t ask if Shane still loved him. He made no demand at all, and the unfamiliarity of that emptiness was its own kind of ache that he deserved.

Shane studied him, the suspicion not gone, but tempered with a weary confusion. “What’s the catch?” he asked finally.

Ilya blinked. “What?”

“What happens if I say something you don’t like?” Shane clarified, his tone not challenging, but genuinely inquiring, as if checking the rules of a dangerous game.

“Nothing,” Ilya said, the word too simple.

Shane didn’t believe him. “You get angry.”

Ilya thought about it. The heat in his chest, the cold clarity that sometimes followed. “Maybe, maybe.”

Shane stiffened, confirming Ilya’s fear.

“But being angry,” Ilya continued, forcing the words out, “does not mean I get to punish you.”

The silence after that was different. It held a new, fragile possibility.

Eventually, Shane looked away, his throat working. “Sometimes I see him again. My Ilya. And it makes everything harder.”

Ilya’s heart thudded painfully against his ribs. He asked, barely a whisper, “Am I him now?”

Shane’s gaze traveled over his face, searching, weighing. The assessment lasted an eternity. Finally, he gave a small, almost imperceptible nod but then looked away. “Right now? I’m not sure. I can’t trust you anymore, Ilya.”

Of course. One moment of clarity amid weeks of switches meant nothing. Ilya understood. Instead of protesting, he just nodded, accepting the verdict. “Okay.”

“Okay?” Shane echoed, wary.

“You don’t trust me. I understand.” He hated it, but he didn’t argue.

They sat there after that, the conversation neither concluded nor abandoned. The atmosphere didn't magically repair, but the weight in the room had shifted, redistributed between them rather than piled solely on Shane's shoulders. Shane picked up his spoon again and took a bite of his beet ice cream, making a face that was almost a smile.

After a few minutes, Ilya gestured to the bowl. "Can I try?"

Shane looked at him as if he'd suggested licking the floor. "Seriously?"

"Maybe baby has discovered something."

With clear reluctance, Shane quickly shoved two big spoonfuls into his mouth before he pushed the bowl toward him, offering the spoon. Ilya scooped a modest amount, the purple streaks vivid against the white. He ate it.

The flavors exploded, cloying sweetness, earthy tang, the acidic vinegar punch. He swallowed, placing the spoon down with deliberate care.

"This," he announced, "is fucking disgusting."

A chuckle burst from Shane, startled and real. It was the sound Ilya had missed so desperately, the one he'd heard filtered through the window earlier. Hearing it directed at him, even in ridicule, was a gift. He found himself laughing too, a rough, rusty sound.

Later, as they both prepared to retreat to bed, Ilya climbed the stairs, the events of the evening replaying in his mind. He had spent hours without his medication. He had engaged in the most difficult conversation of his life. He had felt anger, shame, regret, and a piercing sorrow.

But he hadn't lost control. He hadn't raised his voice. He hadn't threatened or demanded or punished.

For the first time since Shane left home, he felt more like himself than he had in months. The significance of that thought hovered at the edge of his awareness, not yet fully formed, but present.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you Lisa, Tony, Anna and B, you are all amazing.

Chapter 46: Chapter 46

Chapter Summary

Okay, y'all ❤️ I think we have officially survived the worst of it. Thank you Lisa, Anna, Tony- not B because his suggestions would have gotten me lynched or burned as a witch.

I promised you a happy ending, and I have NOT forgotten that promise. From this chapter on, we are going uphill. And perhaps a little faster than some of you are expecting. 🙄😂

That's all I'm saying. I've already said too much.

Thank you for trusting me through the absolute emotional warfare of these last few chapters. Now come get your boys. ❤️🔪💎

Chapter Notes

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

The leather of Galina's office couch was cool against Ilya's palms. The room was, as always, a calm space for him, soft lighting, abstract neutral colored art, the faint scent of sandalwood. It usually felt like a decompression chamber. Today, it felt like a stage, and Ilya wasn't entirely sure why.

"How are things at home?" Galina began, her notepad balanced on her knee, "you said it has shifted slightly."

"Da. Marginally." Ilya focused on a point just past her shoulder. "It is still... awkward. He watches me. Measures his words. But sometimes now, he answers. We had a conversation. A real one."

He recounted the kitchen scene, haltingly. The admission of fear. Shane's quiet, devastating explanation, but held back, he didn't want to give too many details on a private conversation he had with his mate. Galina tried to get more details, but she backed off when Ilya denied her line of questioning. As he spoke, the old, defensive anger stirred, a hot ember of recalling how Shane left, how he took his child and hid, but it didn't blaze. It smoldered alongside a newer, colder understanding. Both could exist. The contradiction was exhausting.

“It sounds like a breakthrough in communication,” Galina observed, her tone neutral. “And how did that feel for you? To hear him express that?”

“It hurt,” Ilya said bluntly. “But it also... made sense. In a way it did not before.” He rubbed his thumb over his knuckles. “When he says it, I can see it. The moments he means. I can remember them. I could have been a better partner, a better alpha and not just assume that he knew things. We started when we were so young, I sometimes forget that we were raised so differently.”

Galina nodded, making a note. “This is excellent progress, Ilya. Truly. Understanding his perspective is the first step toward rebuilding. But I am hearing that you focus on his feelings? What about you? Are your needs being addressed?” She leaned forward slightly, her expression one of professional curiosity. “You know, hearing this from you is one thing. But meeting Shane myself, even once, could give me a much clearer picture of the dynamic, the bond, his emotional state. It could inform how I help you both navigate this.”

“No.”

The word was out before the thought had fully formed, sharp and absolute. Galina blinked, taken aback by the force of it.

“Ilya, I only meant-”

“No,” he repeated, his voice lower but no less firm. “My only need is to get Shane and me back to when we were happy. I don’t need you to be talking to him for that. He is not your patient. He already feels... managed. By doctors. By me. By everyone. I will not bring another person into his life to dissect him without his permission.”

Galina studied him, her head tilted. After a moment, she leaned back, a small, conceding smile on her lips. “A very protective instinct, and a respectful one. I understand. The offer stands, should you both ever feel it would be helpful.”

The conversation moved on, but the echo of his own vehemence lingered in Ilya's chest. It had felt less like protection and more like a territorial boundary, *Shane was mine to shield, not yours to examine.*

"Your medication," Galina said, glancing at her file. "We should schedule a refill soon. You are taking them consistently?"

"I have plenty." Then, because she would likely hear the hesitation in his voice anyway, he added, "I missed a dose. The day everyone visited. It was chaotic. I forgot."

Her pen stilled. "And how did you feel? Any increase in anxiety? Irritability?"

Ilya considered the memory: the fuzzy warmth of the weed, the bleak honesty with Troy and Marly, the shocking normalcy of Shane's laugh from upstairs, the difficult, necessary conversation over that absurd bowl of ice cream.

"Fine," he said. Then, more truthfully, "Actually... pretty fucking good. That was the night we talked. I was... relaxed. I could listen. I did not have the... the flashes of anger."

Galina's expression was one of gentle, professional caution. "Ilya, you were also using cannabis, which has its own psychoactive effects. You were socially engaged, supported by friends. Shane was more receptive. These are all variables. One missed dose in a context of lowered stress tells us very little. What we know is that inconsistency with psychiatric medication can create instability. The chemical balance in your brain is delicate. We do not alter the prescription based on a single anecdote, agreed?"

It was reasonable, something he expected to be told already. He nodded. "Da."

But a quiet, stubborn thought persisted: *Still, that night, I felt like myself.*

Galina neatly shifted topics. "I've been thinking... with all this focus on family, on your child, it surprises me you haven't returned to Russia. Not even for a visit. Your roots are

there. Your parents. Your history. The child should be introduced to your culture.”

Ilya shrugged, a defensive twitch of his shoulder. “My life is here. There is no reason to go back.”

“It is still a part of you,” she said softly. “A large part. And now, it will be a part of your child.” She let that hang for a moment. “Your child will be Russian, too.”

The words landed with a profound, unexpected weight. Emotion, thick and sudden, clogged Ilya’s throat. “They will speak Russian,” he said, the words gruff. “Proper Russian. Not the... the tourist words Shane will teach them to annoy me. They will know the food. The stories. They will know about my mother.” His mamas face, warm and smiling in his memory, flashed before him. “They should know who she was.”

“Of course,” Galina murmured, her eyes soft with understanding. “That connection is vital. Perhaps, in time, a visit could be meaningful. For the baby to see where their father came from. To feel that land, that air.”

The image was potent, alluring. Teaching Bean to skip stones on the Neva. Showing them the dusty shelves of his mother’s favorite bookstore. But a instinct, as sharp as the one that had made him say *no* to bringing Shane here minutes before, raised its head.

“The baby can visit someday. Maybe,” Ilya allowed. “But they do not need to live in Russia to understand where they come from. Their home is wherever Shane and I are.”

Galina held his gaze for a beat, then smiled, a placid, professional curve of her lips. She closed her notebook. “Their home is with their parents. That is what matters most. Well said.”

The session ended on that note of apparent harmony. Ilya drove home through the grey Ottawa afternoon, the familiar route on autopilot. The conversation replayed in his head, seeming, on the surface, productive. Yet two thoughts trailed him, persistent as ghosts.

The first: Why had the suggestion of Galina meeting Shane felt like such a profound violation? It wasn't just protectiveness. It was a gut-level no that had come from a place deeper than reason.

The second, quieter, more insidious: He had felt fractured and controlled for weeks, a stranger in his own mind. The one night he had been... whole, coherent, capable of painful but honest conversation, was the night a chemical he was told he needed had been absent from his bloodstream.

Coincidence, Galina would say. Variables.

By the time Ilya reached the house, neither thought had gone away. The two stubborn thoughts: *why not Galina meeting Shane* and *why do I feel fine without the pills*, circled in his head like tired birds, unable to land. He pushed them aside as he entered the house, the heavy silence a familiar, unwelcome greeting.

He found Shane upstairs, exactly as he'd half-expected. Not in bed, but in the armchair by the bedroom window, a blanket pooled around his hips. He was staring out at the leaden sky, his profile etched with detached exhaustion. One hand rested on the dome of his stomach, his thumb moving in an absent, mechanical stroke with what he guessed was whenever Bean shifted. He didn't turn when Ilya entered.

The sight was a physical blow. After their kitchen conversation, after the terrible, necessary honesty, Ilya had allowed a fragile filament of hope to form. Shane had *talked* to him. In the days since, there'd been moments, a muttered comment about the weather, a shared, weary glance over a tedious prenatal vitamin routine that felt almost normal. Not forgiveness, but a cooling of the outright war.

Now, looking at the utter stillness of him, it was as if that conversation had never happened. The filament snapped.

"Bean giving you trouble today?" Ilya asked, leaning against the doorframe, keeping his distance.

“Im fine.”

“Did you eat the lunch Anatoly left?”

“Yeah.”

“We could watch something. That terrible show you like with the baking.”

“If you want. I don’t care.”

Each flat, hollow answer was a door gently closed in his face. Pushing further, Ilya knew, would only make Shane retreat deeper into whatever interior fortress he’d built. The frustration was a hot, familiar coil in his gut, but beneath it swam a colder, more frightening current: helplessness.

He turned and went back downstairs, his steps heavier than usual. In the kitchen, he went through the motions: glass of water, orange vial, child-proof cap clicking open. He shook out the two small white pills into his palm. They looked innocuous. Lifelines. *Chemical balance. Inconsistency creates instability.*

I’ve felt fine without them.

The thought was a whisper, easily drowned out by Galina’s reasonable, professional voice. He raised his hand to his mouth.

And stopped.

His gaze, unfocused, drifted to the staircase. Not to Shane’s health. Not to his obedience. Not to the rules that governed his safety.

To someone Shane *wanted*. Something that belonged only to him, that Ilya could neither command nor replicate.

The nest.

He closed his fingers around the pills, feeling them grow slightly damp in his clammy palm. He set the glass down with a soft clink and went back upstairs.

Shane hadn't moved. The afternoon light was fading, leaching the color from the room and from him.

Ilya leaned against the doorframe again. "Have you thought about your birthing nest?"

The reaction was subtle, but it was there. Shane's head turned a fraction, his eyes focusing on Ilya with genuine confusion before the guard came back up. "Of course I have," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. A confession. He looked away, back out the window. "I had... ideas. At the Fischers'."

He didn't elaborate. Those plans had been private, precious, a secret life built in a rented room away from him.

"What about cottage?" Ilya asked.

Now Shane fully turned. "What?"

"We do not have to stay here. If you want nest at cottage, we go. You can build it there."

For one breathtaking, unguarded second, Shane's face transformed. It was like watching the sun break through weeks of cloudy skies. His eyes lit up, his lips parting slightly as he was

clearly, instantly picturing it: their bedroom overlooking the lake, the quiet, the privacy, the space to spread blankets and pillows without the oppressive weight of this house's recent history.

Then, like a shadow crossing the sun, it vanished. His expression shuttered, closed off. The hope was replaced by wary calculation. "Would Dr. Vasiliev even allow that?"

The question hit Ilya like a slap. Not *is it safe?* Not *do you want to?* Not even *can we?*

Would Dr. Vasiliev allow it?

He stared at Shane, and with horrible clarity, he saw the chain of command he himself had meticulously established. Galina's advice to Ilya. Vasiliev's instructions through Ilya. Shane, at the end of the line, internalizing that a stranger in a white coat who barely acknowledged him while he paid the house visit, speaking only in Russian and had ultimate authority over the most intimate space of his pregnancy.

"Fuck Vasiliev," Ilya said, the words rough with a sudden, protective fury.

Shane blinked, startled.

"If you want nest at cottage, we go to cottage." Ilya forced his voice to level. "Is your nest."

Yours. The word hung between them, a radical concept after weeks of *mine*.

Shane's suspicion was a tangible thing. "Just like that?"

"Da."

“The medical care...” Shane began, the practical worry surfacing. “We’re getting close. I don’t want to be isolated if something happens. With the anemia and everything.”

Ilya’s first, ingrained instinct was to solve it. *I will arrange someone. I will hire the best.* He bit it back. He remembered the clinic in Willow Creek. Shane’s ease with Dr. Alvarez. The way she had looked at Shane, not through him.

“Do you trust Alvarez?” Ilya asked.

Shane studied him, cautious. “Yes.”

“Then I call her. Or you call her. If she is willing, I fly her here when we get closer. She stays nearby until Bean comes.”

“She has a practice, Ilya. She can’t just...”

Ilya gave him a look that was pure, exasperated Ilya. “I said I ask. Not kidnap doctor.”

A tiny, incredulous snort escaped Shane. It was there and gone, but it was real.

“If she says no,” Ilya continued, the plan forming as he spoke, “you tell me who else you trust. We find someone.”

The difference was seismic. For weeks, it had been a closed loop: experts telling Ilya what Shane needed, Ilya enforcing it. Now, Ilya was standing in their bedroom, the unswallowed pills still clenched in his fist, asking *Shane*. This decision should only be theirs, two mates making the best choice for their family.

He saw the conflict warring in Shane’s face, a desperate, hungry want to believe this version of him, clashing with five months of evidence that this version could disappear in an instant.

Shane looked back out the window, his voice so quiet Ilya almost missed it. “And if Vasiliev says it’s a bad idea?”

Ilya shrugged, a gesture of pure, dismissive finality. “He can write complaint. For this, I will give you what you want, Shane. If you want us to go and start your nest at the cottage, we can go any time you want.”

Another almost-smile, quickly suppressed. Shane didn’t start planning aloud. He didn’t ask when. He didn’t let the hope back onto his face. He wrapped the offered possibility in layers of caution.

“Okay,” he said, the word neutral. “Maybe.”

Ilya heard the unshed joy in that maybe, and the profound fear underneath it. He wanted to promise. He wanted to swear that this wasn’t another temporary glimpse, that the door wouldn’t slam shut again. But he had made enough promises he couldn’t guarantee he could keep.

So he didn’t.

“Think about it,” he said, and pushed away from the doorframe.

He went back downstairs. In the kitchen, he finally swallowed the two pills, washing them down with tepid water.

Upstairs, Shane remained at the window. Long after Ilya’s footsteps faded, his hand settled over the hard curve of Bean. He tried to stop it, to wall off the treacherous spark of hope, but his mind, starved for light, betrayed him.

It conjured the cottage. The specific way that the morning sun through their bedroom windows. The sound of the lake. The deep, quiet peace of that place, before everything fractured. He thought of the blankets he'd want, the soft, worn one from the living room couch, the fuzzy blue one he'd bought at a market. They could put the bassinet near the window. He caught himself, a sharp, internal rebuke.

Don't.

He'd seen this Ilya before. In flashes. Gentle hands fixing pillows. A familiar joke over terrible food cravings. Moments that felt like coming up for air, only to be pushed back under. This was not hope. He refused to name it hope.

But for the first time since the door of the basement apartment in Willow Creek had opened to reveal his nightmare, Shane Hollander had something, however fragile and suspect, to look forward to.

The key turned in the lock with a soft snick, and Yuna let herself into the quiet Ottawa house. The air was still, but the lights were on in the kitchen as she walked over. She looked around and saw Ilya's lighter on the counter. She'd brought the container of lemon-ginger tea cakes Shane had mentioned craving last time they spoke, it was his one 'normal' craving that he'd been asking for.

Her gaze swept the empty kitchen, landing immediately on the familiar orange vial sitting squarely on the granite countertop, next to a half-empty glass of water. It looked innocuous. A part of her brain, the part automatically registered its presence and her prior suspicions, the mother-animal part that had spent five months watching Ilya disintegrate and then reassemble himself into this strange, controlled version, saw it as evidence.

She moved quickly, setting the bakery box down. She pulled out her phone, opened the camera, and took several clear pictures of the prescription label: drug name, dosage, prescribing doctor, the pharmacy details. Her fingers were steady. Then, with efficient grace, she unscrewed the child-proof cap, shook two small white tablets into her palm, and replaced the cap. She wrapped the pills in a clean tissue from her purse and tucked it into an inner

pocket. The vial went back exactly where she found it. The entire thing took less than fifteen seconds.

She busied herself putting the kettle on, arranging the tea cakes on a plate. She texted Ilya.

Yuna- Downstairs. Brought food.

A few minutes later, his heavy tread sounded on the stairs. He entered the kitchen, and for a moment, she saw the man she'd come to know in the desperate months of Shane's absence, tired, but present in his eyes.

"Hi, Ilya. Is Shane awake? I brought him lunch and some cake. I thought it might cheer him up a bit." she asked, transferring the boiled water to a teapot.

His face lit up, a genuine, unguarded spark of something like enthusiasm. "Da. I offered for us to make our way to the cottage, to make the birthing nest there. That we would get his doctor from Willow Creek, the one he likes, Alvarez. Fly her here if she will come." He leaned against the counter, watching her. "He... he thought about it. I could see it."

It was the most hopeful thing she'd heard from him since Shane's return. A plan that considered Shane's wants, not just his needs. A plan that involved asking, not dictating. Her heart lifted a fraction.

Then his eyes flicked past her, to the vial on the counter. A slight frown creased his brow, as if he'd forgotten a chore. "Ah. My pills." He picked up the bottle, shook two into his hand, and dry-swallowed them with a practiced tilt of his head. He chased them with the stale water in the glass.

Yuna watched, her expression carefully neutral as she placed a teacup on a saucer. The timer in her head started.

“I brought you something too,” she said, turning to pull a wrapped sandwich from her bag. “Chicken parm. From that place you liked near my office.”

Ilya’s eyes widened. For a second, he looked startlingly young, the fierce, complicated alpha replaced by a simple pleasure. He took the sandwich almost reverently. “You remembered.”

“Of course I remembered,” she said, her tone gentle. She reached out and smoothed a non-existent wrinkle from his shirt sleeve, a purely maternal gesture. He didn’t flinch. He leaned into the touch, just barely, his shoulders relaxing. For a moment, he was just a tall, tired boy being fussed over by someone who cared. *Her* boy, in a way the chaos of the past months had forged. They talked as he ate. He asked about David. She asked about the team’s schedule and rookie prospects for the upcoming season. The atmosphere was easy, almost familiar.

Yuna checked the clock on the oven. About twenty minutes had passed since he’d taken the pills.

“Shane needs some fresh air,” she said, clearing his plate. “It’s mild today. I thought I could take him out to the meadow for a little picnic. Just for an hour or two.”

Ilya, finishing the last bite of his sandwich, nodded. “Is good idea. He is inside too much.” His agreement was immediate, and she could see that he was a bit relaxed, the tension on his face and body easing for a few minutes.

But as she gathered a blanket and the container of tea cakes into a basket, she began to notice it. The change wasn’t dramatic, it was a slow seepage of cold, like winter air finding cracks in a window frame.

His shoulders, which had been loose, squared slightly. The easy light in his eyes dimmed, replaced by a more focused, assessing watchfulness. When she turned to him, basket in hand, his voice had lost its conversational warmth. It was flat, informative.

“He shouldn’t be outside long,” Ilya stated, looking out the window as if judging the weather for threats.

Yuna paused. “You literally just said it would be good for him.”

“I said he could go.” Ilya turned his head toward her, and his gaze was different. Colder. The affectionate boy was gone, replaced by whatever *this* was. “I didn’t say he should stay outside all afternoon. An hour. Maybe less. The wind is picking up and its not good for the baby.”

She didn’t argue. The timer in her head was blaring now. *Twenty-five minutes was all it took then.* She simply nodded. “An hour. Got it.”

She helped Shane, massive and wincing with every shift of his weight, down the stairs and into his coat. As they made their laborious way across the back porch, Ilya’s voice stopped them from the doorway.

“Stay where I can see you from the terrace.”

It wasn’t a request. It was an order. Another red flag. The man who’d been excited about Shane’s autonomy an hour ago was now back to dictating.

The walk to the meadow was slow, a procession of shuffling steps and pauses for Shane to catch his breath. By the time Yuna spread the blanket and he lowered himself onto it with a profound groan, they were both ready for a rest.

“So,” Yuna said, handing him a tea cake. “How have things really been?”

Shane looked out over the brown, dormant grass. “There have been... more ups lately,” he admitted, picking at the cake. “Actual conversations. He offered the cottage. Talked about bringing Dr. Alvarez. Moments where he’s just... Ilya. The one I remember.” He sighed, the sound heavy. “Those almost make it worse, you know? Because you see it again. You start hoping.”

“And the downs?” Yuna asked softly.

Shane was quiet for a long time. “They usually happen after he comes home from therapy,” he said finally. “Or sometimes after he gets off a certain kind of phone call. He’ll be okay, and then it’s like... a door closes behind his eyes. He goes cold. Everything becomes about rules again.”

Yuna’s blood ran cold. The pattern, the timeline. What she had just witnessed in the kitchen was a textbook example of what Shane was describing. The before, the after. She chose her next words with extreme care.

“Has he... have his medications changed at all? Does he ever talk about that?”

Shane’s entire body locked. The shutters came down over his face, swift and absolute. He stared straight ahead, his jaw tight. “I don’t know. I don’t ask.”

Yuna immediately backed off, her heart pounding. She’d pushed too far, too fast. “Okay,” she said, her voice deliberately light. “More cake?”

Shane grabbed a second one and they were quiet for a few minutes while he picked at it. Yuna startled when a large man came from behind the hedges. “Mrs. Hollander.” Thick Russian accent, as large as Ilya and dressed all in black- she moved to put herself in front of her son but Shane stopped her.

“It’s ok, mom. It’s just Anatoly, he takes care of me, or the property.” Shane said simply.

“Sorry for the intrusion, but I am about to have Mr. Rozanov busy for an extra hour or two. I think it would be a good idea to keep Shane out of the house for a couple hours if he’s up for it?” Anatoly looked towards Shane, getting a nod in reply. “Good. I will send someone with more food if you’d like- we got some borscht at the security rooms- I can send some out for you with the pickles, Mr. Hollander.”

“Oh!! That sounds good. And do you guys have some of the cabbage left, with the tomatoes?”

“Yes, I’ll send some right over and I’ll have the golf cart on standby so you won’t have to walk that far when you go back to the main house.”

“Thank you, that would be great.”

Anatoly nodded again and bent down to shake Yuna’s hand. He pushed something into her hand and winked before he left them.

They sat there and talked, keeping the conversation light. A few minutes later after Anatoly left, another ‘security’ person appeared with a large covered bowl and a large jar. She watched as Shane devoured the red soup but tried to hide the face she made when he started dipping the last of the cake into the few sips left at the bottom of the bowl, promising her that it was delicious.

They made it back in the golf cart hours later when Shane started struggling to keep his eyes open. She was nervous to see what Ilya’s mood would be. But the house was quiet as she slowly walked Shane up to the bedroom and helped him get changed for bed. She stayed next to him as he quickly fell asleep.

Later, alone in her car parked a few blocks away, Yuna sat in the driver’s seat under the glow of a streetlight. She wrapped the note Anatoly slipped into her hand.

“Please see perscription I had discovered from when he first started therapy. You may contact this pharmacy and tell them I sent you and they will have the information to you on the same day. I am monitoring as closely as I can the iron supplements and prenatals of Mr. Hollander but that is more difficult since it’s in there bedroom and I do not want to stress out pregnant omega. I have started to notice the behavior problems and I try to run as much interference as I can.

She held the tissue-wrapped pill in one hand and her phone, displaying the photos of the prescription label, in the other.

She thought of Galina's perfectly composed smile. The increasing dosages. Ilya's desperate reliance on her. She thought of the warm, sweet man eating a chicken parm sandwich, and the cold, rigid figure insisting on visual supervision twenty minutes later. She thought of Shane's description '*a door closes behind his eyes.*'

The pieces weren't forming a full picture yet. But they were no longer random scraps. They were evidence.

Yuna Hollander, who had spent her career trusting her gut instincts in all things, looked at the pilfered pill in her hand. She knew what proper procedure was. She also knew, with a mother's ferocious certainty, that the official channels, the prescribing doctor, the trusted therapist, were now part of the problem.

This needed to be investigated. But not by anyone who already knew Ilya Rozanov's name.

Yuna didn't act on suspicion alone. For the next several days, she became a quiet, observant shadow in the corners of Ilya's life. She visited at different times, bearing food as her excuse, and she watched.

She catalogued everything, the Ilya of the early mornings, before the orange vial made its appearance, was the one she recognized. He was quieter, often pensive, with shadows under his eyes that spoke of poor sleep, but he was *present*. He'd grumble about the coffee, steal a strip of bacon from the pan she was using, ask after David with genuine interest. He was capable of self-deprecating humor, of weary warmth. He was lovingly attentive to Shane but giving him space at the same time. This was the man who had offered Shane the cottage.

Then, usually mid-morning, it went downhill. The pills; And within the half hour, the subtle shift. The warmth would recede from his eyes, replaced by a flatter, more assessing gaze. His posture would become more rigid, his responses more definitive. The man who might have debated which movie to watch would become the man who stated which movie they *would* watch. It wasn't monstrous while she was there. It was a gradual chilling, a closing of doors in his eyes that Shane had described.

The pattern around therapy was even starker. He'd leave the house often looking like 'Early Ilya', apprehensive, but open. He'd return as After-Pill Ilya, closed off, colder, frequently retreating to his office or making calls in low, tense Russian. The correlation was now an alert in her mind but she was thankful that Anatoly was usually around and she had seen him running interference a few times to get him away from Shane while he was like that.

Meanwhile, she worked on the pill. Using the photos of the label, she had a contact discreetly look into the prescription. The dosage was high for a standard anxiolytic, but not impossible. It was the physical pill itself that broke the case wide open.

She visited the two different pharmacies, well outside her usual neighborhood and the one Anatoly had recommended. At the first, she presented the wrapped pill, asking if they could confirm its identification based on the imprint. The pharmacist, a kindly older man, frowned at it under his light. "This doesn't match the common manufacturers for that medication," he said, sounding puzzled. "The scoring is off."

At the second, a younger, sharper-eyed woman took one look and shook her head. "That's not what the label says it is. The chemical makeup might be similar, but the binders, the imprint... this is a custom compound. From a private lab, maybe." She handed it back, her expression now guarded. "Come back in 4 hours. I will have information for you and tell Anatoly he owes me the good vodka."

A custom compound. Not what the label said. The pieces Yuna had been holding separately slammed together with final, terrifying force. This was deliberate fabrication. She didn't tell Shane or Ilya. Loading them with this horrific suspicion, without proof or a plan, would only magnify the problem. She needed to see the source. She went over to a coffee shop and looked over emails. She was still fielding both of their offers and knew that pretty soon, Shane would need to make some sort of announcement. Ilya was doing a few written interviews- getting praise for raising the Centaurs so high in the rankings during his first year when it was obvious that something behind the scenes was happening.

When she stepped back into the pharmacy, she was ushered into the back office. “Very interesting. The compound is from 3 different pills, all from Russia. It was created during the war to maximize the alpha soldiers aggression. They ended the program after the fighting stopped since omega’s were getting hurt. It was viewed as a very forward thinking thing since Russian omega’s are considered lower caste. Whoever is taking these, they’re protective instinct is being tampered down and the aggressive is being pushed forward. Very dangerous.”

She raced back home and arrived at the Ottawa house early, just as the rain clouds were bleeding grey light into the sky. She brought bagels and strong coffee, the sort of mundane caretaking that had become their language. She found Ilya in the kitchen, already awake, staring out at the back garden with a mug in hand. He was in a soft, worn sweater, his hair mussed from sleep. So she still was working with early Ilya.

They ate in a companionable quiet for a while. She asked about a repair at the cottage. He complained about the general manager’s latest asinine trade idea. It was almost normal.

“When is your next appointment with Galina?” she asked, topping up his coffee.

His shoulders tightened almost imperceptibly. The openness in his face clouded with suspicion. “Why?”

“I want to go with you.”

“Therapy is private, Mama Yuna.” His voice was low, a warning.

“Normally, it should be,” she agreed, her tone reasonable. She met his gaze. “You told me you don’t know why you’re doing these things. I’m taking you seriously. Let me help you figure it out.”

He looked away, a muscle jumping in his jaw. “I don’t need a chaperone.”

Mama Yuna emerged then, not with a shout, but with an immovable, gentle force. “You have spent five months calling me Ma. Congratulations. This is the downside. You don’t get to only have me when it’s convenient.”

A faint, weary smirk touched his lips. “There are many downsides.”

“Get dressed, I think you usually go today, right?” she said, standing to clear the plates.

He argued, but it was half-hearted. He finally agreed with conditions: she could come, but if he needed to discuss something private, she would leave. She agreed immediately. The session wasn’t her target. Galina was.

Yuna was a subtle, persistent force. She arrived early again, she fussed. She straightened the collar of his coat, clucked at him for not wearing a scarf, insisted he eat a piece of toast. She was a distraction, a buffer between him and the pill bottle.

“Ma, I am adult. I can get my own food,” he grumbled, but he was smiling, exasperated.

“Obviously not,” she shot back. “You’d live on protein shakes and spite. Let’s get McDonald’s on the way. My treat.”

His eyes lit up with genuine, childish interest. “Sausage McMuffin?”

“Two, if you stop complaining.”

It was only in the car, halfway to the closest restaurant, that he blinked, patting his pockets. “I forgot pills.”

Yuna kept her eyes on the road, her voice casual. “You’ll survive an hour. You can take them after.”

He hesitated, that ingrained anxiety flashing across his face. Then he shrugged, the promise of hash browns seemingly outweighing Galina's programming. "Da. Okay."

Galina's expression, when she opened her office door to find Ilya with Yuna Hollander at his side, was a masterpiece of suppressed shock. Her professional mask slid into place in a nanosecond, but the fissure had been visible, at least to Yuna.

"Ilya," she said, her voice a smooth blend of warmth and mild reprimand. "Our sessions are confidential. This is highly irregular."

Ilya, seemingly more relaxed than she'd seen him in weeks, simply gestured with his chin. "Yuna is sitting in today. Is fine."

"But our sessions are for you alone. It's a boundary that protects you."

"She's like a mother to me," Ilya said, the statement simple and devastating in its truth. "Is okay. So English please."

Galina's eyes flickered between them. She had lost control of the environment. Reluctantly, she stepped back, granting them entry with a tight smile. "Of course. If that is your wish."

Yuna took a seat not in the chair typically reserved for a guest, but on the small sofa beside Ilya. The visual was deliberate: she was on his side. Galina resumed her seat, her posture perfect, her notepad on her lap.

"So," Galina began, her gaze settling on Yuna with polite curiosity. "Yuna. May I ask what prompted this desire to join Ilya's session today? Your relationship with him is... unusually close, given he is your son's partner."

Yuna smiled, a tight, pleasant curve of her lips that didn't reach her eyes. "Yes. It's terrible. Sometimes I feed him, too. The horror."

A faint snort escaped Ilya. He was watching this like a mildly intriguing tennis match.

Galina didn't blink. "Do you consider yourself a maternal figure to him?"

"He calls me Ma, or Mama Yuna," Yuna said, her tone leaving no room for ambiguity. "I'm assuming he doesn't go around calling every woman in his life that."

"I see." Galina made a note. "And do you feel your protectiveness, however well-intentioned, might be interfering with Ilya's own independence and his crucial therapeutic process?"

Yuna leaned forward just a fraction. "Interesting. I thought having people who love and support you was generally considered good for mental health. Isn't that in the textbook?"

The air in the room grew thin and sharp. Galina's smile remained, but it was now a brittle thing. Yuna sat back, her own expression one of pleasant, unyielding attention. She wasn't here to talk. She was here to observe. And what she observed was a woman who was not used to having her authority questioned, who was visibly unsettled by Ilya's unexpected companion and his unnervingly relaxed demeanor.

Ilya, for his part, seemed almost amused by the tension. He was alert, engaged, but without the brittle edge or cold certainty the pills usually brought. He was simply there, caught between the two most formidable women in his life, one who claimed to hold his sanity in her hands, and one who had just quietly declared war on his behalf.

It was, Yuna thought with a cold surge of satisfaction, shaping up to be a terrible day for Galina Kostova.

Yuna allowed the silence to stretch for several seconds after Galina's last question, watching the woman across from her with the pleasant expression she had perfected over decades of

dealing with people who believed a soft voice made an insult less insulting. Galina was good. Yuna would give her that. Every question had been framed politely, every challenge wrapped in the language of concern. She had managed to turn Yuna's presence into something that needed to be explained, as if loving the man sitting beside her were itself an intrusion requiring professional examination.

Enough.

Yuna reached into her purse.

Ilya's attention shifted immediately. Galina's did too.

She pulled out her phone, tapped through several photographs, and brought up the clearest picture of the orange prescription bottle. She enlarged the label until the name, dosage, pharmacy information and prescribing details filled the screen, then turned it toward Galina.

"I want to know what these are."

The change in the room was almost imperceptible.

Galina did not gasp. She did not pale. Her professional expression barely altered at all. But Yuna had spent the better part of a week watching for changes most people would miss. She saw the fractional pause before Galina inhaled. The tiny tension at the corners of her mouth.

Ilya leaned forward beside her.

Galina recovered smoothly. "Those are Ilya's prescribed medication. You are already aware that I've been treating him for severe anxiety, mood instability and an escalating response to prolonged separation trauma."

"I know what the bottle says." Galina's eyes returned to Yuna. "I'm asking what's inside it."

Ilya turned sharply. For the first time since they entered the office, his amusement vanished entirely.

Galina set her pen carefully across the top of her notebook. "I'm not sure what distinction you believe you're making."

"I think you do."

"Yuna."

"No. We're done with the soft voice." Yuna kept the phone raised between them. "I took two of those pills."

Ilya's head snapped toward her. "You what?" Yuna glanced at him.

He was staring at her with genuine anger now. "You took my medication?"

"Yes."

His expression hardened. "You had no fucking right."

"You're correct, but give me a minute to explain."

That stopped him.

Even Galina's brows lifted slightly.

Yuna turned fully toward Ilya. "I didn't. They belong to you. They were prescribed to you. I went into your bottle and took something without asking, and if I'm wrong about this, you can be angry at me for the rest of my life."

Ilya's jaw worked.

"But I'm still glad I did it."

"Ma-"

"I watched you change."

His expression flickered.

Yuna pressed on before he could retreat behind anger. "Not once or twice. Over and over. I watched you before you took them. I watched you afterward. I watched you leave for therapy one person and come back another. Shane noticed it too."

Ilya went very still.

Galina intervened before he could respond. "This is exactly the sort of well-intentioned interference I was concerned about."

Yuna slowly looked back at her.

Galina's attention was on Ilya now, not Yuna.

"Ilya, psychiatric treatment depends upon consistency and trust. Removing medication from a patient's prescription bottle, independently investigating it and then entering the therapeutic environment with accusations can be profoundly destabilizing."

"I had them checked," Yuna said.

Galina did not look at her.

“Ilya, do you remember why you originally returned to treatment?”

He frowned.

“You were barely sleeping. You were obsessively searching for Shane at all hours. Your professional behavior had become erratic. Your aggression on the ice was escalating. You described episodes of rage so severe that you frightened yourself.”

Ilya looked away.

Yuna watched his shoulders tighten.

Galina saw it too.

“Do you remember telling me that you were afraid of what you might do when you found him?”

The question landed exactly where Galina intended.

Ilya’s face changed.

Not coldly. Not yet.

Shame.

“Yes,” he said quietly.

“You were terrified that the grief and anger would overwhelm you.”

“Da.”

“And after treatment?”

Ilya didn't answer.

Galina supplied it for him. “You slept. You returned to a more functional routine. You were able to think clearly enough to continue working. You stopped drinking as heavily. You stopped destroying yourself.”

Yuna hated how reasonable it sounded. Worse, much of it was true.

Galina finally looked at her.

“You are understandably angry. Your son was frightened. Ilya behaved in ways that I'm sure horrified you. But it is dangerous to decide that because you dislike some of his behavior while medicated, the medication itself must be the enemy.”

“I don't 'dislike' him. He's part of our family.”

Galina's expression turned almost sympathetic. “You dislike what happened to Shane.”

“Yes. I do.”

“Then perhaps this is less about the medication and more about your need to find a reason why the man you trusted behaved violently toward your child.”

Yuna’s fingers tightened around her phone.

Ilya looked between them.

Galina leaned slightly forward. “And perhaps that is easier than examining the broader family dynamic.”

There it was. Yuna knew the attack was coming before Galina delivered it.

“Shane’s relationship with his omega identity has been deeply conflicted for most of his life, from what Ilya has described. His career, his public persona, his need for control, the suppressants, the secrecy. Those patterns didn’t originate with Ilya.”

Ilya shifted uncomfortably, and Yuna’s face remained still.

Galina continued. “You raised an omega child in an environment where his biology was consistently treated as something to manage around the demands of his career. You helped him conceal. You helped him adapt. You reinforced the idea that his worth depended upon maintaining a version of himself that the outside world would accept.”

The words hurt. Yuna felt them deep in her chest but that wasn’t the point of this conversation.

Because buried inside the manipulation was something she had asked herself in darker moments long before Galina ever voiced it. *Had* she protected Shane? Or had she helped teach him that parts of himself needed to be hidden in order to deserve the life he wanted? She thought of Shane at seventeen. Determined. Terrified. Already planning five steps ahead.

Galina watched her carefully. “You may want to consider whether some of what you’re seeing now is the consequence of a young man who was never taught how to integrate his omega instincts safely into an adult relationship.”

Ilya said nothing.

For a few seconds, neither did Yuna. Then she nodded. Galina blinked. “You’re right about one thing.” The therapist’s expression remained cautious. “I made mistakes with my son.” Ilya looked at her. “A lot of them, probably.” Yuna’s voice remained steady. “And if Shane ever wants to sit me down and tell me every single way I failed him, I’ll sit there and listen to him.”

Galina’s mouth tightened.

“But we’re not talking about my mistakes right now.” Yuna placed the phone on the table between them. “We’re talking about yours.”

The office went silent.

Ilya’s eyes moved to the photograph again.

Galina’s tone sharpened by a degree. “You’re making a very serious accusation.”

“No. I’m asking a very simple question.” Yuna reached into her purse again and withdrew a folded piece of paper. “I took the pills to two pharmacies.”

Galina’s eyes dropped to it.

“The first pharmacist told me it didn’t match the medication on the label. The second confirmed it was a compounded drug and sent it for analysis.”

Ilya turned toward her completely now.

“You tested it?”

“Yes.”

“Without telling me.”

“Yes.”

His anger resurfaced.

Yuna met it. “I would do it again. And it’s not just for Shane, but for you too.”

Galina immediately seized the fracture.

“Ilya, listen to yourself. She invaded your privacy, removed medication from your home, and subjected it to outside testing without your knowledge. Does that sound like support to you?”

Ilya stared at Yuna.

For one horrible second, she thought Galina had him.

Then Yuna said quietly, “If you want me to leave, I will.”

His expression shifted.

“I mean it. This is your session. Your medication. Your decision. If you tell me to leave, I’m gone.”

Galina looked sharply toward him. Yuna waited, Ilya did too. After several seconds he muttered, “Stay.” Yuna nodded once.

Nothing more. The decision was his. She unfolded the paper. “The medication in that bottle is not what the label says.” Galina’s face remained composed. Yuna read only the important part.

“Three active compounds. Russian manufacture. Two appear in older military pharmaceutical records. One suppresses protective inhibition. Another is associated with increased aggression and territorial response. The third appears to intensify alpha-specific hormonal reactivity.”

Ilya’s face drained of color.

Yuna looked directly at Galina.

“So I’m going to ask you one more time.” She pushed the paper across the table. “What the hell have you been giving him?”

Galina did not touch it.

Instead, her attention returned to Ilya.

“You are doing better.”

Yuna almost laughed.

Galina kept going. “You are sleeping, eating, functioning. You are no longer drinking yourself unconscious. You found Shane. You brought your family back together.”

Ilya flinched slightly at that description. Galina either didn’t notice or ignored it. “The medication was prescribed because you were becoming dangerous. Whatever terminology an outside pharmacist has used, the therapeutic goal has been stabilization.”

Yuna stared at her. “Stabilization.”

“Yes!”

“He put his hand around my son’s throat.”

Ilya recoiled.

Galina remained disturbingly calm.

“And he stopped.” The words froze the room.

Yuna stared.

Ilya slowly lifted his head.

Galina seemed to realize a second too late that she had stepped too far.

She adjusted.

“The fact that Ilya retained enough control to stop himself is evidence that treatment was preventing escalation.”

Yuna’s blood went cold.

“You’re taking credit for that?”

“I am saying that without intervention, given his state when Shane disappeared, the outcome could have been significantly worse.”

“How much worse?”

Galina’s expression sharpened.

“You know what an enraged bonded alpha is capable of.”

“No,” Yuna said softly. “Tell me.” Galina did not answer. Yuna leaned forward. “Because you just said my son could have been hurt worse, and then you called the fact that Ilya stopped himself proof that your medication worked.”

Ilya’s breathing had changed beside her.

Yuna heard it.

Galina turned toward him again.

“Ilya, your omega disappeared with your unborn child. He severed communication. He denied you any knowledge of whether your mate or child were safe. Your reaction was severe, but understandable under the circumstances. The medication allowed you to regain enough control to retrieve him and restore stability.”

Ilya’s eyes narrowed. “Establish stability?”

Galina paused. “You know what I mean.”

“No.” His voice had become frighteningly quiet.

“What do you mean?”

Galina’s gaze flickered.

“You brought Shane home.”

Ilya stared at her. Yuna saw something click behind his eyes, not the cold door Shane described. Something else. Recognition.

“I never told you.” Galina’s fingers tightened around her pen. “Told me what?”

“What happened in apartment.”

“You discussed finding him extensively.”

“I said I found him.”

“Ilya...”

“I did not tell you how.”

Galina's face remained composed, but Yuna saw the calculation racing behind it.

“I knew you were angry when you found him. You told me that much.”

“No.”

Ilya leaned forward.

“You knew I had to take him under control.”

Galina's expression hardened.

“You had described Shane as profoundly dysregulated.”

“You used those words before I found him.” The room seemed to shrink. Ilya's mind was moving now. Yuna could almost see it happening.

Galina recommending Vasiliev. Vasiliev arriving. Both of them speaking the same language about Shane needing firm control.

The dosage increases. The insistence that the pills were keeping Shane safe. The suggestion that Galina meet Shane.

Russia.

The one night Ilya forgot the medication and managed to sit across from Shane while Shane told him everything he had done wrong without Ilya exploding.

Ilya looked at the report.

Then at Galina.

“What are pills?”

Galina softened her voice again.

“Ilya, you’re becoming distressed.”

His eyes flashed.

“That is not the answer.”

“This is precisely why medication changes should not be discussed in an emotionally charged environment.”

“What. Are. The pills.” Each word was said slowly, separately and very calmly.

Galina closed her notebook.

“I think we should pause.” Yuna nearly smiled. Of course she wanted to stop.

“Ilya, I want you to go home, take your prescribed medication, and we will discuss this privately tomorrow once you’ve had time to regulate.”

Yuna’s stomach dropped.

Ilya stared at her.

“You want me to take them now.”

“Yes.”

“After this?”

“They are your medication.”

Yuna saw the fear flash through him. Not fear of Galina. Fear of himself.

Galina saw it too.

“You told me yourself that you’re frightened of what might happen without them,” she said softly. “You told me you were afraid you could hurt Shane.”

There was the leverage. Ilya looked toward the floor. His hands curled into fists. Galina leaned forward. “Think about your child.” Yuna watched his breathing deepen. “Think about how vulnerable Shane is right now. This is not the time to gamble with his safety because someone who is understandably angry with you has frightened you with incomplete information.”

Yuna stood.

Galina looked at her.

“No.”

“Yuna, sit down.”

“No.”

Ilya looked up.

Yuna did not reach for him.

Did not tell him what to do.

Did not touch him.

She simply looked at him.

“Ilya.”

His eyes met hers.

“If you want to stay, I’ll sit back down.”

Galina's mouth tightened.

"If you want to talk to her privately, I'll wait outside."

Ilya stared at Yuna.

"And if you want to leave, we leave."

Galina interrupted. "This is inappropriate."

Yuna ignored her.

"What do *you* want?"

For several long seconds, Ilya said nothing.

The question seemed to confuse him more than any accusation had.

What did he want?

Not what Galina recommended. Not what would keep Shane compliant. Not what an alpha should do. Not what medication supposedly demanded.

Him. Ilya Rozanov. Finally, he looked at Galina.

Then at the report. Then at Yuna.

“Leave.”

Galina relaxed infinitesimally.

Yuna didn't move.

Ilya frowned.

Then understood. “Not you.” The faintest flicker of humor nearly broke across Yuna’s face despite everything.

Ilya stood. “Da. I want to leave.” Yuna picked up her purse. Galina rose as well.

“Ilya, if you abruptly discontinue medication, you may become unstable. I need you to understand that.” He stopped at the door.

“I understand.”

“You could become dangerous.”

His shoulders tightened.

Yuna watched him.

Galina continued. “Particularly around Shane.”

That finally made him turn. For a moment, Yuna saw the old Ilya in full. Not cold or chemically flattened.

Furious.

But thinking.

“If I am dangerous,” he said, “I leave the room.”

Galina's expression changed. “I leave house. Guest house. Hotel. Fucking Siberia if necessary.”

He opened the door. “I do not make Shane smaller so I can stay close.” Yuna's chest tightened. Ilya looked back at Galina one final time.

“You taught me medication was the thing stopping me from hurting him.”

Galina said nothing. “The one night I forgot it was first night I listened to him.”

Silence. Ilya swallowed. “I think maybe you and I need different conversation.”

Then his eyes went flat in a way Yuna had never seen before.

Not medicated, not detached.

Predatory. Russian. “But not today.” He walked out.

Yuna remained for one additional heartbeat. Galina looked at her. The professional warmth was gone entirely now. “You have no idea what you’ve interfered with.” Yuna picked up the analysis report from the table. “No,” she said quietly. “I don’t.”

She slipped it into her purse. “But I’m going to.” Then she followed her new son out of the room.

The ride home was silent, but not because either of them had nothing to say. Ilya sat rigid in the passenger seat, his phone untouched in his hand, his entire understanding of the last several months being dismantled and rebuilt one memory at a time.

Yuna let him.

She didn't tell him what the pills meant. She didn't tell him what he should do about Galina. She didn't tell him whether he was guilty or innocent or manipulated or sick.

She had spent enough time watching people make decisions for him.

“I think I need to be away for a while. I want you to take David and some of the guards to the cottage and settle Shane there. I can’t be around him right now.” He said quietly.

Yuna looked over.

Ilya hadn't moved. His phone sat loose in his hand. Yuna's chest hurt.

“And you?”

“I don't know.”

“Ilya-”

“No.” He dragged a hand over his face. “I don't know what is me right now, Ma.”

That stopped her from saying anything further.

His voice dropped. “I know I was angry before pills, I was obsessive and extreme. I know I was fucked up before pills. I know not everything I did was because of them.”

Yuna said nothing.

“But I don't know which thoughts are mine anymore.” He swallowed hard. “Until I do, I should not be around him.”

“Okay.”

His eyes snapped toward her, almost suspicious of how easily she agreed.

Yuna kept her voice quiet. “I'll ask Shane what he wants.” Something in Ilya's face broke.

“Da,” he whispered. “Ask him. You need to go with him.”

Yuna glanced over. “I just said I would.”

“No. I mean to stay with him while I'm away.”

Her eyes returned to the road.

“At cottage. With Shane.”

“And you?”

He shrugged, but it was too casual, too carefully held together. “I figure something out.”

Yuna recognized it immediately. The same tone he'd used during those first weeks after Shane disappeared whenever she asked if he'd eaten. The same shrug he'd given David when they offered him their guest room. *I am fine. Go away before you discover I am not.*

“Where are you going?”

“Does not matter.”

“It matters to me.”

His jaw tightened. “Ma.”

“What?”

“He is your son.” There it was.

Yuna's hands tightened slightly around the steering wheel. “Yes.”

Ilya stared through the windshield. “You should choose him.”

Yuna was quiet for several seconds. “I’m not choosing between you.”

He gave a small, humorless laugh. “If what I did to him was David, you would.”

That one hurt because Yuna couldn't immediately deny it. “Probably,” she admitted.

Ilya nodded once, as if he'd expected nothing else.

“But David isn't my son.”

Ilya's head turned.

Yuna kept her eyes on the road.

“And neither are you by blood. Apparently neither of you cares very much about making my life easy.”

His mouth twitched despite himself.

“Shane needs me to protect his right to choose what happens to him. Right now that means I'm going to ask him whether he wants to go to the cottage.”

She paused.

“You need someone to make sure you don't disappear into whatever the hell this is by yourself.”

His expression closed immediately. “I do not need babysitter.”

“Good. I'm terrible at babysitting.”

“Ma.”

“Ilya.”

He sighed. Then, quieter, “You don't hate me?”

Yuna's throat tightened. “I'm furious with you. I'm angry at the situation in general.”

He looked away. “That wasn't what I asked.”

Silence. “No,” she said. “I don't hate you.”

He swallowed. “I don't know what happens with you and Shane. That's his decision and yours. I don't know if he'll forgive you. I don't know if he should. But whatever happens between the two of you doesn't erase the last five months for me.”

Ilya's eyes stayed fixed on the windshield.

“You don't stop being family because you've done something I hate.”

His breathing caught.

Yuna let him have the silence.

Then Ilya said, so quietly she nearly missed it: “Okay.”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will be up this weekend! Its started and I know exactly what I'm doing with it.

Chapter 47: Chapter 47

Chapter Summary

Hello y'all ❤️

So... remember when I said we were getting somewhere?

We are.

Is it somewhere good? Debatable.

Is it somewhere important? Absolutely.

This one is long, messy, painful, occasionally unhinged, and there may or may not be a Hollander committing crimes in defense of one or both of the boys. 🙄

Also, Ilya finally gets some answers. Shane gets something he's been demanding for a very long time. And apparently everyone in this story needs therapy, a responsible adult, and possibly legal representation.

Enjoy. 🍷

Thank you Lisa, Anna, Tony- I adore you lot- not B though. You're still grounded.

Chapter Notes

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

Yuna's hands didn't shake as she packed. She moved through her bedroom with efficiency, pulling clothing, toiletries, chargers, her laptop, and David's things from the bathroom cabinet. She tossed it all into two large suitcases open on the bed as she prepared them to be able to work away from their usual offices.

David appeared in the doorway, a question dying on his lips as he took in her face. "What happened?"

"We need to pack," she said, not looking up. "Enough for a couple of weeks. We won't be staying here."

He didn't argue. He walked to his side of the closet and started pulling out sweaters and jeans. "Tell me."

As they packed, she gave him the condensed version. The pharmacist connected to Anatoly, the lab results. She was trying to stay in control but she felt it slipping. Someone had been hurting her boys. And worse that it was directly aimed at Ilya, the one who hadn't had a mother for so many years but now he had her and she would be by his side until they figured things out.

David's hands stilled on a folded shirt. His face, usually so placid, darkened with a fury Yuna rarely saw. "She's been *drugging* him? Feeding him something to make him more... what? More controlling? More aggressive?" He shook his head, the implications unfolding. "When he's already an alpha with his history? When he's living with Shane? We need to report this. I have-

"We don't know her reasons yet, but we can't report it. We need to talk to Shane first." Yuna said, her voice flat. "If we report it, I'm not sure what the law would say. And would he be under Russian, American or Canadian law?"

David had to put his feelings aside and focus on calming his wife. "Shane... God, Shane's been living with the consequences of that. And Ilya... he's been losing his mind in there and didn't even know why." He looked at her, stricken. "What does Shane know?"

"I'm not sure. He knows that something was off with Ilya but not why."

"What does Ilya say? What is he planing?"

Yuna zipped her suitcase with a sharp sound. She covered her face with her hands for a few seconds before taking a deep breath and straightening up. "He doesn't know how much of the last few months was the medication and how much was... just him. And I dont think it was just the last few months. I think something happened before too."

"Where is he now?"

“I don’t know exactly. He drove off after. He said he wanted us to take Shane to the cottage and wait for the baby there.” She paused, meeting David’s eyes. “He told me to ask Shane what he wants.”

David stopped packing entirely. “Ask him?”

“Yes. Not convince him to go to the cottage. Not pack him up and take him.”

The significance of this, after weeks of dictates and decisions made over Shane’s head, settled heavily between them. David nodded slowly, his anger momentarily displaced by a weary understanding.

“What do you think he should do?” he asked quietly.

“It doesn’t matter,” Yuna said, closing the second suitcase. “Of course I have an opinion. I’m his mother. I have a hundred opinions before breakfast. But this one isn’t mine. I’ve been thinking this for a while and I just didn’t know how to fix it but we need to do better by both of them. They’re not like us and to expect both of them to behave like betas will do no one any good. We can’t ignore the fact that they’re are a bonded couple anymore.” She straightened. “But for now, we’ll go to the house. If he wants to nest at the cottage, we take him. If he wants to stay in Ottawa after Ilya leaves, we stay with him. If he wants Willow Creek, we figure it out. We do not make the decision for him but we’ll do what’s best for him and the baby.”

David absorbed this. “And Ilya? Did he... try to use the pills as an excuse?”

Yuna shook her head. “He said it explains some things. It doesn’t make what he did disappear. He said he was angry and obsessive before the pills. That he’s hurt people before them. That Galina didn’t invent everything wrong with him.”

David’s shoulders slumped slightly, a grim recognition of a painful truth. They hadn’t been paying close enough attention to their son to notice how bad things were. They hadn’t pried

too deeply when they'd been around Ilya to notice how bad he'd really gotten. "Okay," he said softly. "Let's go."

The drive back to the Ottawa house felt like moving through syrup. Ilya's mind, usually sharp, often cruel with his clarity, was like a shattered mirror. Fragments of the confrontation with Galina flashed: her poised calm, Yuna's unwavering glare, the phrases that had been used. He tried to assemble them into a coherent picture, but nothing made sense. How much of the decisions that had governed him was really him and how much was caused by the medication? How much was the old, familiar rot inside him, was something like this always inside of him? Was this what his father had felt when he drained his mother out of all her spirit and joy? Would that be what he had to offer Shane?

He didn't know. He couldn't know. And the only thing that crystallized with absolute, chilling certainty was that he couldn't do that to Shane, he could not be the person to kill everything he loved about the omega.

He parked and didn't go inside. Instead, he walked to the small, discreet guard station near the gate. A younger guard was inside, monitoring a bank of screens. He looked up, and his professional neutrality faltered at whatever he saw on Ilya's face.

"Sir?"

"Get Anatoly and come with me," Ilya said, his voice hollow.

He stood, and radio'd the other man, immediately alert. "What's happening?" Anatoly asked, walking into the room a few minutes later.

"You will stand outside the bedroom."

"Why?"

“I need you to be on stand by while I speak to Shane.”

Anatoly’s confusion deepened. “I don’t understand.”

Ilya met his eyes, forcing the words out. They felt like they were the most important order he would ever give. “If you hear yelling, fighting. Anything breaking, you come in.”

Anatoly stared. “And do what?”

“Get Shane away from me.” Ilya held his gaze, ensuring the command was seared into him. “I do not care if I tell you to leave. I do not care if I become angry. If Shane sounds afraid, you take him out. Do you understand?”

The color drained from Anatoly’s face. He gave a stiff, solemn nod. “Yes, sir.”

“Good.”

A minute later, Ilya led Anatoly and the other guard, upstairs. He pointed to the space outside the master bedroom door. They took their posts, silent and watchful.

Ilya pushed the door open quietly.

Shane was asleep. The sight was a physical ache. Seven months pregnant, curled in his usual mounds of pillows, one hand tucked under his cheek, the other resting on the great curve of their baby. In the soft light, he looked heartbreakingly young and but tired. Every instinct in Ilya screamed to go to him. To fix the blanket. To adjust the pillow behind his back. To kneel and press his ear to Shane’s stomach, to listen for the life they’d made.

But he did none of it. Because standing there, with the full truth of what had been going on curdling in his gut, he could no longer trust himself to distinguish between care and control. The realization was heartbreaking.

He turned away.

He pulled an old team duffel from the closet and began throwing things into it. Clothes from drawers, grabbed in handfuls. He threw random things in the bag and the toiletries from the bathroom counter. He had no real plan, only a frantic need to create distance to make sure his mate was kept safe.

The sound, the zip of the bag, the thud of shoes, woke Shane.

He stirred, blinked slowly, and then his gaze landed on Ilya, then the duffel. His entire body went rigid, like a rabbit sensing the predator's shadow. He pushed himself upright, a clumsy, graceless movement. "Where are we going?"

The question, thick with immediate, assumed dread, stopped Ilya cold. He turned. The fear on Shane's face was apparent.

"Your mother and father are coming in soon," Ilya said, the words too blunt.

Shane's eyes flicked to the half-packed duffel. "Then why are you packing?"

Ilya swallowed against a dry throat. "I am leaving."

Shane stared. The sentence seemed to bounce off his understanding, failing to land. "What?"

"I am leaving."

“Where are you going?”

“I don’t know.”

Confusion warred with the fear on Shane’s face. Ilya planned everything. This made no sense. “You don’t know where you’re going?”

“No.”

“For how long?”

“I don’t know.”

Ilya forced himself to sit on the bench at the foot of the bed, putting space between them. He kept his voice low, measured, fighting the tremor that wanted to break through. “Yuna discovered something. With my medication. Galina was not giving me what she said she was, its been .”

Shane went very still, his eyes widening slightly.

“The pills I was given were not anxiety medication. They contain other compounds. Russian. Designed to affect aggression, alpha responses.” He watched the connections spark in Shane’s mind, the sudden switches, the coldness, the man who would vanish behind his own eyes.

Before Shane could give any real response, Ilya cut it off. “It explains some things.” He paused, trying to say the right things while his mind was racing. “It does not make what I did to you disappear. I was angry before the pills. I was obsessive before the pills. I have hurt you before starting them. Galina did not invent everything wrong with me.”

He looked down at his own hands, the hands that had touched Shane with both love and violence. “I do not know what was really me.” He lifted his gaze, meeting Shane’s directly, his own shame and fear laid bare. “And until I know, I should not be around you. I do know that a lot of what went wrong at the beginning for us was me.”

Shane’s face cycled through emotions too fast to track: shock, a dawning comprehension, a flicker of something that might have been relief, immediately chased by a deeper, more complicated dread.

“Where are you going?” Shane asked, his voice small.

“I don’t know. A hotel, I could stay with Troy or Marly. Anatoly will know where I go if you need to get a message to me.”

“For how long?”

“I don’t know.”

The lack of a plan seemed to frustrate Shane as much as it frightened him. “You’re just... leaving me here?”

The words, though not meant as an accusation, felt like it to Ilya. Ilya’s face tightened, a brief spasm of pain he couldn’t suppress. “I am giving you the space I should have given you before. Your parents are coming, they know. They will stay with you if you want. I think you should go to the cottage for your nesting. It’s safe and you’re so happy there. Dr. Alvarez... if you want her, I can arrange for her to see you there and take over your care. If you want to stay right here, you can. I am the one leaving.”

He stood, needing to move, needing to finish before he lost the resolve. “I need my shaving kit,” he muttered, more to himself, and turned back toward the walk-in closet.

The second the closet door clicked shut behind him, Shane moved. It wasn't a conscious decision, it was a deep, instinctual urge. He swung his legs over the side of the bed, wincing at the weight, and waddled to the dresser. He opened the bottom drawer, pushed aside a stack of sweaters, and pulled out the leather-bound pregnancy journal he'd kept from Willow Creek.

Five months of a life Ilya hadn't seen. Bump pictures. Ultrasound prints. Notes about cravings and heartburn and the first fluttering kicks. Stupid, sweet observations. Taped-in bits of advice from Ruth. A pressed flower from one of Walter's bushes. And, scattered throughout, in moments of weakness or longing, little references to Ilya. *Bean kicked hard today during the third period of the Centaurs rerun. Coincidence? Or, Had a dream you were there for the ultrasound. You cried from happiness.*

Shane stared at the book, his heart pounding. He heard a faint noise from the closet.

He moved, tried to be fast but it was more ungainly, to the open duffel. He shoved the journal deep inside, burying it beneath a hoodie and a pair of gray sweatpants. He barely managed to haul himself back onto the edge of the bed, breathless, as Ilya re-emerged.

Ilya stopped, his eyes scanning Shane, noting his labored breathing. "What happened?"

"Nothing."

"Are you okay?" Ilya took an aborted half-step forward, his hand twitching at his side, before he forcibly stopped himself.

Shane saw it clearly. Even though getting physically touched by Ilya still made him tense still, he sometimes craved his touch and they had recently started to touch more when things were calm- either Shane grabbing Ilya's hand to put over an active spot on his belly or letting Ilya help him down the stairs.

"I'm seven months pregnant and just sat up too fast," Shane snapped, the irritation covering a swell of emotion he couldn't name.

Ilya watched him for another second, conflict raging in his eyes, before he turned back to the duffel. He zipped it closed with a final, decisive sound, the teeth sealing over the hidden

journal, a secret Shane had sent with him without a word.

He walked towards the door but stopped. "I know you deserved better than this, Shane. I always knew." His fingers tightened around the handle but he couldn't turn around. "I tried so hard to be better for you. Maybe I did everything wrong way. Maybe I loved you wrong sometimes, but it was the best way I knew how to." He swallowed and shook his head a couple times to clear out his thoughts. "But I need you to know I did love you. I do. Not because you're an omega, or 'Shane Hollander'. My soul, my everything somehow knew you from the very second you came up to me all shy and beautiful to introduce yourself. I hope you can see that and not regret our relationship."

Ilya turned slightly and looked over his shoulder. "From the first fucking second. You came up to me, so shy and so beautiful, trying to introduce yourself like I did now already know exactly who you were." his mouth twitched, but there was nothing happy in it. "Something in me knew you. Knew that you were it for me and that I needed you in my life, no matter the cost."

Shane's vision blurred.

"I hope someday you can remember some of the happier times and not regret me."

Tears streamed down Shane's face as he listened. "Ilya? Don't go." He called out. Shane watched as Ilya just held on to the door handle for a few seconds. "Please."

"I can't stay, milyy moy." Ilya's voice cracked. "I have to know that I can be beside you and not hurt you again, I want you to be proud to have me as your man, as your mate. Right now you can't do that. When I come back, I'll beg you for forgiveness."

Ilya made it as far as the doorway before he stopped. His hand was already wrapped around the handle, his duffel hanging heavily from the other, and for several long seconds he simply stood there with his back to Shane. Shane's heart gave one stupid, painful leap because he thought Ilya had changed his mind. He thought maybe his *don't go* had been enough, that Ilya would turn around, drop the bag, crawl back into their bed and somehow they could pretend for one night that none of this had happened. Instead, Ilya's shoulders rose with a shaky breath. "Can I say goodbye to Bean." His voice was so quiet Shane almost didn't hear him. Ilya turned slowly, but he didn't immediately come back toward the bed. His eyes dropped to

the heavy curve of Shane's stomach before lifting uncertainly to his face. "Can I?" Shane frowned through the tears still wet on his cheeks, not understanding. Ilya swallowed. "Can I say goodbye to him?"

Something about the question hurt more than Shane was prepared for. Ilya had been talking to Bean since they first found out. He had never asked permission. He would crouch beside Shane on the couch and argue with their unborn child about hockey, press his face against Shane's stomach and complain about random things, speak endless streams of Russian while Shane pretended not to find it adorable. Even during the worst weeks between them, when Shane barely answered him, Ilya had still talked to Bean. Now he stood several feet away as though even speaking to their child required permission. Shane nodded because he didn't trust his voice. Ilya took a few steps forward and stopped again. His hands hung uselessly at his sides. "Can I touch you?"

Shane's breath caught. For one horrible second all he could think about were those same hands holding him too tightly, directing him where to go, deciding when he stayed and when he left, closing around his throat when everything had gone so terribly wrong. But there were other memories too. Those hands rubbing circles into his aching back, tying his skates, cooking for him, holding his face like Shane was something precious, spreading over his stomach in stunned wonder every time their baby moved. Shane hated that both versions could exist in the same pair of hands. He hated that he could still be afraid of Ilya touching him and ache for it at the same time. "Yes," he whispered.

Ilya crossed the remaining distance, but instead of sitting beside him, he lowered himself slowly onto his knees between Shane's legs. The sight made Shane's throat close. Ilya had spent so much of the last few weeks towering over him, filling rooms with his size and his certainty until Shane sometimes felt like there wasn't enough air left for both of them. Now the enormous alpha knelt silently at his feet and waited. Only when Shane gave another tiny nod did Ilya lift his hand and place it carefully against the curve of his stomach. His palm barely seemed to settle before Bean kicked directly beneath it. Ilya sucked in a breath, and whatever control had been holding his face together cracked. His eyes squeezed shut. "Of course," he whispered hoarsely. "Now you wake up."

Ilya leaned forward instinctively, then stopped himself before his forehead touched Shane's stomach. Shane noticed. He noticed the inch of empty space Ilya deliberately left between them, the way his entire body seemed to strain toward something he was refusing to take without permission. Shane didn't think about what he was doing. His hand simply lifted, shaking fingers sliding into Ilya's dark hair, and he gently pulled him the rest of the way forward. Ilya went completely still when his forehead finally rested against Shane's belly. The breath that left him sounded broken. His hand spread wider over Bean while Shane's fingers remained tangled in his hair. "Do svidaniya, malenkiy," Ilya whispered, then immediately shook his head against Shane. "No. No goodbye. Papa is only going away for little while."

Bean rolled beneath his hand, and Ilya gave a wet, trembling laugh. “Da, I know. You are angry. You are always angry when Papa does something you don't like.” Shane's mouth trembled despite himself. Ilya stroked his thumb once over the place where Bean had moved. “You stay with Daddy, okay? You behave for him. No kicking ribs. No sitting on bladder. You eat whatever he gives you, even disgusting vegetables.” A laugh escaped Shane before he could stop it, broken and watery and tangled with a sob. Ilya smiled against his stomach, and for one tiny second it felt painfully familiar. It felt like them. “You take it easy on him,” Ilya whispered, and then he went quiet. His brow furrowed against Shane's belly. “I'll try to be back soon.” He shook his head. “Papa has some things to take care of. You just grow. That is your job. Grow big. Be healthy. Make Daddy miserable at night.”

“He already does,” Shane managed.

“I know. Very talented baby.” Ilya's smile lasted only another second before it disappeared. His thumb stopped moving. When he spoke again, his voice had changed. “I am sorry I am going to miss more things.” Shane's fingers tightened in his hair. “Maybe you turn around. Maybe you get hiccups again. Maybe Daddy finishes your nest.” Ilya stopped, swallowing hard enough that Shane could feel the movement where his forehead rested against him.

Shane closed his eyes. The journal was already buried inside the duffel beside them. Five months of photographs, ultrasound pictures, scribbled notes, cravings, kicks, dreams and stupid little moments Ilya believed had disappeared forever. Five months of Bean's life that Ilya thought Shane had stolen completely from him were sitting only a few feet away, hidden beneath a gray hoodie because Shane had shoved them there without even understanding why. For one wild second, he nearly told him. *You didn't miss everything. I saved it. I saved it for you.* The words climbed into his throat and stayed there.

Ilya's hand trembled against him. “But I need to go now so when I come back, I know I can be a good Papa.” His voice cracked on the last word. He took a breath and tried again. “And good man for your daddy.” Another silence stretched between them before Ilya added, so quietly Shane almost wished he hadn't heard it, “If he lets me.”

That destroyed whatever Shane had left. His face crumpled as tears spilled freely down his cheeks. Ilya wasn't promising their unborn child that everything would be fine. He wasn't telling Bean that Papa would fix it, that Daddy would forgive him, that they would all live together because they were bonded and therefore Shane belonged beside him. For the first time, Ilya was leaving the ending unwritten. Leaving it to Shane.

Ilya lifted his head just enough to look at the curve of Shane's stomach before pressing one feather-light kiss against it. "Ya tebya lyublyu, malenkiy," he whispered. "Papa loves you so fucking much." Bean immediately kicked beneath his mouth, hard enough that Ilya jerked back slightly before a laugh broke through his tears. "Da, da. I love you too, little asshole."

A strangled laugh escaped Shane. Ilya smiled up at him through wet eyes, and there he was. For one aching second, there was Shane's Ilya. The ridiculous Russian asshole who argued with a fetus and looked at Shane like he'd somehow hung every star in the sky. Then Ilya's hand began to slide away.

Shane caught it.

Neither of them spoke. Shane stared down at their joined hands, breathing unevenly, before slowly guiding Ilya's palm back to his stomach. Ilya didn't move it. He didn't take more than Shane offered. He simply left his hand exactly where Shane put it and waited. A few seconds later Bean kicked again, right into the center of his palm, and Ilya closed his eyes as another tear slipped down his cheek.

Shane kept him there for one more moment. Then another. And finally, when *he* was ready, Shane released Ilya's hand.

Ilya rose slowly to his feet. He looked wrecked now, no trace of the cold, controlled alpha Shane had been living with for weeks. He looked tired and terrified and painfully human. Shane wiped uselessly at his face. "He'll miss you."

Ilya went still.

Shane's chest tightened. "Bean," he added too quickly. "I mean Bean will miss you."

Something moved through Ilya's expression, but for once he didn't push. He didn't tease Shane or demand the rest of the sentence. He simply nodded. "I will miss him too."

Ilya reached down and picked up the duffel.

Then his eyes found Shane's one last time.

“Both of you.”

Shane couldn't answer. He watched Ilya shoulder the bag containing five months of a pregnancy he believed he'd lost forever, watched him turn toward the door again, and this time Shane didn't call him back. He sat with one hand covering the place on his stomach where Ilya's palm had been and listened as the man he loved walked away because, perhaps for the first time, Ilya loved him enough to understand that wanting to stay wasn't the same thing as having the right to.

Outside, Anatoly and Kostya stood vigil as Ilya shouldered the bag and walked past them without a glance, leaving the only home he'd ever wanted to build, and the only person he'd ever truly loved, behind.

The sound of the bedroom door shutting was the loudest thing Shane had ever heard.

It wasn't a slam, it was a soft, final click of the latch engaging. But the sound echoed repeatedly in his mind.

He stayed sitting on the edge of the bed, staring at the blank white wood. He waited. He didn't know what for exactly. But he thought that Ilya would come back. Ilya wouldn't leave him. He waiting for the handle to turn. For footsteps to come back. For Ilya to swear under his breath because he'd forgotten his phone charger, or his favorite razor, or just to deliver one last order about making sure he ate dinner.

Instead, he heard the footsteps move farther down the hall. Down the stairs. Then nothing.

The silence rushed in, thick and suffocating.

He left.

The thought didn't compute. Ilya didn't leave. Ilya followed. Ilya hunted. Ilya was always there even when he physically wasn't. Shane had crossed an international border, vanished into a tiny town, changed his hair, lived on cash, built a whole hidden life for five months, and Ilya had still ripped the roof off of it to get to him.

Shane had screamed at him to give him space. Ilya had tightened his grip. Shane had begged him to stop controlling everything. Ilya had made more rules. And now, tonight, Shane had finally said, "Don't go." And Ilya had fucking gone.

The absurd, cruel irony of it hit him like a physical blow. His first clear emotion was a hot, sharp spike of anger. "Asshole." His voice was too loud in the empty room. There was no answering growl, no sarcastic retort. The silence ate the word whole.

Bean rolled then, a slow, heavy shift that made Shane gasp. His hand flew automatically to the spot, pressing against the tight skin. His other hand, the one that had slowly gotten so used to reaching for another stretched out toward the empty side of the bed. Lately, when Bean got like this, frantic or restless, Shane had started the habit himself, taking Ilya's wrist, guiding his broad palm to the epicenter of the movement. *Feel this.*

There was no wrist. No hand. Just his own trembling fingers splayed over his stomach.

Shane's face crumpled. A ragged, wounded sound tore from his throat, and then the tears came; Hot, furious, shameful tears that he swiped at angrily. This was what he wanted. Wasn't it?

“This is what you wanted,” he spat at the empty room, his voice thick.

Bean kicked again, hard, right under his ribs. “Don’t,” Shane hissed, pressing his hand harder.

Another kick, a defiant ripple. “Seriously kiddo, don’t start with me right now.” Eventually, the numbness receded enough for movement. He got off the bed, telling himself he needed water. Or the bathroom. Something normal. But his feet carried him to the bedroom door. His hand rose, fingertips brushing the cool metal of the handle.

He was going after him.

The understanding iced through his veins. He froze. A new, awful understanding crystallized: Ilya hadn’t left because he stopped wanting him. Ilya had left because Shane mattered more than what Ilya wanted.

That was new. Shane’s fingers curled around the handle. He could turn it. He could call out. He could probably still catch him before he drove away.

For one terrifying, glorious second, he wanted to. But he didn’t.

Because he didn’t know what his own “don’t go” had meant. Did it mean *I forgive you*? Did it mean *I’m scared to be alone*? Did it mean *I love you no matter what you’ve done*? or just *I’m seven months pregnant and hormonal and the idea of you walking out that door makes me feel like I’m splitting in two*?

He didn’t know. So, for the first time, he made himself stay. He would not make another catastrophic, life-altering decision from a place of pure, blind panic. He closed his eyes, a fresh wave of heat flooding his face.

“Fuck.”

The sound of the front door opening downstairs jolted him. His entire body reacted before his mind, leaning forward, heart leaping. *Ilya*. Then he heard his mother's voice, low and concerned, followed by his father's quieter murmur.

The disappointment was so immediate, so intense, it felt like a physical sickness. He quickly wiped his face again, but it was useless. He'd been crying, and he looked it.

Yuna entered first, David a step behind. David's face did that painful crumple of paternal worry, and he started forward, but Yuna put a gentle hand on his arm. She didn't rush to Shane. She stood near the foot of the bed, giving him the room to speak first.

His first question was out before he could stop it. "Did you see him?"

Yuna knew exactly who he meant. "No."

It wasn't the answer some part of him had wanted. He covered the flare of... whatever that was... with a shrug. "He told me. About the pills."

Yuna sat then, on the bench at the foot of the bed, keeping a careful distance. David leaned against the doorframe, a steady, silent presence.

Then Yuna told him everything. The pharmacist Anatoly knew. The lab results. The custom Russian compounds designed to heighten alpha aggression, to suppress specific emotional inhibitors. Galina. The connection to Vasiliev.

As she spoke, Shane's mind populated the clinical terms with memories: Ilya's easy laughter in the kitchen one minute, the flat coldness in his eyes twenty minutes later. The rigid set of

his shoulders after therapy. The inexplicable rages that seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere. The night he'd forgotten his dose, the night they'd finally talked.

"I told you," Shane whispered, the words aching. "I told you something was wrong with him."

Yuna's nod was solemn. "You did."

The confirmation should have been a relief but instead it opened a deeper, more frightening chasm. Shane looked at her, his eyes red-rimmed but clear. "So which parts were him?"

Yuna hesitated.

"Which parts?" Shane pressed, his voice gaining an edge. He started listing them, each one a stone dropped into the quiet room. "The tracking. The threats. Dragging me home. The rules. The doctors." His hand rose unconsciously, fingertips brushing his throat. "Vegas? Or when he ch—" He cut himself off with a shake of his head. "Was that all him?"

Yuna held his gaze, and in her honesty, Shane found a terrible kind of respect. "I don't know."

"That's a pretty fucking important thing not to know."

"Yes."

"Does he know?"

"He doesn't know," Yuna said softly. "He refused to use it as an excuse. He said... Galina didn't invent everything wrong with him. He said he was angry before the pills. Obsessive before them. Violent before them." She paused, letting the unvarnished truth settle. "He didn't ask me to tell you it wasn't his fault."

Shane looked away, out the dark window. “Good.” The word was small, but it carried a weight of grim satisfaction. If Ilya had tried to claim instant innocence, it would have felt like another manipulation. This acknowledgment of his own darkness, separate from had been done to him, was the only thing that felt real.

“There’s something else,” Yuna said. “He asked me to ask you.”

“Ask me what?”

“What you want.”

Shane blinked at her.

“Not what he wants. Not what I think is safest. Not what any doctor recommends. You. If you want to stay here, go to Willow Creek, go home with us, we can go. If you want the cottage, we will take you there.”

A bitter, choked laugh escaped Shane. “Little fucking late for that.”

Yuna didn’t flinch. She didn’t offer a defense. “Yes.”

The simple agreement surprised him.

“But I’m asking now, your choice sweetheart.” Yuna said.

Shane fell silent. He looked around the beautiful, haunted bedroom. The bed where he’d been both cherished and imprisoned. The doorway Ilya had walked through. Then he thought of the cottage. The lake windows. The quiet. The peaceful, sun-drenched room where he’d imagined building Bean’s nest out of soft blankets and hope.

Finally, he said, “The cottage.”

“Okay,” Yuna replied.

Shane waited for the conditions, the caveats, the buts. None came. “That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

A strange impulse made him ask, “What does Ilya think?”

Yuna gave him the answer that carved something hollow and aching in his chest. “He said it isn’t his decision.”

Yuna and David began moving quietly, gathering the things Shane would need. Yuna asked, “What do you want to bring?”

He listed them mechanically. Clothes. Laptop. Prenatals. Shane looked back toward the window, toward the unseen city where Ilya was now driving alone, unmoored. Somewhere in that duffel bag, wrapped in Ilya’s clothes, was a leather-bound book containing five months of a lost life, and a thousand silent admissions.

For the first time since the door had clicked shut, something besides grief and confusion stirred in Shane’s chest. It was thin and sharp, a needle of anticipation laced with dread.

Because eventually, Ilya was going to open that book. And then he was going to know everything he’d missed.

The click of the bedroom door latch echoed down the hallway long after the sound itself had faded. Ilya walked, the duffel strap digging into his shoulder, each step measured and deliberate. Anatoly and Kostya fell into step behind him, a silent, professional shadow. He did not look back. If he saw Shane again, saw the devastation on his face, remembered the warmth of his own forehead against the curve of Shane's stomach, the distinct kick of Bean against his palm, the whispered plea to not leave, the fragile resolve holding him together would shatter.

He kept walking.

At the bottom of the stairs, he stopped. The grief was a living weight in his chest, but he shoved it behind the cold, operational part of his brain that knew how to survive. He turned to Anatoly.

"You are in charge of Shane's security until I return."

Anatoly nodded, waiting.

Ilya forced the next words out, each one a conscious revision of every order he'd given over the last month. "You are responsible for his *safety*. Not his decisions."

A flicker of understanding in Anatoly's eyes.

"If Shane wants to leave this house, he leaves. If he wants the cottage, Willow Creek, his parents, wherever... you make sure he gets there safely. You do not stop him." Ilya took a breath, the next part the most difficult. "You do not report every fucking thing he does to me."

Anatoly's eyebrows lifted slightly, but he nodded.

“If he asks for something, you get it. If he asks you to fuck off, you fuck off to somewhere close enough that he is still protected.”

This time, Anatoly almost smiled. “Understood.”

“Dr. Alvarez is his doctor. Unless Shane chooses someone else. If he wants her brought to the cottage, arrange it. If he wants to contact Ruth and Walter for a visit, help him. If he wants anything from Willow Creek retrieved, get it.”

Then Ilya’s voice changed, dropping lower, the temperature in the foyer seeming to fall with it. “Galina.”

Anatoly’s posture shifted infinitesimally, all professional attention.

“I want people on Kostova. Immediately, but keep them discreet. Not anyone connected to our usual operations here.” He needed people she wouldn’t recognize, who couldn’t be traced back to Shane. “I want to know everything. Where she goes. Who she meets. Every property. Professional history. Financial connections in and out of Russia, her connection to Vasiliev. Travels. Phone records if you can obtain them legally. Anyone she has contacted since Yuna confronted her.”

He paused, ensuring Anatoly absorbed the most critical instruction. “Do not touch her. Do not frighten her.”

Anatoly’s eyes narrowed in comprehension. They were going to let her think she still held the leash. “You want her to keep moving normally.”

“Da.”

“I’ll get you everything there is to know.”

Ilya's jaw tightened. "Please, I can't come back until I can ensure that Shane and the baby are safe with me."

They moved through the grand, silent house to the garage. This had been his favorite before- a place to store his car collection and he'd love when Shane scolded him over the excess of his favorite ones, softly lit, the air cool and smelling of wax and high-octane fuel. A Range Rover, a Porsche Taycan, a Mercedes sedan sat gleaming. He'd gotten the new SUV for Shane to drive when they brought the baby home but hadn't had the chance to gift it to him yet. Ilya walked past them all without a glance and went directly to the Ferrari 12Cilindri, its Rosso Magma paint standing out against the other cars.

He opened the driver's door, tossing the duffel into the passenger footwell.

Anatoly looked from the low-slung supercar to the bag, then to Ilya's face. "You sure you should be driving this car right now? I can give you the hummer we're using."

Ilya slid into the carbon-fiber seat, the engine coming to life with a muted, ferocious growl at the push of a button. "I am still Russian," he said, his voice flat. "We do not have healthy coping mechanisms."

Anatoly opened the passenger door and got in.

Ilya stared at him. "What are you doing?"

"Coming with you."

"No. You stay with Shane."

"Kostya is with Shane. His parents will be here shortly. There are guards all over this property." Anatoly fastened his seatbelt. "I get you settled. Then I come back."

“Anatoly, ”

“You are not the only person in this family allowed to decide someone needs watching.”

The word family hit Ilya in the quiet cockpit with unexpected weight. Ilya said nothing. Over time, he guessed they had formed some type of pseudo family. He released the brake and guided the Ferrari up the ramp and into the grey Ottawa afternoon.

He drove because he needed the concentration, he as forced to focus on the road and was thankful that Anatoly did come with him since he had a few seconds during the drive where he wondered if it would hurt if he turned the wheel slightly and crashed against a wall or drove off a cliff. Grief was a luxury he couldn't afford yet, he would plan for it if needed though. He could fully admit that without Shane, his life was just not worth it anymore.

Beside him, Anatoly was already working. His phone, secured with encryption protocols Ilya himself had mandated, was a hub of silent activity. Text chains. Secure messages. Calls made in low, rapid Russian. Ilya caught fragments: “No contact... Both residences... Vasiliev too... Start with financials...” It was a comfort, this swift, professional unraveling of a threat. Action was easier than feeling.

But at every stoplight, every moment the roaring engine fell to an idle, it all rushed back.

Don't go. The feel of Bean's heel pushing against his hand. *He'll miss you. Bean. I mean.*

His grip on the steering wheel turned his knuckles white. After twenty minutes of aimless driving, Anatoly looked up from his phone. “Where are we going?”

Ilya realized he hadn't decided. The concept of destination felt abstract. He needed walls, a door he could lock between himself and the world. “The Château Laurier,” he said finally. It was opulent, anonymous, and close.

When the Ferrari purred to a halt under the hotel's stone portico, a valet approached, his training warring with his recognition of both the car and the man inside it.

Ilya didn't move to get out immediately. The silence stretched.

Anatoly finished typing a message and looked over. "Before we go inside, call Kostova."

Ilya turned his head.

"Why?"

"Because right now she thinks she lost control of you." Anatoly's gaze was steady. "Give it back."

It took Ilya a few minutes to understand. He pulled out his phone, the weight of it suddenly heavy. He found her number, and pressed call.

She answered on the third ring. "Ilya?" Her voice was warm, concerned, layered with a professional gentleness that now made his skin prickle.

"I wanted to apologize," he said, forcing a weariness into his tone. He stared straight ahead through the windshield, watching a bellman load luggage onto a cart.

"You don't need to apologize to me." Soothing, forgiving. "I imagine you're feeling very overwhelmed."

"Da." He let the word sound shaky. "Yuna... she showed me things. I wasn't expecting it. I don't... I don't know what to believe." He paused, scanning over the cyrillic words Anatoly had scrawled on a napkin for him. "I think maybe I reacted too quickly."

A small, deliberate pause on her end. Then, a tone of gentle reassurance. “That’s completely understandable, Ilya. Having an important person in your life questioning medication can be frightening, particularly when someone without clinical training presents it in an alarming way. ”

There it was. The subtle undermining. He could hear the machinery of it now, each word chosen to separate him from Yuna, to frame her concern as ignorance.

“Yuna must love you very much, and you haven’t been getting that motherly affection in so long,” Galina continued, the epitome of benevolent reason. “But fear can make people interpret things in ways that aren’t medically useful. It doesn’t mean she doesn’t care.”

Ilya closed his eyes, nausea rising. “Da,” he murmured.

“Where are you now?” she asked, the question casual.

“Taking some time alone.” He didn’t offer more.

“That’s wise. Distance from Shane for a day or two may actually be beneficial while your system settles.” She was talking about him like a recalcitrant machine.

“Do you have your medication with you?” she asked.

Ilya glanced at Anatoly. “No. I left quickly.”

“That’s all right,” she said, no trace of annoyance, only smooth efficiency. “I can have it delivered to you. It’s important you don’t stop abruptly, Ilya. That could make everything you’re feeling considerably worse.”

The trap was so clear now. How had he not noticed this before? The fear of withdrawal, the fear of his own unmedicated mind, used as the hook to keep him compliant. To keep him

consuming whatever she was sending.

“Okay,” he said, sounding defeated.

“I’ll arrange it. We should schedule another session later this week, once you’ve had some time to process.” A slight shift in her tone, a testing. “Just the two of us.”

Ilya let the hesitation hang in the line. “I thought you wanted me to bring Shane?”

Another pause, shorter this time. “I think it would be better if it were only us this time. There are things we need to work through that may be difficult with someone else in the room. You need a space where you aren’t being influenced by everyone else’s fear.”

Isolation, Anatoly scribbled down. The final, definitive move. Don’t trust Yuna. Don’t trust Shane. Trust only me.

“Da,” Ilya whispered, pouring confusion into the word. “Maybe that is better.”

“Good.” He could hear the satisfaction, carefully masked. “I’ll take care of the details. For now, get some rest tonight. Don’t make any major decisions. You’re frightened and confused. Let me take care of the medical side, and we’ll talk when you’re ready.”

“Thank you,” Ilya said.

“Of course, Ilya. I’ll get you back on the right track. Call me if you need anything.”

He ended the call and sat perfectly still in the sudden silence. The valet shifted his weight a few feet away.

“She sounded exactly the same,” Ilya said, his voice hollow. The horror was in the consistency. The manipulation hadn’t begun today; it had always been there, and he had just been deaf to its frequency.

Anatoly watched him. “Do you want the medication delivered?”

Ilya looked at him, a spike of anger cutting through the numbness.

Anatoly clarified, his voice low. “Not for you to take. But I can send it back home and have it analyzed.”

Understanding dawned. “Da,” Ilya said, the cold strategy aligning with the cold void inside him. “Let her send everything she wants.” A fresh trail. Packaging, courier, pharmacy source, fingerprints. A direct line to her network.

Anatoly nodded, his thumbs already moving over his screen.

Ilya finally opened the door and stepped out. The valet approached, offering a ticket. Ilya hesitated, his fingers tightening around the key fob. For a surreal second, surrendering the Ferrari felt like surrendering the last vestige of control he had over anything. Then he let go, placing the fob in the valet’s gloved hand.

Upstairs, the suite was predictably vast, bland and luxurious. Ilya stood in the center of the living area, adrift. Anatoly was already at the desk, his laptop open, connecting to a secure network.

Ilya’s gaze fell on the duffel bag where he’d dropped it by the sofa. He needed to move, to do something with his hands. He unzipped the main compartment, intending to pull out a sweatshirt, to claim some small piece of familiarity in the sterile room. He wished he’d grabbed something of Shane’s, but that had seemed counterproductive at the time.

As he tugged at the bundled fabric, a smaller, heavier object slid free from between the folds of his hoodie and thumped softly onto the plush carpet.

It was a book. Leather-bound, worn at the edges. He stared at it, not comprehending. He hadn't packed a book. Slowly, he bent and picked it up. He turned it over. There was no title on the cover. He opened it. On the first page, in Shane's neat, looping handwriting, was a date from late March, followed by a single line:

Today I told Ruth. She cried. I think I did too.

Beneath the words was a small, slightly blurry photograph taped to the page. Shane, visibly thinner, paler, standing in a sunlit kitchen that wasn't theirs. His hand was resting on the very beginning of a curve beneath his sweater. He was trying to smile.

Shane's journal. He saw the dates and flipped through the pages. The five months that he'd been gone for. The last page was of the night before he'd gone to get him.

Ilya sank onto the edge of the sofa, the book cradled in his hands. He didn't turn the page. He couldn't. The weight of it, of what it represented, was too immense.

Shane must have given this to him. Shane had put it here. He hadn't handed it to him. He hadn't said a word. He had hidden it. An act not of forgiveness, but of communication. A desperate, wordless reaching across the void Ilya had just carved between them.

He wanted to wait for Anatoly to leave, but when the older man saw him sitting there, he turned and looked over. "What's that?"

"Nothing." Ilya replies, not looking up.

Anatoly walks over and looks down, catching a glimpse before Ilya snapped the book shut. "That doesn't look like 'nothing'."

“Please go back to Shane. We can talk in the morning.”

Ilya sat alone in the silent, expensive hotel room, the journal burning in his hands, and for the first time since walking out of their bedroom, the full, desolate cost of leaving hit him.

He slowly opened the first page, bringing the book up. It smelled like Shane. He wanted to pull out a cigarette or grab a drink but forced himself to lean back and read the first entry.

Oct 7th

Today I told Ruth.

She cried. I think I did too.

She hugged me for so long, I don't remember the last time I let a total stranger hug me like that and then made me eat two pieces of toast because apparently pregnancy means everyone is allowed to become obsessed with whether I've eaten.

I haven't told Walter yet. Ruth says she'll do it because apparently I look like I'm going to throw up every time I try.

Took the first picture because Ruth says someday I'll want to remember this.

Ruth won.

Ilya smiled softly as he saw a slightly blurry picture of Shane standing sideways in Ruth's kitchen, one hand over the tiny curve beneath his sweater. He looks pale and exhausted and is trying unsuccessfully to smile, but he was so beautiful. Ilya ran a fingertip over the image, burning it in his memory.

Oct 12th

Walter knows.

Some orange and brown leaves were pressed to the page this time.

Oct 15th

Ruth made me pancakes in fun little shapes today. I cried. Not even pregnant crying, just pathetic, missing-you crying. She didn't say anything, just wrapped me in a hug that smelled like lavender and flour. Walter pretended not to notice and fixed the loose step on the porch.

Bean is the size of a strawberry, apparently. It doesn't feel real, except I'm exhausted all the time and my sweat smells different. Ruth says it's the omega hormones settling in. It just smells like something's missing.

I keep wanting to turn my phone on, or to dig up the picture from the All-Star game that I printed out. I don't know what I'm waiting for. A message. A sign. For you to somehow know that we're okay.

Oct 25th

Had the first ultrasound today. Dr. Alvarez is nice. She talks to me, not over me. There's a heartbeat. A fast, flickering little light on the screen. I asked her to print two copies of the picture.

I put one in this book. The other is in an envelope in my drawer. I don't know why. I could mail it to you but then you'd know where I am and I just can't have that yet.

Nov 1st

Bean kicked for the first time today. Properly. Not a flutter, a real thump I think. I was listening to Walter's stories about the farm and it was a big kick. I had been thinking about how much you'd like Walter and what crazy stories you both would share.

Coincidence, obviously.

Still. Felt like you were here for a second.

Nov 5th

The town had a parade. Fire trucks, the Fischer's old tractor, kids with face paint. Sam gave me a tiny apple tree pin. I wore it on my shirt and thought about you probably doing some stupid, photocentric team event in Ottawa, smiling that smile that doesn't reach your eyes.

I ate a whole slice of blueberry pie. Bean went crazy afterward. Sugar rush, I guess.

I imagined you putting your hand right here, feeling it. You'd say something obnoxious in Russian. I'd pretend to be annoyed.

It was a good day. A really good day.

Which somehow made it worse. I miss you. I hope I've done the right thing.

Nov 6th

I bought baby socks today. Tiny, white, with little green frogs on them. Ruth came with me. I held them in my palm in the store and my throat got so tight I couldn't speak.

It's getting harder to hide. Not just the belly. Everything. I'm so scared. Not of you finding me anymore. I'm scared you won't.

Nov 8th

First appointment with Dr. Alvarez. Everything looks good. Heartbeat is strong.

I didn't know how scared I was until I heard it.

I asked her every question I think you would, but I know I was missing some- I was too focused on the screen.

You would have asked better questions.

Nov 10th

Dr. Alvarez said Bean would start being more active.

I spent twenty minutes lying completely still waiting for it to happen again.

Nothing.

Already an asshole. Definitely Ilya's child.

Nov 15th

Ruth says I have a bump now. I think I look bloated. Walter said I look pregnant. Walter is no longer my friend.

I didn't realize what shirt I was wearing until after I took this. Not retaking it.

Nov 17th

Bean moved again. Definitely Bean this time.

I was watching the hockey game on my phone. Ottawa.

I am choosing to believe the timing was coincidental.

Nov 20th

Someone behind me at the grocery store was speaking Russian.

Bean immediately started moving.

Genetics are bullshit.

Nov 29th

Dr. Alvarez says everything looks perfect.

Bean has all the things Bean is supposed to have.

Ten fingers.

Ten toes.

Very large feet.

Of fucking course.

I stared at these for almost an hour.

I kept thinking about how many questions Ilya would ask.

*Whether the measurements are right. Whether the heart is right. Whether my iron is right.
Whether Bean is moving enough. Whether I'm eating enough.*

Then he'd ask all of them again in Russian like that somehow changes the answers.

I hate that I know exactly what he'd do.

Dec 02nd

Walter started the crib.

Apparently "we're building a crib" actually means Walter builds a crib while I hold pieces of wood and get yelled at for holding them wrong.

I suggested IKEA.

He looked personally betrayed, so I apologized.

Dec 7th

Bean kicked hard enough today that I could see it from the outside.

I screamed.

Ruth came running because she thought something was wrong.

Then we spent half an hour staring at my stomach.

Walter joined us.

Three adults staring at a stomach waiting for a baby to do something.

Very normal afternoon.

I wish he could have seen it.

I don't know why I wrote that. How did we let it get this bad?

Dec 15

I have officially started waddling.

Walter pointed this out.

Walter is once again no longer my friend.

Sam says I've been waddling for two weeks and everyone was afraid to tell me.

Cowards.

Dec 17

Dr. Alvarez says Bean can hear and tell people apart now.

Ruth has started reading children's books directly at my stomach.

Walter says good morning to it.

I feel ridiculous talking to my own stomach.

I tried Russian.

Bean kicked.

Traitor.

Dec 25

Craving pickles.

I hate everything.

Dec 26

Bought the pickles.

Did not eat them.

I could practically hear you being smug from another country.

I refuse to give into the craving.

Dec 26, 11:47 p.m.

I ate the pickles.

Fuck you, Ilya and your weird ass food.

Jan 2

Ruth says I look beautiful.

I look like I swallowed a basketball.

Also, this is your shirt.

I didn't realize I'd packed it.

That's a lie.

Jan 4

Washed his stupid shirt today.

It doesn't smell like you anymore.

That was a mistake.

Couldn't sleep.

Bean wouldn't stop moving.

Watched Ottawa highlights.

I miss you.

Heartburn is bullshit.

Jan 8

Had another ultrasound.

Bean kept turning away.

Dr. Alvarez called him stubborn.

I laughed so hard she asked what was funny.

I didn't tell her.

Had a dream Ilya was here for this one.

He cried.

Not a little.

Full Russian disaster.

He would deny it.

Jan 10th

Ruth asked about you today. Not where he is. Not what happened.

Just what your like.

I told her 'he's annoying.' I told her 'he's loud. Arrogant. Obnoxious. He cheats at cards. He sings Russian songs in the shower. He steals blankets and then insists I stole them. He thinks being six-foot-whatever means he's automatically right about everything.'

Ruth said I was smiling.

I told her to mind her business.

Jan 13

Walter finished most of the crib.

It's beautiful. Really beautiful.

There's a little maple leaf carved into one side. I asked him why. He said because Bean is Canadian. He noticed my accent. I told him Bean is half Russian.

Walter said, "Nobody's perfect."

I laughed so hard I almost peed.

You would hate him and love him at the same time.

Jan 14

Bean had hiccups.

I thought something was wrong and nearly called Dr. Alvarez.

Then Ruth put her hand on my stomach and started laughing.

Apparently babies get hiccups.

They lasted nine minutes.

I recorded it.

I don't know why I'm keeping all of this.

Jan 14

That's a lie too.

Jan 18

Sometimes I wonder if you can feel us.

Not Bean. I know Bean can feel me. I mean you.

I don't know how bonds work over this much distance. I don't know if hiding changes it. I don't know if you wake up when I wake up. I don't know if you know when Bean moves.

Sometimes I hope you don't.

Sometimes I hope you do.

Jan 23

I had a bad day. Nothing happened. But I wanted to call you.

I didn't. I'm glad I didn't. I don't know what the fuck I'm doing.

Jan 28

Ruth took this.

I told her to delete it.

She printed it instead.

I live with terrorists.

Feb 1

Bean reacts when I speak Russian now.

I've tested it.

English: nothing.

French: nothing.

Russian: kick.

You are somehow corrupting our child from hundreds of miles away.

This feels wrong. I'm trying my best but nothing is as it should be.

Feb 4

Walter asked today whether Bean's father knows he's okay. I said no.

Walter didn't judge me, that was worse. He just said, "That's a heavy thing to carry, kiddo."

I know. But no know prods and I'm left to my own thoughts.

Feb 5

I almost called.

Had the number open.

Didn't.

Feb 7

Dr. Alvarez says Bean is perfect, my iron isn't. Ruth has made it her personal mission to fix it by my next appointment, there is spinach in everything.

I found spinach in scrambled eggs this morning.

You would side with her.

Asshole.

Feb 9

Walter showed me how to sand the last piece of the crib. He says I have to finish it myself. I asked why. He said because someday I'm going to tell Bean I helped build his first bed. I didn't tell Walter that Bean's papa could buy him a thousand cribs. I don't think any of them would matter as much as this one.

Feb 10

I keep thinking about home.

I don't know which place I mean when I write that.

Feb 11

Bean went insane tonight. Couldn't get comfortable. I finally put on an old interview of yours. He settled down.

I'm choosing not to examine that too deeply.

Feb 12

Couldn't sleep again.

Ruth says it's normal.

Everything is apparently normal when you're pregnant. Can't sleep? Normal. Sleep twelve hours? Normal. Starving? Normal. Food makes you sick? Normal. Cry because someone

used the mug you wanted? Apparently also normal.

Bean was moving a lot tonight.

I put my hand where his foot was and he pushed back.

I wish you could feel him.

Shane had crossed out the next sentence so aggressively that the pen had nearly torn through the paper.

I wish you were here.

Below it, after a large blank space:

That's not the same as saying I should come back.

I need to remember that.

Feb 14

I dreamt about the cottage last night. We were on the dock. You weren't saying anything, just tracing the lines on my palm with your thumb. The sun was warm. The lake was still. I could smell us, pine, sunscreen, you.

I woke up and my pillow was wet. Bean was doing somersaults, like they knew. This is the worst part. Not the anger. Not the fear. The quiet moments when I forget to hate you, and I just miss you- my best friend, alpha, lover, soul mate.

On almost every page, Shane had included pictures, pressed flowers, ultrasounds, little simple drawings, things were scratched out, but the constant pictures were a gift to Ilya just as much as the words. He saw Shane and his child grow throughout the months. Dozens of pictures and ultrasounds showed the small changes of his mates body. He'd copied recipes and glued diner menus. Scraps of christmas wrapping paper- everything was there for him.

The leather of the journal was soft and worn under Ilya's fingers, a stark contrast to the cold, impersonal hotel suite. He could see it all, the kind, fierce woman pulling his omega into a hug while Shane fell apart. A scene he should have been part of, as the supporting partner, the proud alpha. Instead, he'd been a raging ghost in Ottawa, a void of fury and fear.

The caption in Shane's neat script: *Bean's first photo in WC. Heartbeat 145 bpm. Dr. A says perfect.*

Ilya's vision blurred. He brought the page closer, his thumb trembling over the tiny, blurred form. He had missed this. He had been pacing a hole in his study floor, screaming at investigators, while Shane sat in a quiet clinic in Pennsylvania, watching their child's heartbeat flicker on a screen. The loss was so acute it was physical, a hollowing out beneath his ribs.

A broken sound, part sob, part laugh, escaped him. Shane had been listening to him. While hiding from him, while fearing him, Shane had been listening to his voice, and their child had moved. The coincidence was like both a miracle and a torture. He pressed the heel of his hand against his stinging eye, but the tears came anyway, hot and silent, tracking down his face and dripping onto the expensive hotel duvet.

Entry after entry shattered him. The image of Shane, a little rounder, wearing a flag pin, eating pie in a small-town parade while consciously, painfully, imagining him... It was the mundane detail that undid him. He hadn't just missed the milestones; he'd missed the blueberry pie. The cravings. The quiet, ordinary joy he had stolen from them both.

He traced the words *I'm scared you won't*. The confession was a knife twisting in his chest. After all the tracking, the hunting, the relentless pressure, the moment Shane stopped being afraid of being found and started being afraid of being *lost*... Ilya had to set the journal down, bowing his head as a wave of shame and grief rolled through him. He cried openly then, shoulders shaking, for the terror he'd caused, for the loneliness he'd imposed, for the man Shane had needed who hadn't been there.

I just miss my best friend.

It was the simplest sentence, and the most devastating. It wasn't about the bond, or the pregnancy, or the trauma. It was about the easy silence on the dock, the shared sun, the friendship that had been the bedrock of everything before it all cracked apart. He had been so obsessed with being Shane's alpha, his owner, his protector, that he had annihilated the one thing Shane pleaded for from the very start: his best friend.

He sat there for a long time, the journal open on his lap, the quiet of the room a heavy contrast to the storm of anguish inside him. The tears slowly subsided, leaving a raw, scraped-clean ache.

And then, through the devastation, a new understanding began to glimmer, fragile and painful.

Shane had kept this. He'd made this diary for him. He'd bought two ultrasound pictures. He'd noted the kick that coincided with Ilya's laugh. He'd imagined Ilya's hand on his stomach, his Russian commentary. He'd pressed a flower from Walter's garden. This journal wasn't just a chronicle of absence.

It was so he could be included when they found their way to each other again. Even in his fear, even in his justified anger, Shane had been saving these pieces. For himself, yes. But also, unconsciously or not, for Ilya. He had been building a bridge across the chasm of those five months, stone by solitary stone.

Ilya had spent those months trying to *take*, to take control, to take information, to take Shane back. Shane, alone and scared, had spent them *giving*, giving their child a history, and giving Ilya, the man who didn't deserve it, a way back in.

The journal in his hands was the opposite of a tracker. It wasn't surveillance; it was an invitation. It wasn't a claim of possession; it was an act of devotion, crafted in secret and passed in silence.

He carefully closed the book, holding it to his chest as if it were Bean itself. The grief was still there, a vast and howling thing. But woven through it now was something else, something that felt like the first true breath after drowning.

A chance, however fragile, to finally understand what it meant to be given something, instead of taking it.

The silence in the hotel suite was thick the next morning. Ilya had fallen asleep on the the sofa, the leather journal a warm, living weight against his heart. His eyes were swollen, his face damp, a painful migraine was starting as he woke up and laid there. Shane had still thought of him, despite five months of desolation, giving him that gift was something he'd never be able to compensate him for. It wasn't forgiveness. It was something more foundational: a testament that even in his fear, Shane had never truly erased him.

For thirty seconds, he just breathed, holding that fragile truth.

Then his phone rang, shattering the peace.

The screen flashed: SECURITY - TEAM 1

Ice flooded his veins. He had been explicit, do not report Shane's movements unless necessary. This was a breach of protocol. This could be an emergency.

He answered, his voice a blade. "What happened?"

"Mr. Hollander is safe, sir." The guard's voice was tense but immediate.

Ilya closed his eyes, a fraction of the tension releasing. "Then why are you calling me?"

A pause. Too long. Ominous.

"It's Mrs. Hollander."

Ilya slowly opened his eyes. "What happened to Ma?"

“She’s also safe.”

Another pause, stretching thin.

“Mostly.”

Ilya sat bolt upright, the journal tumbling to the sofa. “What the fuck does *mostly* mean?”

The guard launched into a rushed, increasingly ludicrous explanation. Shane, David, and security had left for the cottage. Twenty minutes in, Yuna remembered a critical meeting, part of transferring her work to the cottage for the coming weeks. Not wanting Shane to wait, she’d turned back with one security vehicle following. She took her meeting in her office then stopped at a café.

She grabbed her order and walked outside.

And across the street, leaving a discreet, unmarked medical building Anatoly’s team had just flagged for surveillance, was Dr. Galina Kostova.

They made eye contact.

Galina spoke first. “Mrs. Hollander.” Her tone was that infuriating blend of clinical calm and subtle smugness. “I hope Ilya is doing all right.”

Yuna kept walking.

“I understand you’re frightened,” Galina called after her, the words designed to condescend, to isolate. “But I would strongly caution you against interfering further in Ilya’s treatment. You’re not helping him.”

Yuna stopped. Turned.

“He’s doing considerably better since he stopped taking the drugs you gave him.”

Galina’s mask didn’t slip. “Ilya is an unstable alpha with an extensive history of violence. Whatever affection you’ve developed for him doesn’t change what he is. Worry about your own son, Mrs. Hollander. I don’t see this pregnancy ending well.”

That was Yuna’s final triggers. Not the insult, but the weaponization of Ilya’s deepest, most private terror, the fear that his core was irredeemably monstrous and the threat on Shane.

Yuna took a step toward her. “You drugged my kid and now you’re threatening my son.”

“I treated my patient.”

And Yuna Hollander, five-foot-three of ferocious maternal fury, pounced on Galina Kostova in the middle of the sidewalk.

She swung her full body forward, swinging her heavy briefcase to knock the other woman straight off her feet.

The closet security guard was so stunned that Galina managed to retaliate, scratching Yuna’s neck and grabbing a handful of her hair as they both tumbled to the ground. That, the guard reported with audible dread, “made everything worse.”

Security had to physically pull a screaming, kicking Yuna off a shrieking Galina.

“YOU DRUGGED MY SON, YOU FUCKING PSYCHOPATH!”

“Get this woman off me!” Galina yelled, imploring the people staring now as two large men struggled to contain Yuna.

“I’M GOING TO FUCKING KILL YOU!”

The guard’s own voice, pleading in the background: “Mrs. Hollander, please stop helping your case!”

Then the police arrived.

Back in the hotel suite, Ilya listened, his mind struggling to reconcile the facts.

“She assaulted Dr. Kostova,” the guard finished.

Ilya blinked. “Ma?”

“Yes, sir.”

“My Ma? Yuna Hollander?”

“Yes.”

Ilya looked down at the pregnancy journal on the sofa. “The tiny little woman? That Yuna Hollander?”

A weary chuckle slipped out. “... Yes, sir. The report from the hospital said a broken jaw and ribs.”

“Beat up Galina.”

“Quite badly, sir.”

And then, for the first time since walking out of his bedroom, Ilya laughed. A raw, startled burst of sound that was equal parts shock, absurdity, and a fierce, blazing pride. This tiny woman who had fed him and challenged him and refused to abandon him had just physically fought someone on his behalf.

The laughter died as quickly as it came.

“Where is she?”

“Police custody.”

Silence.

“Excuse me?”

“Mrs. Hollander was arrested.”

Ilya was on his feet, snatching his shoes. “Why the fuck did you let police arrest my mother?”

The guard’s voice was pained. “Sir, we cannot prevent Canadian police from arresting someone.”

“You are security.”

“Yes, we are already working on it. She has the best lawyer already and bond should be set within the next hour or so. We had to pull in favors to get an understanding judge.”

Old Ilya would have hidden this from Shane. To protect him. To control the narrative.

He opened his mouth. “Don’t tell-” He stopped. He tried again. “David decides when to tell him.”

He stopped again. No. He forced the right words out, each one a conscious step away from the man he’d been. “Tell David what happened. He can tell Shane. It is not my decision.”

Then he remembered his own order, the cornerstone of the investigation. “Where was the surveillance team?”

“Present, sir.”

“And?”

“They were instructed not to intervene with Dr. Kostova while she is in hospital.”

Ilya’s eye twitched. “I meant if she hurt Yuna!”

“Uhm, well, Mrs. Hollander wasn’t the one needing help, sir. She had one scratch on her and that was only because she was landing body blows. She’s a bit terrifying, sir.”

“Did anyone at least photograph it?”

“Sir?”

“For evidence.”

A pause. “...Yes. The body cams were on.”

“Send it.” He reconsidered instantly. “Actually, no. Do not send it to me. Send it to Anatoly.” He absolutely wanted to see it eventually.

“There is one other thing, sir,” the guard said, his tone shifting. “Mrs. Hollander wasn’t supposed to see Kostova there. She wasn’t near her office or her home. She was leaving a private biomedical research facility. One of the shell entities we’re investigating.”

The laughter was gone. The absurdity crystallized into cold, sharp purpose.

“During the altercation,” the guard continued, “something fell from Dr. Kostova’s bag. Before the police secured the scene, we retrieved it.”

“What?”

“A prescription bottle. The label is for another patient. A different name. But the pills inside match the visual identification of yours, sir.”

The final piece slammed into place, the personal violation expanding into something vast and systemic.

“I’m not the only one,” Ilya whispered.

He was moving before the call ended, shrugging into a jacket, the journal forgotten on the sofa. His mother was in a cell. The woman who had poisoned him was walking free, with other victims in her ledger. And Shane was safe at the cottage, building a nest, trusting him to handle the monsters.

He had never had a family to protect before. Now he had two people who had fought for him in ways he was still learning to understand, one with a quiet book of memories, the other with her fists.

Ilya arrived at the station looking like hell. Designer sweatpants, swollen eyes, a day's worth of stubble, and absolutely none of the polished arrogance the public associated with Ilya Rozanov. Anatoly walked beside him, flanked by two sharply dressed lawyers already speaking in low, rapid tones to a sergeant. And there, on a hard bench behind a glass partition, sat Yuna. Her hair was disheveled, a butterfly bandage covered the scratch on her neck, and her knuckles were scraped and bruised. She looked less like a woman who had just been arrested for assault and more like someone mildly inconvenienced by the administrative consequences of winning a fight.

She saw Ilya, and her eyes narrowed immediately.

"Don't. I don't need to hear it."

Ilya stopped. "I did not say anything."

"Your face says it all. You can't hide from me anymore."

"My face says my mother has been arrested for assault."

"She deserved it."

"I know."

“Then stop looking at me like that.”

Anatoly looked at Yuna’s hands with something disturbingly close to professional admiration. “For someone with no training, your form was surprisingly good.”

Yuna looked pleased.

Ilya snapped, “Do not encourage her.”

“I was going to offer lessons.”

“Absolutely fucking not.”

“It would prevent the cracked knuckles next time.”

“There will not be next time.”

Yuna and Anatoly exchanged a look.

Ilya pointed between them. “I hate whatever this is already.” His attention dropped to the butterfly bandage on Yuna’s neck. Everything humorous disappeared from his face. “Did she hurt you?”

“Ilya.”

“Did she?”

“She scratched me and pulled my hair. I’m fine.”

His eyes went frighteningly still. “I will kill her.”

Yuna pointed one bruised finger at him. “And *that* is why I hit her.”

“This makes no sense.”

“It makes perfect sense. You’re trying not to murder people. I’m helping.”

“By committing felony?”

“Is it a felony?” Yuna asked in surprise.

Anatoly quietly said, “We are hoping not.”

“See?”

“That does not mean what you think it means, Ma.”

After Ilya fusses at her. “You should not have done this.”

Yuna rolled her eyes. “Oh, shut up.”

“Ma. You could have been hurt.”

“So could you.”

“I *was* hurt. That does not mean you attack people in street.”

“She drugged my son.”

The words silenced him. Not *she drugged you*. Not *she hurt Shane*. Not *she endangered my grandchild*, though all of those things were true. *My son*. Ilya stared at her.

Yuna seemed to realize only then what she'd said, but she didn't correct it. Didn't soften it into something safer.

“She drugged my son,” she repeated. “And then she stood there and told me there was something fundamentally wrong with you like she hadn't spent months deliberately making it worse. So yes. I hit her.”

A pause. “Several times.” Anatoly coughed into his fist.

“You cannot beat everyone who hurts me.”

“Watch me, baby. You need people in your corner that love you and I'll be damned if I don't show you that you're worth it.”

“Ma...”

“Fine. I'll try to use my words.”

“Thank you.”

“Unless they drug you, again.”

“Jesus fucking Christ.”

Anatoly interrupted them, showing the text on his phone. “The name on the we collected on the other pill bottle is real.”

Ilya looked at him. “Another alpha?” Anatoly nodded. “Professional athlete?”

“No.”

“Politician?”

“No.”

Anatoly hesitated. “Russian military. He was a general in old regime that worked with your father.”

Silence. Ilya's stomach dropped.

Yuna flexed her swollen fingers and winced.

“I should start carrying a brick in my purse.”

“No,” Ilya and Anatoly said simultaneously.

Yuna frowned at them. “A small brick.”

“Ma.”

“Fine.”

Anatoly looked thoughtful. “There are weighted self-defense-”

“Anatoly.”

“Yes, boss.”

“Stop helping my mother commit crimes.”

“Technically, I was trying to with self defense. No crime there.”

Ilya stared at him.

“I will fire you.”

Anatoly shrugged. “You say that a lot. Mr. Hollander would hire me. I keep snacks for him.”

Yuna snorted.

And something inside Ilya cracked open again.

Yesterday, he'd walked away from the only home he'd ever wanted because loving Shane finally meant accepting that Shane had the right to choose a life without him. Last night, he'd discovered that even while Shane was running from him, Shane had carried him through five months of their child's life in photographs and scribbled notes. And now his new mother was sitting in a police station with bruised knuckles because someone had hurt him. He had spent so much of his life believing love was something he had to seize before it disappeared. Apparently, sometimes it chased you into hotel rooms in leather-bound journals. Sometimes it got arrested for assault. Ilya scrubbed both hands over his face.

“My family is fucking insane.”

Yuna smiled. “You're one to talk.”

The silence at the cottage was always peaceful. It was as soothing as the farm was in Willow Creek to Shane and he had missed it. This was where he considered himself truly home- his favorite memories were here. For the first day, Shane drank it in like water after a drought.

He stood in the sun-drenched room he'd chosen for the nest, his hands on his hips, Bean a solid, heavy weight beneath his palms. Lake light danced on the pine floorboards. Boxes of baby things, some clothes from Willow Creek, blankets Anatoly had retrieved, the crib pieces Walter had sent, waiting to be rebuilt sat in the room, full of potential instead of pressure. No one stood in the doorway watching him. No one offered suggestions. The only sound was the wind in the trees and the distant cry of birds.

This. This was the space he'd screamed for. But Ilya was missing. He should be here. And then another part of Shane knew that they still needed the space, they needed to figure out how to move on and how to reset their relationship to be something healthy.

He took a shower and stood under the spray until the water ran cold, just because he could. For lunch, he made a bowl of sugary cereal and dry toast. He carried it to the table where his father was reading.

David looked up, his gaze flicking to the bowl. His lips parted.

“Don’t wanna hear it. It tastes nice.” Shane said, the word coming out sharper than he intended.

David slowly raised both hands in surrender. “Didn’t say a word.”

Shane waited, tense, for the comment about protein, about iron, about gestational diabetes. It didn’t come. He sat down, the victory feeling strangely hollow. He was so used to the pushback that its absence left him off-balance. “You’re not going to tell me I need protein?”

“Do you want me to?”

“No.”

“Then no.”

Shane scowled into his cereal. He was *winning*, and it pissed him off. The realization was so absurd he almost laughed.

The peace held until David’s phone began to vibrate incessantly on the table, a frantic, buzzing counterpoint to the calm.

“Where’s Mom?” Shane asked, his spoon pausing.

“She’s... handling something.”

“What kind of something?”

David sighed, the sound heavy with paternal exhaustion. “A legal issue.”

Shane put his spoon down. “What the fuck does that mean?”

“Your mother,” David said, pinching the bridge of his nose, “encountered Dr. Kostova.”

The air left the room. “With who? Encountered how?”

“With a briefcase, apparently.”

It took David five minutes to explain. The missed meeting. The chance sighting. The words exchanged, Galina’s clinical, slicing remark about Ilya’s inherent instability, a “concern” for Shane’s pregnancy that was really a threat. And Yuna’s response.

“She beat the shit out of her?” Shane repeated, disbelief warring with a sudden, hysterical image of his five-foot-three mother swinging her purse like a mace.

“Your mother is having a complicated day.”

“Mom got arrested?”

“Temporarily. Its more of a custody hold. She’ll be out in a couple hours.”

A laugh burst out of Shane, sharp and surprised. He clapped a hand over his mouth, but it was too late. The dam broke. He laughed until his stomach ached and tears streamed down his face, the stress and absurdity of the last months, the running, the fear, the drugs, the therapy, the cosmic, ridiculous fact of his life, pouring out in helpless gasps. His father watched him, a worried smile on his face but they both ending up in laughs, leaning against each other.

The laughter died, leaving him empty and raw. He wiped his eyes. “She did that because of Ilya.”

David didn’t flinch. “Yes.”

The confirmation settled in Shane’s chest, warm and aching. His parents’ world was no longer cleanly divided between victim and villain. They could hold Shane’s pain and Ilya’s poisoning in the same hands.

“Is he with her?” Shane asked quietly.

“I believe so.”

Shane looked out at the lake, its surface sparkling with golden light. *Good*, he thought, and the word carried a sharp pang of loneliness. *He shouldn’t be alone.*

The silence became heavier as the hours stretched. He nested. He moved a pillow from the rocking chair to the window seat, then back again. Bean delivered a solid kick to his bladder.

“Your papa would’ve put this one over there,” he muttered, then froze. He glared down at his stomach. “Nobody asked you.” Another kick. “Traitor.” He checked his phone. No calls. No texts. No demands for updates or pictures. Just the blank, silent screen. He told himself this was the respect he’d demanded. He put the phone down. Five minutes later, he picked it up again. Nothing.

“This is literally what you wanted,” he told the empty living room. The first night was the worst. The bed was massive and cold. There were no stray limbs, no snores, no low Russian murmurs against his neck. When Bean began a frenetic soccer practice against his ribs around

2 AM, Shane's hand shot out on instinct, reaching for another, larger hand to press against the spot. His fingers met only cool linen. He laid his own palm there instead. "Papa isn't here," he whispered, and the word Papa stuck in his throat like a knot. He checked his phone again. Nothing.

Then his mind, treacherous and sleepless, turned to the journal. *He's found it by now. He must have. Hasn't he?* The possibilities spiraled: Ilya hadn't unpacked. He'd found it and thrown it away unread. He'd read it and been disgusted by the sentimentality. He'd seen it as a manipulation. He'd- Shane forced a breath. He turned the phone face-down on the nightstand and willed himself to sleep.

By the second afternoon, a low-grade irritation had replaced the anxiety. It was then he asked for Dr. Alvarez. He simply told the guard stationed politely at the front walkway, "Can you get Dr. Alvarez here?"

The man nodded. "Yes, sir." *No I'll check with Mr. Rozanov. No let me see if that's permitted.* Just yes.

She arrived late that night with a huge surprise. Ruth and Walter came with her- hugs, kisses and promises went around for the first half hour and David and Yuna were introduced but stayed back a bit when they saw how Shane interacted with these people.

After a while, the doctor had pulled Shane away and they went to the master bedroom for his exam. The exam was routine. Bean was healthy. Shane's iron was still low, but stable. As she packed her bag, she asked, "How are you sleeping?"

"Fine."

She gave him a look.

"Badly," he admitted.

“Anxious?”

He hesitated, looking around the quiet, sunlit room. “It’s... too quiet.”

She nodded, her expression kind but not pitying. “Quiet can take some getting used to, after so much chaos. Ruth and Walter are staying if you want them too, so I don’t think you’ll be getting that much quiet. Have you thought about your birth plan? Is your alpha going to be here?” Shane shrugged. He hadn’t thought about giving birth yet. He knew that he wanted a home birth, but didn’t know the details or different methods and he didn’t know if Ilya would be back by then.

“Dont worry. We have some time and I’m coming every couple of weeks for your check ups. We’ll get everything sorted before the time comes.”

Later that night, when Ruth and Walter had gone to the guest room on the lower level to get settled and unpacked, Shane sat down and cuddled with his mother. “Have you talked to Ilya?” he asked, too casually.

She looked up from her laptop. “A little.”

“Is he okay?”

“He’s safe.”

Shane waited. She went back to typing.

“That’s it?”

She looked up again, her expression unreadable. “What else would you like to know?”

“Nothing.”

“Okay.” The typing resumed.

He lasted fifteen seconds. “Where is he?”

Yuna stopped. She studied him, and then asked the question that changed the axis of everything. “Do you want to know?”

He thought about it for a few seconds. “Yes.”

“The Château Laurier.”

Shane absorbed this. A hotel. Alone. “Did he say anything?”

“About what?”

“Mom...”

“He asked whether you were safe.”

It wasn’t enough. His eyes flicked to his silent phone. Yuna saw it.

“They good people, the Fischers.” Yuna commented.

“They’re the best. They kept me functioning when I didn’t want to.”

Yuna pursed her lips. "I wish you would've told me how bad things were. Or how you felt."

"I didn't know myself, mama. It was all a mess. Ilya and i... we had so many ups and downs over the years and I couldn't see a way to make things work."

Yuna, manouvered him to rest against her lap and ran her fingers through his long hair. "Everything will work out, sweetheart. You'll see."

The first week at the cottage unfolded slowly for them. Ruth and Yuna recognized one another immediately across the kitchen that first morning after the Fischers arrived, a silent, instantaneous understanding passing between mothers who had spent time loving the same young man through different kinds of storms. Yuna saw the gentle, capable hands that had fed her son when she could not; Ruth saw the fierce, protective worry thrumming just beneath Yuna's polished surface. They moved around each other with a respectful choreography, brewing tea, washing fruit, speaking in the shorthand of women used to managing households and hearts. David and Walter found an easier accord, bonding over sharing amused, raised-brow looks whenever Ruth and Yuna's mutual fussing over Shane reached a particularly fervent pitch.

It was comfortable. It felt, for fleeting moments, like the extended family Shane had perhaps always needed. He seemed to relax into it, his shoulders losing some of their permanent defensive hike as he wandered the familiar rooms.

But Ruth noticed things.

She noticed the restlessness that took him after even short periods of settled quiet, a physical agitation that would send him pacing the perimeter of the main room or out onto the dock to stare at the water. She noticed how, when he thought he was unobserved, he would lift one of the worn flannel shirts from the growing pile in the nest room, Ilya's shirts left over from the previous summer, unmistakable in their size and scent, and press his face into the fabric, his

shoulders rising and falling with a deep, shuddering breath before he would fold it neatly back into place. She saw his fingers drift, time and again, to the spot just below his collarbone, rubbing absently as if soothing a phantom ache. She watched him stiffen whenever Ilya's name was mentioned in passing conversation, a full-body reaction followed by a too-casual change of subject. And she saw the frustrated, almost betrayed look that crossed his face when, during a lazy afternoon listening to a hockey podcast, the distinct rumble of Ilya's post-game interview voice through the speakers made Bean stir into a sudden, vigorous dance within him.

Walter, for his part, observed much of the same. He saw Shane pick it up, stare at the blank screen, put it down, only to snatch it up again minutes later. He heard the tight, dismissive "I don't care if he calls" uttered through slightly gritted teeth after the fifth such check in an hour. Neither Fischer commented. They just watched, and a quiet, shared concern began to solidify between them. They started to notice Shane's scent deepen as the days passed.

On the third morning, Ruth found Shane in the nest room, meticulously rearranging the same three blankets for the tenth time. She leaned in the doorway, a mug of tea cradled in her hands. "The pining easing up any, honey?" she asked, her tone deliberately light.

Shane glanced over, his brow furrowed. "I'm not pining."

Ruth stilled. She took a slow sip of tea, choosing her next words with care. "How's the bond feeling these days? In your chest, I mean."

"It's... complicated," Shane said, turning back to the blankets, his voice edged with finality.

"I meant physically, Shane. Not the feelings about it. The actual... sensation."

He paused, his hands stilling on the soft wool. He didn't turn around. "I don't know," he said, and the admission was small and confused.

Ruth moved into the room, sitting carefully on the wide window seat. She waited until Shane finally looked at her. "Do you know why you keep pulling his things in here?" she asked, nodding toward the small, folded stack of Ilya's clothes integrated into the bedding.

“Because it smells like him, I can’t help it. We never severed the bond.” Shane answered, defensiveness creeping into his tone, as if the answer were obvious and trivial.

Ruth held his gaze, letting the silence stretch until Shane’s defiant expression began to waver. “Your body wanting your alpha isn’t forgiving him for everything that went wrong, honey,” she said softly. “Instinct isn’t permission. It isn’t waving a magic wand where everything will be perfect. But pretending the instinct isn’t happening doesn’t make it disappear either.”

Shane stared at her, conflict warring in his eyes, the intellectual rejection of the very concept clashing with the raw, physical truth of the past few days. He looked away, out the window. “I always thought a lot of that stuff was exaggerated. Social pressure dressed up as biology.”

Ruth’s expression grew more serious, but not judgmental. “Who taught you how to be an omega, Shane?”

He bristled instantly, spine straightening. “I don’t need someone to *teach* me how to be an omega. I won’t submit to some baser animal instinct just because someone says I should.”

“Every omega does,” Ruth said, her voice still gentle but unwavering. “And every alpha does, too,” Walter added from the hallway, where he’d appeared, leaning against the frame with his quiet, solid presence.

“It’s not about teaching submission,” Ruth continued, seeing the protest forming on Shane’s lips. “It’s about recognizing what your own body and mind are telling you what it needs. An older omega teaches a younger one about heats, about nesting, about how scent works, about what pining feels like in your bones, about how a pregnancy can change your needs. About how to tell what your body is asking for, so you can decide what to give it. An older alpha,” she said, with a glance at Walter, “teaches a younger one about territorial feeling, about protective urges, about rut, about scent response. And most importantly, they teach that none of those feelings are an excuse for controlling or hurting someone else. The point is to understand what you really need, inside you, Shane. Not to let it steer the ship.”

Shane had no answer. He stood amidst the half-built nest, looking suddenly very young and very lost, his hands resting on the curve of Bean. The conversation lapsed, the questions

hanging in the sunlit air, unresolved.

Later that afternoon, exhaustion from the emotional weight and the sheer physical demand of late pregnancy finally pulled Shane under. He succumbed to a deep sleep curled in the center of the nest, his breathing evening out into slow, heavy rhythms. Ruth watched him for a long moment, then gestured silently to Yuna and David. Walter joined them, and the four adults slipped out onto the porch and down toward the lake path, leaving the cottage in quiet guard.

When they were a distance from the house, the lap of water against the shore the only sound, Ruth turned to Yuna. "I want to ask you something, and I need you to know I'm not asking to hurt you."

Yuna's posture became immediately guarded, but she nodded. "Ask."

"Who were Shane's godparents?"

Yuna blinked, thrown by the seemingly random question. "Michael and Susan Cho," she said, reciting names from a lifetime ago.

"How were they able to leave Shane without any guidance? That boy is just playing it all by ear from what we're seeing?"

"Betas. Both of them. We were close neighbors until they had to move to London for work. They call us and ask after Shane when they can." Yuna's confusion was clear.

Ruth and Walter exchanged a look, one of confirmation rather than surprise. Ruth pressed on, gently. "Did Shane have an omega godparent? An alpha one? An older omega relative, or a mentor, a coach, a family friend... anyone designated to help him understand his secondary sex?"

The answer was written plainly on Yuna's face before she even spoke. "No."

Ruth took a careful breath. “You raised an omega child without an omega.”

Yuna’s defensiveness ignited, swift and hot. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“It’s a custom,” Walter explained, his voice low and calm, cutting through the building tension. “When Beta parents have an Alpha or Omega child, it’s... strongly encouraged. You find secondary-sex mentors. For an omega kid, that usually means an experienced omega, maybe a trusted alpha too, so the child learns what healthy alpha behavior feels like from someone who isn’t a parent. It doesn’t replace you. It provides... lived knowledge. Things you can’t know firsthand.”

David looked genuinely startled. “No one ever told us that was expected.”

Walter met his gaze, his expression kind but grave. “Somebody should’ve.”

“We did everything we could,” Yuna insisted, her voice tight. “We had the best doctors, specialists, we read every book, we went to seminars. We educated ourselves.”

“I believe you,” Ruth said, and she meant it. “But I also heard that when Shane presented, everyone around you immediately started talking about his future differently, didn’t they? Asking if he’d still play hockey. Talking about mates and marriage before asking what he wanted.”

Yuna’s anger softened into a weary, remembered frustration. “Yes. before we knew that he wanted to play professionally and he was good enough so we did what we could to make that happen. Then, overnight, it was all anyone saw. We made a decision. We weren’t going to let being an omega become the most important thing about him.”

“It isn’t,” Ruth agreed. “But it is still one of the things about him. Being a hockey player isn’t everything about him.”

The silence that followed was profound, filled only by the wind in the pines and the distant cry of a loon. Yuna stared at Ruth, the simple truth of the statement dismantling her defenses layer by layer.

“You taught him that being an omega wouldn’t decide his life,” Ruth continued, her voice soft. “You were right. You gave him the confidence to walk into rooms that wanted him smaller. You taught him he didn’t owe anyone submission.” She paused, choosing her next words with immense care. “But somewhere along the way, I think he learned that acknowledging what being an omega does to his body- the needs, the instincts, meant surrendering to it. So he denies the need until it becomes a crisis. You taught him he didn’t owe anyone submission. But nobody taught him that *needing* his alpha sometimes doesn’t make him submissive.”

Yuna flinched as if struck. “He is one of the strongest, most independent people I know,” she said, her voice quavering with maternal defiance.

“I’m not asking you to apologize for that,” Ruth said, holding her ground with a calm that was its own form of strength. “I’m trying to explain what I see.”

Walter stepped in, his tone pragmatic. “Let’s be clear. Ilya scared him. Ilya hurt him. Shane needed somewhere safe, and we were glad to give it to him.”

“Yes,” Yuna agreed, sharp and sure.

“But *safe* isn’t the same thing as pretending he didn’t have a mate, or not understanding what exactly that means.” Walter said, folding his arms over his chest. “For five months, that boy suffered. He slept with Ilya’s shirts. He talked Russian to the baby. He’d get quiet and faraway whenever thinking about him. That kid spent half the winter telling us he didn’t need that man while arranging his whole damn life around missing him.”

“If an alpha hurts his omega, the omega gets away,” Ruth stated, her voice leaving no room for ambiguity. “Bond or no bond. Pregnancy or no pregnancy. But Shane should have known that leaving a bonded alpha while carrying his child might have physical consequences, and a lot their problems from what we heard was because a lot of the mess, from what we saw, came from Shane not understanding what his body was doing or understanding that instinct could be separated from choice.”

The perspective shifted, tilting the conversation away from blame and toward a tragic, shared lack. Yuna's anger drained away, replaced by a dawning, horrified comprehension. "Ilya probably didn't have anyone either," she said quietly.

Walter's mouth tightened. "From what Shane told us about his father? I'd guess whatever that boy learned about being an alpha was worse than nothing."

"Are you saying we failed him?" Yuna asked, the question raw and stripped bare.

Ruth did not offer immediate reassurance. "I'm saying there was something he needed that you didn't know he needed."

Yuna let out a bitter, shaky breath. "That's a polite way of saying yes."

"Then yes," Ruth said, and let the word hang, honest and unforgiving.

Then she softened, reaching out to touch Yuna's arm. "But you did a thousand things right. You raised him to believe he could be an omega and still be an elite athlete, ambitious, difficult, brilliant, and entirely himself. You protected his choices in a world that wanted to make those choices for him. You just... you didn't give him the language to understand his own nature without being afraid of it."

David, who had been listening with a pained, thoughtful intensity, was the first to move past defensiveness. "What should we have taught him?" he asked, his voice earnest.

The shift was palpable. Ruth nodded, gathering her thoughts. "How late pregnancy intensifies the need to nest and seek your mate. How an omega's scent can change under separation stress. How pining isn't just sadness, it's a physical discomfort that can steal sleep and appetite and peace. How you can crave an alpha's scent or presence without wanting sex, or forgiveness, or to hand them control. How to tell the difference between a panic attack and bond distress."

Yuna listened, stunned. She saw, with heartbreaking clarity, that Shane had never possessed this vocabulary. He'd had only two categories: defiant independence or helpless surrender.

"Is it too late?" Yuna asked, her voice much smaller now.

"For what?" Ruth replied.

"To teach him."

A faint, kind smile touched Ruth's lips. "He's an adult, Yuna. Not dead."

"Stubborn enough to make it a project, though," Walter muttered, and the weak, shared laughter that followed was a release of tension.

"You don't teach him," Ruth said, her gaze steady on Yuna. "Not alone."

Understanding dawned. "You?"

Ruth shrugged. "If he wants me."

"And I know some older alphas," Walter added quietly. "Good men. Steady. They could speak to Ilya someday, if he's ever willing to listen."

The suggestion hung in the air, not a solution, but a possibility. It was at least worth a discussion. As they turned and walked back toward the cottage, the late afternoon sun gilded the windows. Through the glass of the nest room, they could see Shane still asleep. Yuna stopped, looking in.

Shane lay nestled amidst his own favorite blankets, pillows from his old bed, the tiny frog-patterned socks and knitted caps for Bean. There was the quilt Ruth had brought from Willow Creek, its pattern familiar and comforting. Beside him lay the Swiss Army knife Walter had given him for “practical things.” Tucked near his shoulder was a sweater Yuna had bought him last winter. And woven throughout, integrated seamlessly, were several pieces of Ilya’s clothing, a soft gray henley, a faded Centaurs hoodie, their fabric dark against the lighter linens.

Yuna’s breath caught. “He built a nest,” she whispered, the words filled with a complex awe.

Ruth stepped beside her, following her gaze. “No,” she corrected softly. “Look.”

Yuna looked again, and this time she saw it. It wasn't like a usual nest they’ve read about, this was built from every source of home he had ever known. It contained his childhood, his refuge, his parents, his chosen family, and his mate. All of it, together.

“That doesn’t mean he wants Ilya back,” Yuna said, the automatic protection rising once more.

Ruth smiled, a sad, knowing curve of her lips. She placed a gentle hand on Yuna’s shoulder. “Now you’re getting it.”

Shane woke slowly, swimming up through layers of dense, dreamless sleep. He was warm. The early morning sunlight fell in wide, gentle bars across the cottage floor, gilding the dust motes that danced in the air. Bean was a heavy, familiar weight tucked high under his ribs, a solid anchor in the sea of soft blankets. For several long, blissful seconds, there was no thought, only sensation: the ache in his hips from the pregnancy, the quiet of the lake outside, the profound peace of having slept through the night without once jerking awake into panicked awareness.

Then his brain caught up.

His face was buried in something soft and faintly abrasive. He knew the texture before he opened his eyes. He knew the scent that filled his nostrils, clean cotton, expensive detergent, and underneath it all, the fading, unmistakable signature of Ilya's skin: leather, cold air, something metallic and clean.

He froze. He opened his eyes. The world resolved into the faded red and black of an old Ottawa Centaurs playoff hoodie, the fabric worn thin at the cuffs. Ilya's hoodie. He had pulled it from the nest pile sometime in the deep of the night and wrapped it around himself like a child with a security blanket, clutching it to his chest.

He stared at it, betrayal and confusion warring in his sleep-fogged mind. *You*, he thought at the garment, as if it had crept into his arms of its own volition.

Bean delivered a slow, stretching roll, a contented sigh in physical form.

"Don't," Shane muttered to his stomach, his voice rough with sleep.

Another kick, more insistent.

"I know whose hoodie it is. I'm not an idiot."

He considered, very seriously, hurling the offending item across the room. He imagined it hitting the wall with a satisfying thump. Instead, with a sense of resignation, he pressed his nose into the collar one last time, inhaling deeply, before shoving it away from him and struggling to sit up. The peace of the morning was ruined and he was annoyed about it.

Ruth found him later in the kitchen, morosely stirring a bowl of oatmeal he had no intention of eating. She placed a mug of herbal tea beside him and leaned against the counter.

“Sleep better?” she asked, her tone light and devoid of any pointed meaning.

Shane’s defenses snapped up instantly. “Maybe.”

“Better than the night before?”

“Yes.”

She nodded, sipping her own tea. That was all. No knowing look, no smug nod of wisdom. Just an observation.

Shane watched her, waiting for the other shoe to drop. It didn’t. The silence stretched, becoming more irritating than any lecture. “You’re doing that thing,” he finally accused.

“What thing?”

“Where you have something important to say but don't want to come off as bossy and want me to figure it out myself first.”

A small, genuine smile touched Ruth’s lips. “You hate when people tell you what to think.”

“Correct.”

“So I’m trying something new. Waiting for you to tell yourself what you think.”

Shane glared at her over his uneaten oatmeal. He hated that even more.

After a moment, Ruth set her mug down. Her expression softened, but remained open, curious rather than instructive. “Do you think sleeping better because his scent was in your nest means you forgave him?”

The answer was immediate, automatic. “No.”

“Does it mean you have to call him?”

“I don’t want to right now.”

“Does it mean he gets to come back?”

“No.”

“Does it mean you’re ready to trust him?”

Shane hesitated, the intellectual part of his mind racing ahead of his heart. “No,” he said, quieter but no less firm.

Ruth nodded again. “Good. Then we’ve established several things it doesn’t mean.” She tilted her head. “What does it mean?”

He hated the question. “I don’t know. I know I haven’t forgiven him yet, but I miss him. I know we have a lot to talk about.”

Ruth gave him a look so dry it could have kindled fire. “Smart answer, honey.”

He rolled his eyes, a petulant teenager in a twenty-four-year-old athlete’s body. He looked away, out the window where the lake shimmered. The truth was there, humiliating and basic.

He forced it out. “I miss his scent.”

“There you go.”

Three words. Quiet, accepting. They landed with far more weight than he’d expected. They didn’t feel like a surrender. They felt like... naming a thing. A thing that existed separately from the anger, the fear, the shattered trust. *I miss his scent.*

Ruth didn’t let him wallow in it. “Do you miss *him*?” she asked.

Shane’s instinct was to deflect, to complicate. “That’s... more...”

“Most true things are,” she said, not unkindly.

He swallowed. Looked down at his hands. “Yes.”

“Are you still angry?”

“Yes.”

“Are you still afraid of him sometimes?”

The silence this time was longer, filled with the memory of cold eyes, a hand on his throat, the terror of being a possession. “Yes,” he whispered.

“Do you love him?”

He looked up, irritation flashing. “You know I do. More than anything.”

“I do,” Ruth agreed calmly. “I’m asking whether *you* know you can say it without it cancelling out all the other answers.”

He stared at her. The concept was so foreign it took a moment to parse. Love existing in the same space as fear. Anger coexisting with longing. They weren’t sequential; they were concurrent, layered like strata in rock.

“Try it,” Ruth suggested gently. “One at a time. Out loud.”

It felt stupid. He felt stupid. But he did it, his voice low and grudging. “I miss him.” Pause. “I’m still angry.” Deeper breath. “I love him.” The admission made his throat tight. “I don’t trust him yet.” And then, the most confusing one, pulled from some raw, vulnerable place he rarely acknowledged: “Sometimes I want him touching me.” He closed his eyes. “Sometimes I don’t.”

Ruth didn’t reach out to pat his hand. She simply let the words hang in the sunlit kitchen. “None of those sentences erase the others,” she said finally.

Shane let out a shaky breath that was almost a laugh. “That seems inefficient.”

“People usually are.”

Later, as they tidied the kitchen, Ruth spoke again, her tone practical now. “If you ever talk to him again, you get to say exactly what you need. Not what you think you should need. Not what he thinks you need.” She gave examples, not as commandments but as possibilities. “You could say, ‘I need your scent, but I don’t want you touching me.’ Or, ‘I want you beside me, but I don’t want you fixing anything.’ Or even, ‘I need your hand on my stomach. That doesn’t mean I want sex.’” She met his gaze. “I want you here. I’m still angry with you.”

Shane frowned, turning a spoon over and over in his hands. “That sounds contradictory.”

“Only if you think needing someone gives them ownership of the need,” Ruth said, and the words struck a chord so deep it vibrated in his bones.

He thought of Ilya, how a single request for comfort had so often been taken as a blanket invitation to take over, to decide, to possess. And then, with a lurch of uncomfortable self-awareness, he realized he had rarely, if ever, given Ilya the actual, specific request. He had expected him to *know*, to intuit the precise boundaries of the need, and had then raged when Ilya inevitably overstepped, inferring permission where none was given. It wasn’t an excuse for Ilya’s actions, the fear was real, the control was unacceptable, but it was a flaw in their that when Shane didn’t have it, he craved some of Ilya’s control over him. He did miss some aspects of it oddly enough.

After Ruth left him alone, Shane picked up his phone from the counter. The screen was dark, inert. He unlocked it, thumb hovering over the messages app. The silence from Ilya had stretched for days now. At first, he’d told himself it was respect, the space he’d demanded finally given. Then it became a quiet irritant, a pebble in his shoe. Now, after Ruth’s questions, it posed a new, more frightening query: *What do I actually want?*

Not what would prove his strength. Not what would demonstrate his capacity for forgiveness. Not what was expected, or safe, or morally correct. What did he, Shane Hollander, seven months pregnant, angry, scared, and lying awake clutching his alpha’s hoodie, actually want?

His thumb moved, pulling up Ilya’s contact. He thought of the journal, buried in Ilya’s duffel bag. Five months of his life, of Bean’s life. Every ultrasound, every silly note, every craving, every moment of missing him. The crossed-out line he’d never meant for anyone to see: *I wish you were here*. He had drawn the distinction himself, in his own hand.

And Ilya, who had spent a lifetime ignoring nuance, might have finally read it and taken it literally.

Yuna found him like that, staring at the phone as if it might bite him. She didn’t ask. She simply poured herself a cup of coffee and sat beside him at the table, the companionable silence of two people who shared the same complicated heartache.

“Did you want him to call?”

Shane looked down at the dark screen of his phone. The wanting was a physical ache, a pull in his chest separate from the bond, separate from the pregnancy, separate from everything but his own lonely heart. He whispered the word, barely audible. “Yes.”

Yuna didn’t tell him to call. She asked, gently, “Why do you think he hasn’t?”

Shane cycled through the dark possibilities that had haunted him for days: Ilya was disgusted by the sentimentality. He saw it as a weakness. He thought it was a trick, a manipulation. He never even opened it.

Then he remembered his own handwriting on the page. The clarification. The boundary he himself had drawn. *Missing you is not the same as wanting you to come back.*

The realization was a sucker punch to the gut, leaving him furious and devastated and, somewhere beneath it all, unbearably proud. “Oh, fuck him,” he breathed.

Yuna blinked. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“That didn’t sound like nothing.”

“He’s doing exactly what I asked,” Shane said, the words tasting like ash and something strangely like hope.

“And you hate it.”

“Yes.” He picked up the phone again. This was a choice. No one was telling him to. The bond wasn’t screaming. Bean wasn’t in distress. There was no crisis, no external pressure. It was just him, in a quiet cottage kitchen, deciding.

He opened Ilya’s contact. His thumbs hovered over the keyboard. He typed: Did you find it?

He stared at the three words. They were neutral. They gave nothing away. He hit send before he could think better of it.

Immediate regret. He flipped the phone face-down on the table, as if hiding the evidence. His heart hammered against his ribs. He counted to five, then snatched it back up.

No answer.

Ten seconds. Twenty.

The phone vibrated in his hand.

IGR- Da.

That was it. One word. Affirmative. No elaboration, no emotion, no opening.

Shane’s irritation flared, hot and familiar. His fingers flew over the screen.

Shane- And?

A pause. Longer this time.

IGR- I read it. All of it.

Shane's breath caught. He typed, deleted, typed again.

Shane- All of it?

The wait felt interminable. Then:

IGR- Three times.

Something cracked open in Shane's chest, sharp and sweet. He pressed a hand over his sternum, as if he could hold the feeling in. He typed several responses, erasing each one. Finally, he sent the raw, unvarnished truth.

Shane- You didn't call.

The typing indicator appeared. Disappeared. Reappeared. The struggle was visible, even through text.

IGR- You wrote that missing me was not the same thing as wanting to come back.

Shane stared at the screen, his vision blurring.

Another message came through.

IGR- I did not want to make it mean something you had not said. I need to work on myself before coming back to you. I cannot risk hurting you again.

The tears came then, hot and silent, tracking down his face. He didn't try to stop them. The man who had turned every instinct into a justification for control, who had seen a plea for space as a challenge to be overcome, had finally taken Shane's words at their exact, literal value. He had respected the distinction. It was the most heartbreakingly considerate thing Ilya had ever done, and it was wildly, terribly inconvenient.

Bean kicked, a hard, sudden movement. Shane pressed his palm over the spot, his voice thick. "Your papa is an asshole." Another kick, a rolling protest. "I know you like him. Shut up."

He wiped his eyes with the heel of his hand, sniffed hard, and picked up the phone. His thumbs were steady now. He typed the sentence, the first clear, direct statement of need he had ever voluntarily sent to Ilya Rozanov.

Shane- I wanted you to call.

The response came quicker this time, but careful, measured.

IGR- Do you want me to now?

Shane stared at the question. It was everything. It was the opposite of assumption, of takeover, of alpha decree. It was a simple, terrifying offer of choice. *Do you want me to?*

His throat was too tight to speak, even to himself. He typed the only possible answer.

Yes.

The phone rang ten seconds later, Ilya's name flashing on the screen. Shane took a deep, shuddering breath, his thumb hovering over the accept icon. For a second, he was terrified. Then he was just ready. He slid his thumb across the screen and brought the phone to his ear.

“Hello,” he said, his voice rough but clear in the quiet kitchen.

Chapter End Notes

Well... that was a lot. 😂❤️

The good news is, I think our idiots are finally starting to learn that loving someone and knowing how to love them are two very different things.

Next chapter, we might try something terrifying: communication.

Like actual communication. With words. On purpose. 😬

Surely that will go well.

Right?

...Right? 🙄❤️

See you next chapter, my loves. Bring tissues. And maybe a drink. 🍷

Chapter 48: Chapter 48

Chapter Summary

Hi y'all 

First, I'm sorry this chapter took me so long to get out, but I really wanted to take my time with it because this is honestly one of my favorite chapters I've written so far. After everything these two have put us through, getting them to this point felt incredibly important to me.

Second, thank you Lisa, Anna & Tony, I adore you all madly.

Thank you so, so much to everyone who has stuck with this story, commented, left kudos, all the things... I appreciate you more than you know. 

And guys... we are getting really close to the end.  I'm not emotionally prepared for that! But super excited too.

For now, enjoy this one. I really, really loved writing it. 

Chapter Notes

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

The silence on the line was a thick with every unsaid word that had piled up between them since before their separation. This was probably a conversation that should have happened years ago, before the tensions of the world seeped into their own stolen moments that they managed to carve out or even when things seemed fine. Shane could hear the faint, rhythmic sound of Ilya's breathing, steady and controlled in a way that felt deliberate, as if he were holding himself very still against a tide of emotion. "Hello." He said quietly, flinching at how weak and pathetic he sounded.

"Shane," Ilya said finally, and just the sound of his voice, stripped of its usual arrogant certainty, low and rough with feeling, made Shane's eyes burn anew.

"Yeah," Shane managed, his own voice barely a whisper.

Another pause. Ilya broke it, his words careful, each one placed like a step onto thin ice. “I saw the book you put in my bag. Thank you. I didn’t think you’d do that.” He let out a shaky breath. “I hate myself for making you feel forced to leave like that. I made you be alone, away from your family and friends.”

“I wasn’t alone,” Shane said, the correction automatic. “Ruth and Walter were there. I had the whole town with me too after a while.”

“That is not what I mean,” Ilya said, and the pain in his voice was naked. “I mean I was not there. I should have been the one taking care of you. I should have been the one driving you to the appointments, holding your hand.” His voice cracked on the last word. “I missed it. All of it. Because I am the reason you had to hide.”

Shane leaned his forehead against the cool glass of the window, his free hand pressed flat against his stomach where Bean was quiet, as if listening too. “I don’t think I was going to stay away forever, Ilya. I just- I don’t know. I felt like I wasn’t in control of anything in my life. I was giving up my career, everything that I worked so hard for was now handed over to you and I didn’t know about it.”

“I understand that now. I shouldn’t have assumed that you had the same education we have in Russia. And I never took anything from you, Shane. Please believe me. I should have explained it better, but it’s my fault. I just felt this need to take care of you,” Ilya echoed. Then, quieter. “It kills me that you thought you’d have to sneak money out. That you were worried about it when you left.” A wet, broken sound that was almost a laugh came through the line. “Everything I have is yours, Shane. You should have known that.”

“It wasn’t ever about money, Ilya. I don’t care about that. We could have been broke and struggling and if you would’ve just told me first, I would have felt better,” Shane whispered.

“I did not know,” Ilya insisted, his voice fierce with self-recrimination. “I have never known so much with you, Shane. I have only assumed. I assumed my love gave me rights. I assumed my fear justified control. I saw your independence as a door I needed to break down, not a thing to cherish. I was... I am... a jealous, possessive man. The medication Galina gave me, it turned the instinct up on that, yes. But it was also there before. I had time to think back and I’ve not cherished you as I should have. I just hope that you can let me show you how sorry I am. I hurt you before and I would do anything for another chance..”

Shane closed his eyes, tears tracking silently down his cheeks. This was the confession he'd needed, the one that didn't hide behind excuses but laid the ugly truth bare. "You scared me," he admitted, the words dragged from a deep, shameful place from deep within his soul. "After everything with Kent, after the fire... I needed to feel safe again. And instead, I felt owned. Tracked. Managed. Every time you looked at me, it was like you were seeing a thing you needed to secure, not a person you loved. I felt myself disappearing into what you needed me to be. So I ran. I ran because it was the only way I could remember who I was."

"I know," Ilya said, and the acceptance in his voice was devastating. "I took your choices away because I was terrified of my own unworthiness. If I could control you, I could believe you would stay. It is the logic of a coward, it's what I grew up with and I see that now."

The humility was disarming. It left Shane nowhere to hide and if Ilya was being so open and honest with him, he had to do the same. "It wasn't all you," he forced out, the admission terrifying. "I... I let you. In the beginning, after you rescued me, after Vegas and everything, it felt... safe to let someone else be in charge. And throughout everything, even the worse parts, I still felt safe with you, at least physically. I've been talking with Ruth the past few days." Shane stopped to try to find how to express himself in a way that Ilya would understand when he could barely understand it himself. "To just... obey. It was easier than letting my thoughts run in circles. And then when it stopped feeling safe, I didn't know how to take the control back. I just knew I had to get it back, no matter the cost. So I left. I didn't just leave you, Ilya. I left us. I tore our life apart because I didn't know how to fix it from the inside. Ruth said I gave mixed signals. I liked some of the, um, parts when you took control. I liked knowing that you protect me, but at the same time I felt that I should be able to do it myself."

The line hummed with shared grief, a silent acknowledgment of mutual destruction. Then Ilya spoke, his voice so soft it was almost carried away by the static. "Years ago, you were talking in your sleep. You asked me if I would have loved you if you were a beta. I think we can make something similar happen. If we remove the bond, I can take out my scent glands. Its not ideal, but I'd do it for you, Shane." Shane sucked in a shocked breath.

"Becasue the answer is yes," Ilya said firmly. "I loved your stubbornness before I knew your scent. I loved your laugh before I felt the bond. I loved the way you challenged me, infuriated me, saw through every mask I wore, long before I ever touched you. I love you for everything you are. I love that you're the better athlete, that you're strong and confident when you need to be but then when its the two of us, you could be soft. You call me out on my shit all the time and I need that. The omega... that was a part of you, a beautiful, miraculous part thats giving us Bean. But it was never the reason. The reason was always just... you. I think I

have loved you since you came up to me, all shy and beautiful, with your hand out. I loved you when you were my rival. I love you now, when I am the man you have the most reason to hate.”

A sob ripped from Shane’s throat, unbidden, a release of a pressure he’d carried for years. He cried openly, unable to stifle the sounds, his shoulders shaking. On the other end, he could hear Ilya’s ragged breathing, could picture him in some sterile hotel room, his own face wet with tears, holding the phone like a lifeline.

“I don’t hate you,” Shane choked out when he could speak again. “I was so angry at you. I’m afraid of what you became. But Ilya... I have loved you too for so long. I fell in love with the man, and I am... I am so lost without you, but I don’t know what I’m doing sometimes.” It was the truest thing he’d ever said.

“I am lost without you, too,” Ilya confessed. “There’s no point to my life without you. But, Shane... I do not want to find myself by losing you again. I do not want to be the man you come back to out of guilt, or the bond, or because of Bean. I want to be the man you choose. Every day. Even on the days you are angry. Even on the days I am difficult. I want to earn it. Slowly. However long it takes.”

The proposal was terrifying. It wasn’t a demand for reunion. It required a faith Shane wasn’t sure he possessed. “I’m still scared,” Shane whispered.

“I am terrified,” Ilya admitted. “Of myself. Of my anger. Of hurting you again. But I am more terrified of a life where I do not try to become someone who deserves you.”

Shane looked around the nest room, at the evidence of his own conflicted heart woven into the blankets. He thought of Ruth’s words. Instinct is not permission to let someone do whatever they want. Needing someone doesn’t give them ownership of the need.

“I need to see you,” Shane said, the decision crystallizing as he spoke. “Not... not to come home. Not yet. But I need... I need to be in the same room. I need to know if I can look at you and not just see the man who frightened me. I need to know if I can see my best friend again.”

On the other end, Ilya was silent for so long Shane thought the call had dropped. Then, a hushed, reverent, “Okay.”

“And you can’t... you can’t assume. I’m still- I need to know when you’re about to touch me. Every time. I mean for now, because-”

“I will ask,” Ilya vowed, the weight of the promise settling into his voice. “I will ask until you are sick of hearing it, until you are not scared of me.”

A weak, watery laugh escaped Shane. “It might be for a long time.”

“Good.” Ilya’s own smile was audible. Then his tone softened again, vulnerable. “Shane?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you. For the journal. For giving me back the months I stole from us. For... for calling. For giving me a chance to hear your voice say these things, even if they break my heart.”

Shane swallowed against the tightness in his throat. “You read the last entry? The one about the dream?”

“Of the cottage dock. The sun. My hand tracing your palm.” Ilya’s voice was thick. “You wrote that you missed your best friend.”

“I did,” Shane said, the truth simple and enormous. “I do. I want to find him again. I want us to find each other.”

Through the window, Shane watched a lone loon dive on the lake, disappearing beneath the dark water. He waited, holding his breath. The line crackled softly.

“He is here,” Ilya said, his voice raw with a hope so fragile it hurt to hear. “I am here. And I will wait. However long you need. I will show you that you can trust me again.”

Shane nodded, though Ilya couldn't see it. He pressed his hand harder against Bean, against the future they had made, against the terrifying, beautiful possibility of a second chance they were trying to work out, to love each other better.

“Okay,” Shane whispered, the word like a new beginning. “Okay.”

He didn't hang up. Neither did Ilya. They just stayed there, listening to the sound of each other breathing across the distance. Ilya cleared his throat finally, “Um, Troy offered me to stay with him and Harris for a few days. He is a good friend and if you'd like to come over, he can make sure everything is calm.”

“Okay.”

They hung up the call a few minutes later, with Ilya letting Shane know that he'd text Troy's address, but there was no pressure to visit him. That they could communicate over the phone until Shane was comfortable enough to see him. It wasn't like their more recent conversations, this really felt like they were moving forward towards the same goal after so long.

After their call, Shane sat in the nest, his phone warm in his hand, the address beckoning him. No other message before or after, strictly putting the decision in Shane's control. They had had an honest conversation. From what Shane thought, they were doing this and making an effort for themselves, not just for the baby's sake. The admission felt like stepping off a cliff, but still solid and hopeful.

He rolled himself up slowly, his body heavy and a little unbalanced, but he was suddenly determined. He quickly got dressed in the first pair of pants that he found that still fit him and worn in hoodie, compliments of their shared closet. Vaguely he knew that his mother might comment on the random graphic on the shirt but he didn't care- it smelled of Ilya and it was too warm and comfortable to go and change into something of his. He made his way downstairs and into the living room, finding his dad typing away on his laptop and Walter carving something into a block of wood. He scrunched his face at the thought of the wood shavings getting on the floor but turned around and continued to search for his target. He found Ruth and his mother in the sunroom with her sewing box and different shades of green and yellow fabric all around her. Yuna was rapidly texting on her phone and they both looked up and offered him smiles.

Ruth moved things aside for him and motioned for him to sit next to her. Unconsciously, he nuzzled her neck before he could stop himself, earning a quick little head butt from the old woman. He used to do that to his mother but stopped when he got to high school. That behaviour was too much of his omega leaking out and he couldn't risk it before. Now it didn't matter who saw.

"I want to go see him." He announced, clutching the phone to his chest.

Yuna looked up surprised and motioned with her finger that she needed to do something on her screen and took a minute to put her phone down. Ruth set aside the blanket she was working on and gave him her full attention. Shane noticed though but offered no comment.

"Do you want us to take you? He let us know a few days ago where he was staying." Yuna said, trying to ignore how close her son was to someone other than her. It hurt, deeply, but Ruth and Walter had begun to explain things better to both David and herself, it would be something that they'd need to work on moving forward.

Before Shane could answer, Ruth spoke up. "What do you want to do? Do you want someone there with you?"

Shane hesitated. He loved his parents, he really did. They were his foundation. But they were also betas, over the past week while on his walks with Ruth and Walter, and his own research, there was a very large gap in his education while growing up. It wasn't their fault though, and Shane would never want them to feel as if they weren't the best parents to him. Yuna had fought his battles, David had absorbed his rage, had been the steady and calming presence

he'd needed. They would love him through anything, but their presence would inevitably become a buffer, a translation layer between him and Ilya. He needed someone who would really understand them both. His eyes settled on Ruth.

"Will you come with me?"

Ruth looked genuinely surprised. "You sure?"

"Yeah." Then, because he was Shane and didn't want to seem too soft, he added, "Also, you're probably the only person I know who won't let either one of us get away with any bullshit."

"Of course honey," Ruth said, her eyes were focused on Shane, softening. She nodded once. "We can go wherever you're ready."

Yuna's expression flickered, surprise, a flash of maternal hurt, then understanding. She crossed the room and hugged him, her grip tight. "You don't owe him anything because you had that conversation," she whispered into his hair.

"I know, Mom."

"You can change your mind halfway there."

"I know, but that won't fix anything and we're getting too close to the baby being here." He said with a kind smile, looking down and giving his belly a little run, getting a swift kick back in response.

"You can walk into that hotel and walk right back out."

"Mom... it'll be fine. And he's not in the hotel anymore. He went to stay with Troy Barrett."

She pulled back, cupping his face. "I'm practicing."

The drive to Ottawa had to be paused a few times since Bean had to show his or her excitement by sitting right on Shane's bladder. Shane sat in the back passenger seat so he could stretch out better, his hand absently rubbing the ache around their mating bite. Bean was restless, a constant, rolling activity that felt like a physical manifestation of his own anxiety. He checked his phone for the tenth time, though Ilya had no idea they were coming.

Ruth let him have his peace for the first part of the drive. After twenty minutes of silence, she spoke. "Does he know you're coming?"

"No."

She glanced at him, then back at the road, saying nothing.

"What?" Shane asked.

"Nothing, honey."

"What are you thinking? Should I have told him?"

"It's very good that you two spoke. That's a positive step, in my opinion," she said, her tone mild. "Just, when you two are talking now, get it all out of the way. Be honest with him and yourself. I only saw that boy once, but he seemed lost and angry. And it's not just about you, but I'm with you, 100% behind you and supporting you, but I will not cover mistakes. You boys need to have a frank conversation before that baby gets here."

Shane stared at her profile. "You're right. And I thi- I hope that's what seeing him will be like today."

“Good. Now take a nap, we should be there in about half hour.”

With a grumble, he picked up his phone.

Shane- Are you at Troy’s?

The reply was almost immediate.

IGR- Da. Then, a few seconds later.

IGR- Is something wrong? Are you ok?

Shane rolled his eyes.

Shane- Yes.

He took a breath, his thumbs hovering.

Shane- I want to come see you. Is that okay? We’re on the way.

The typing bubble appeared. Disappeared. Appeared again. Shane’s heart hammered against his ribs.

IGR- Yes! Of course.

IGR- Very much yes.

IGR- But only if you want.

He showed the screen to Ruth. She nodded. “Better.”

Shane- Ok. See you soon.

Troy Barrett's house was nice, a large modernized colonial house set in what seemed like a family friendly neighborhood. The driver opened the door to the SUV and helped them both down and he caught Ilya pacing back and forth in front of a window. He walked up to the front door slowly and rang the bell once.

There was a pause. Then the door opened.

Ilya stood there, and Shane's breath caught.

He looked... ravaged. Not his purposefully unkempt, but genuinely undone. Days of stubble shadowed his jaw. His eyes were swollen, the skin beneath them bruised with exhaustion. He wore simple gray sweatpants and a faded t-shirt that hung a bit loosely on his frame. But it was his stillness that struck Shane most. Every line of his body was taut with a restraint that looked physically painful. His eyes drank Shane in, his face, the swell of Bean, the bond mark on his throat, and Shane could see the violent, instinctual urge to reach out warring with a conscious, desperate hold-back. His hands flexed once at his sides, then went still.

"Hi," Ilya said, the word rough.

Shane's throat closed. "Hi."

Then Ilya's gaze shifted to Ruth, standing a respectful step behind Shane. Recognition dawned, followed by a deep, wary humility. "Mrs. Fischer."

"Ruth," she corrected, her eyes scanning him with a clinical, maternal thoroughness.

"Ruth," Ilya amended, nodding once.

She studied him for another moment. "You look like hell."

A faint, weary ghost of a smile touched Ilya's mouth. "Thank you."

Shane snorted. The tension in the doorway splintered, just a little.

Ruth's expression didn't soften, but it became more assessing than judgmental. Ilya swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing. "Thank you," he said again, the meaning layered and heavy.

"You don't owe me thanks for taking care of someone who needed taking care of," Ruth replied, her voice matter-of-fact.

"Still. Thank you. You took care of my mate when I wasn't able to. I owe you a great debt."

She accepted that with a nod. Then Ilya's voice dropped, low and raw. "And I am sorry."

"For what?"

He didn't flinch from the question. "For frightening him. For coming to your home the way I did. For taking him away when he did not want to go."

Ruth held his gaze. "Good."

Ilya blinked. "Good?"

"An apology's worth more when a person actually knows what they're apologizing for." With that, she seemed to consider the preliminary exchange complete. She moved past him into the home, giving them space but not leaving.

Now it was just the two of them in the doorway, a few feet of plush carpet stretching between them like a canyon. They had said everything over the phone, the love, the fear, the apologies, the hope. But now Shane could smell him.

It hit him like a physical blow, a sensory memory so potent it bypassed his brain entirely. The familiar scent of leather, Ilya's skin, the faint, familiar spice of his shampoo. His body reacted before he could think: a rush of warmth, a loosening in his joints, a deep, cellular sigh of relief. Bean shifted, a slow, contented roll. His shoulders dropped an inch.

For half a second, panic flared, this overwhelming physical response had always felt like his autonomy being hijacked. Then Ruth's voice echoed in his mind. *You can control instincts a bit. Choice is what you do with it*

Across from him, Ilya inhaled sharply. He could smell Shane's reaction, could see the minute relaxation in his posture. His own eyes darkened, yearning and shame and hope swirling in their blue depths. But he didn't move. He waited.

"You can come closer," Shane whispered, the words barely audible.

Ilya took one careful step forward. Stopped.

Shane almost laughed, the sound choked with emotion. "Closer than that, asshole."

Another step. Then another. Until they were inches apart. Shane could feel the heat radiating from Ilya's body, could see the frantic pulse in his throat. Ilya's hands remained clenched at his sides, knuckles white.

Shane looked up at him. "I want you to hug me."

Ilya's face shattered. The careful control dissolved into something open and devastated. But still, he asked, his voice cracking, "Are you sure?"

“Yes.”

Shane was the one who closed the final distance. He stepped into Ilya’s space, wrapped his arms around his waist, and buried his face against his chest, right over the steady, pounding beat of his heart. For a terrifying second, Ilya remained rigid, his arms hovering. Then, with a broken sound, they came down around Shane, one high on his back, the other curving with exquisite care at the base of his spine and he curled himself over Shane.

The moment Ilya’s scent enveloped him completely, Shane started to cry. Quiet, shuddering sobs that he couldn’t contain. He fisted his hands in the back of Ilya’s shirt, holding on as if he might be swept away. Against him, Ilya trembled, his own tears falling silently into Shane’s hair. They stood locked together in the middle of the hallway, like two shipwrecked survivors who had finally washed up on the same shore.

“I fucking missed you,” Shane mumbled into his chest, the words damp and muffled.

Ilya’s arms tightened, just a fraction. “I missed you every second.”

Bean kicked, a solid thump right where Ilya’s hand now rested. Ilya froze, his breath catching. Shane didn’t pull away. He reached down, took Ilya’s wrist, and guided his palm to the exact spot. He didn’t feel trapped or that it was too close, this was his choice.

Another kick, stronger this time. A ragged sob tore from Ilya’s throat. “Privet, malenkiy,” he whispered, his voice thick. Hello, little one.

Shane closed his eyes, letting the warmth, the scent, the feel of Ilya’s large hand cradling their child, seep into his bones. For a few minutes, there was nothing else in the world.

“All right.”

Ruth's voice, firm but not unkind, cut through the cocoon they'd woven. Both men startled, turning their heads toward where she sat in an armchair, watching them with an expression that was both compassionate and uncompromising. Troy stood by her chair, setting down a glass of water in front of her on the coffee table. He took a seat near them, paying attention to Ilya's body language.

"Before the two of you decide crying on each other constitutes a complete relationship repair, sit down. You two are here to talk so get to it."

Shane made a noise of protest. "Ruth."

Ilya, however, was already pulling back, wiping his face with the heel of his hand. "She is right."

"Don't encourage her."

"Oh, I don't need encouragement, honey." Ruth said, a hint of dry humor in her tone. Ilya's mouth quirked, the first real hint of a smile Shane had seen since he arrived.

They sat on the sofa, a careful foot of space between them. Ruth observed them, her keen eyes missing nothing, the way Shane's body leaned infinitesimally toward Ilya, the way Ilya's hands were clasped tightly in his lap to keep from reaching out.

"Who taught you how to be an alpha?" Ruth asked Ilya, her tone conversational.

Ilya went utterly still. He looked from Ruth to Shane, confusion and a dawning wariness in his eyes.

"Oh, fuck," Shane muttered, recognition dawning.

"What?" Ilya asked.

“She did this to me too.”

Ruth ignored him, her focus entirely on Ilya. “Who taught you?”

The silence stretched. Ilya’s gaze turned inward, toward memories that were clearly not fond. When he finally spoke, his voice was flat. “My father. I had some schooling too but I was pulled to start hockey training early. They tested me out of the academic classes. Alpha/omega lessons weren’t really a big thing in Russia. Omega’s are taught to be obedient and it’s just,” Ilya paused, searching for the proper word. “Assumed, I think you say.”

“What did your father teach you?”

Another long pause. Ilya’s jaw worked. “That an alpha does not show weakness.” He swallowed. “That if something belongs to you, you protect it, show your ownership. No matter what.” Saying the words felt like that were dragged up like a stone. “That people leave if you give them the opportunity.”

Shane’s heart ached, hearing the bleak curriculum.

Ruth nodded slowly. “Anything about what you do when your instincts tell you to protect someone who doesn’t want protecting?”

Ilya looked genuinely perplexed. “No.”

“What about when your mate asks for space?”

Nothing.

“When territorial instinct becomes fear?”

Nothing again.

“When protection becomes control?”

Ilya’s eyes flicked to Shane, full of a pained remorse. “No,” he whispered.

Ruth let out a soft breath. “That’s what I thought.”

Ilya straightened, his spine stiffening as if bracing for a blow. “This does not excuse what I did.”

“Didn’t say it did.”

“I hurt him.”

“Yes.”

“I frightened him.”

“Yes.”

“I never meant to hurt him, things got out of hand.”

Ruth’s expression hardened, all traces of softness gone. “Out of hand? Easy as that?” She let the stark condemnation hang in the air. “And if you ever do that again, I’m not the only one who’s willing to help Shane disappear again. Being his Alpha doesn’t give you the right to

frighten him into doing what you think is best. You protect a mate by making sure he's safe enough to tell you no."

Ilya stared at her, stunned.

"Jesus Christ," Shane breathed.

"What?" Ruth said, her demeanor shifting back to pragmatic. "Apparently that's how your family communicates."

To everyone's surprise, least of all his own, Ilya let out a short, startled laugh. It was rusty and brief, but it was real.

Ruth's face softened again, but her words remained pointed. "Understanding why you do something doesn't make the thing acceptable, Ilya. It gives you a chance to recognize it before you do it again." She looked between them, her gaze encompassing both. "Well. This is worse than I thought."

Shane bristled. "Excuse me?"

She pointed a finger at Shane. "You were taught that being a good omega meant proving you didn't need anybody." Shane opened his mouth to protest, but she pointed at Ilya. "And you were taught that being a good alpha meant making damn sure nobody could leave." She let that sink in. "One of you hears instinct and thinks trap." She looked at Shane. "The other hears instinct and think 'Oh, I need to take full control of this'. And somehow in this mess the universe decided that the two of you were perfect for each other and should mate."

Ilya's lips twitched. "Universe is an asshole then."

"Oh, on that we can agree." Ruth answered back with a smirk. Then her voice softened into something more gentle but still watchful. "Neither one of you learned that instinct is just the

first step into what your body needs. It tells you something is happening inside you. It doesn't tell you what you're allowed or should do."

Shane watched as Ilya seemed to take in what Ruth was saying. He looked over at Troy who was watching the two of them with sharp eyes, but he still caught another scent in the house, but he couldn't see or hear another person nearby.

He couldn't remember if Troy Barrett had a mate. The house had warm touches throughout from the bit that he could see so there must be another omega somewhere in the house. Why were they hiding? Had Ilya asked for them to stay in another part of the house? He was stopped from his train of thought when Ruth continued speaking.

"Your body," Ruth directed to Shane, "can want his scent without giving him permission to touch you." She turned to Ilya. "And smelling that he wants you doesn't mean you get to decide what kind of wanting it is. Consent is too important to let gut reactions take over in a new relationship. And yes, I've heard that you two have been with each other for a long time, but it wasn't in a normal context." she then turned back to Shane. "You can need your alpha beside you and still be angry with him. And being needed doesn't make you in charge." Her focus intensified on Ilya. "Your instincts can scream that your mate is leaving. That doesn't mean you stop him." Finally, she softened and turned back to Shane. "And if you need to leave, you say it when you can. You don't make him guess whether you and his child are alive unless staying in contact would genuinely make you unsafe."

Shane nodded, no defensiveness left. "I know."

"Good." Ruth looked at them both, her gaze encompassing them as a unit for the first time. "You're allowed to need each other. Neither of you is allowed to turn that need into a weapon."

Ilya was staring at her, a complex mix of awe and vulnerability on his face. "Why you helping me?" he asked, the question earnest. "After what I did."

Ruth considered him, then looked at Shane. "Because he loves you." She turned back to Ilya. "And because from everything I've heard, you've got about as much idea how to be an alpha as he does how to be an omega."

“That’s insulting,” Shane grumbled.

“It’s supposed to be.” Then her voice softened, layered with a compassion that was directed at both of them. “And because somebody should’ve taught both of you this years ago, when you were children. But we can’t dwell on that now. We can only move forward.”

Ilya’s composure wavered. Shane could see it, the lifetime of handlers making anything he wanted accessible, coaches telling him how great he was, and institutions trying to manage and exploit him. Very few had ever offered simply to teach him. To curb the intensity.

“You would do this?” Ilya asked, his voice hushed.

“If you want me to. I mean, I think if you learn to lean more on friends and the family around you, it would help.”

Ilya’s eyes instinctively flicked toward Shane, seeking permission, as if looking for a cue.

Ruth caught it immediately. “Don’t look at him,” she said, not unkindly but firmly. “I’m asking you.”

The correction was vital. Ilya swallowed, his throat working. He met Ruth’s steady gaze. “Yes.”

“Yes what?”

“I would like you to help me. I can’t lose Shane. I’d die without him.”

Ruth gave a single, definitive nod. “Then we all will help.”

Shane watched, an unexpected lump forming in his throat. This wasn't Ruth forgiving Ilya on his behalf. This wasn't her choosing sides. This was her seeing a fundamental lack in both of them and deciding to fill it. It felt like a gift. This tiny little woman that always smelled like Christmas and sugar, had uprooted her life to help two strangers without a second thought.

As the afternoon light began to fade, Ruth's attention turned practical. She eyed Ilya critically.

"When did you last eat?"

"I ate."

"Young man, when did this one eat last?" She asked Troy, who blushed at the attention.

Ilya shifted, caught. Shane bit his lip to keep from smiling.

"Um, not since he got here this morning," Troy answered. "We tried to offer him breakfast, but he said no."

"Traitor. You betray your captain?" Ilya said with a frown.

"Well, she's scarier than you, Cap." Shane couldn't help it; a small laugh escaped. "Oh, you're fucked."

Ilya shot him a look. "Why?"

"She did this to me for five months. There is no escape."

Ruth stood up. "I'm ordering food."

"I can order food," Ilya said, almost petulant.

"I'm aware. And yet apparently nobody fed you today, because you wanted to be looking all sad." Ruth said, picking up some takeout menus.

Shane grinned, leaning back into the sofa. Ilya looked at him, a beleaguered expression on his face. "You brought another Yuna."

"Worse," Shane whispered.

From near the phone, Ruth called, "I can hear you."

Later, after a quiet meal where Ruth deftly steered the conversation toward neutral, grounding topics, the weather, Walter's garden back home, the upcoming hockey season, she and Harris managed the entire conversation. Shane was fascinated by Troy's mate. He was adorable- that was the only way to describe him. He smelled of apples and sunshine, wouldn't stop talking and was just bubbly. He was worried when while they sat down to eat, he grabbed a can of Coke and before he sat down, Troy swapped it out for a bottle of juice instead. Harris had frowned but said nothing.

Through out dinner, Shane noticed that Troy was always attentive towards Harris while they all still carried a conversation. He'd put more food on his plate, touched the back of his neck or arm frequently. It was very similar to what Ilya used to do. It was sweet.

Harris seemed fascinated with Shane and his pregnancy, asking him question after question and if Shane wasn't so charmed, he'd be overwhelmed.

Harris got up to clear the table and Shane offered to help since sitting down for that long made his back hurt sometimes. They took a few trips to the kitchen to get everything and

started loading the dishwasher while chatting. “You look so good! You’re all belly and it’s adorable. I’m surprised the news hasn’t leaked.” he said as they rinsed the dishes.

Shane blushed. “I feel huge.” He rubbed a spot that bulged with a kick.

“Can I?” Harris asked, drying his hands on the kitchen towel.

Shane nodded, coming closer and pointing to where Bean was moving. Harris gave a huge smile. “Wow. that’s amazing.” He whispered.

“Are you and Troy planning on babies soon? I mean after the team gets settled, I imagine that the longer contracts will start coming in.”

Harris gave a sad smile and looked away, the first time all evening that he was still and quiet. “I don’t think that’s in the cards for us. I have health problems and Troy shut the baby talks down.”

Shane was about to respond when Ruth walked in, asking if they were okay to leave since the drive was long. As she passed Ilya on her way to collect her coat, she paused. Her hand came up and rested briefly, lightly, on his cheek. It was a simple, maternal gesture, much like Yuna did sometimes.

Ilya went completely still, his breath catching. He didn’t pull away, but his eyes widened slightly, unsure how to process this casual, caring touch from someone who owed him nothing but had chosen to give him something priceless anyway. Shane saw it all, the shock, the wary acceptance, the faint, aching hope. He said nothing.

He exchanged numbers with Harris before leaving, saying his goodbyes to Troy as Ilya walked them out. At the door, Ruth turned. She looked directly at Shane. “Do you want me to stay?”

Not Ilya. Shane.

Shane looked at Ilya, who was watching him, his expression open, leaving the choice entirely in Shane's hands. He looked back at Ruth. "No. Just give us a minute?"

Then Ruth's eyes moved to Ilya. Not threateningly, but with clear expectation. "Behave, I'm right over by the car."

Ilya's answer was immediate, solemn. "Of course."

Ruth nodded, satisfied. That was enough. She made her way down the driveway and watched them as promised.

The silence sounded them for the first time in the evening. They were standing several feet apart again, the space between them charged with everything that had been said and everything that was still to come. Ilya stood with his hands in his pockets, waiting.

Shane took a deep breath. This was it. The first time he had chosen to be alone with Ilya since the separation. Not because circumstances forced them together, or because of a bond crisis, but because he wanted to be.

"Today was good."

Ilya didn't smile. He around for a few seconds. "Yeah. best night in a while. Troy is a good friend to me I think. I can talk to him like I cant talk to Marly or Sveta."

Ilya crossed space between them slowly, leaving a careful, respectful inch between them. He didn't touch. Shane waited, the anticipation a live wire under his skin. Then, deliberately, he leaned his weight sideways until his head came to rest against Ilya's shoulder. Ilya tensed, a full-body rigidity.

"Don't make it weird," Shane mumbled.

“I am trying, I’d do anything to make this ok between us.” Ilya whispered, the strain evident in his voice.

Shane reached over and took Ilya’s hand. He didn’t lace their fingers. He turned it over and placed it, palm down, on the hard curve of his stomach where Bean lay quiet. He covered Ilya’s hand with his own, holding it there.

Choice.

He felt Ilya shudder beside him, a silent release of breath. Then, slowly, Ilya’s head tilted until his temple rested against Shane’s hair. They stood like that as the last of the daylight bled from the sky, “I know you’re trying. I’m trying too.”

“Ya tebya lyublyu.” Ilya said, softly against his temple.

“Ya tozhe tebya lyublyu.” Shane said, the Russian was slow and careful, Shane concentrating so hard on the pronunciation that for a second, he worried that he’d said something completely unintelligible.

When Ilya heard, his whole body shuddered and he crushed Shane to him tightly. “I’ll fix this, Shane. I’ll do anything you ask.”

“Just give me time, let’s keep talking. I want us to get back to a good space. We need to figure out what that’ll look like.”

Ilya nodded, he saw Ruth coming closer out of the corner of his eye and slowly stepped away from Shane. “Do you have anything you need? Are you feeling ok?”

“Yea, the doctor checked me out when we got the the cottage. Everything is ok and she’s coming in next week for another check up. You can come if you’d like.” Shane said, a little

bashful but willing to make the effort since Ilya was doing the same.

Shane stared out the window at the passing blur of darkened trees and highway lights, hyper-aware of the solid warmth of Ruth beside him. The space between them on the seat was a deliberate six inches, he needed the space after so many hours of talking and being around new people. Every few minutes, Shane would see from the corner of his eye the slight, abortive shift of Ruth's right hand toward the center of the seat, followed by a conscious stillness as he pulled it back.

After the third time, Shane couldn't take it. "How do you really think that went?"

"Honestly, I think it went very well. It was a good first step, but I wished he'd come home with us. I don't think talking over the phone is very productive."

"Maybe I'll ask him to come over next time he calls me?"

"That would be good," Ruth answered. "Why don't you get some rest? I know that all must have been mentally draining for you. When we get to the house, we can get you a nice snack while you soak in the tub."

"Hmm, that sounds so good."

Ruth's hand turned, her fingers lacing through Shane's. The simple contact sent a wave of warmth up Shane's arm, a settling in his chest that had him feeling immediately comforted. He didn't pull away. It was odd. Most of the time, he didn't like being touched unless it was from his parents or Ilya. Over the past few years, his close friends had been added to the 'list' of people who he liked to be touched by up to a certain extent.

The car hummed along the highway. After a while, Shane asked, his voice quieter, “You really think we’ll be ok?”

“With how you two look at each other? Yes. It’s not going to happen overnight or be perfect, but I have a feeling that you two love each other too much and are too stubborn to give it up.”

Shane smiled a bit and shifted to make himself more comfortable. The driver asked if they needed to stop anywhere before coming up to the highway and Shane replied no, closing his eyes and trying to rest.

Walter was on the porch when they pulled up, a silhouette against the warm golden light spilling from the cottage windows. He wasn’t waiting anxiously, just existing there, a part of the landscape. As they got out of the car, Shane was helped down by their guard. His parents walked out and waited next to Walter as he slowly

Walter considered him, his face unreadable in the dim light. “How you doing kiddo?”

Shane gave him a tired smile. “Good. It went well.”

Walter’s gaze shifted past him, taking in Ruth as she walked up beside Shane. “You hungry?” he asked Shane.

“Always.”

Ruth, coming up the steps, didn’t break stride. “He hasn’t been eating much.”

“Come, go take a warm bath and relax a bit and I’ll make you a snack plate just like you like it,” she said, brushing past him into the house.

Yuna smiled and offered to help run his bath. Shane wanted to protest but it all sounded nice so he followed his mom inside and to the master bathroom.

He leaned against the counter as she went around and poured his favorite bath salts and oils into the rising water, then lighting candles around the room. Shane shrugged, a real smile tugging at his lips while watching his mother fuss around him. He’d missed her so much while he was gone, and things had been a little tense since he came back.

“Why don’t you get in and relax for a bit? Remember when you was younger, I used to bring a stool up to the door and we’d talk about everything while you did your ice baths? I miss that. I feel like we haven’t had a chance to reconnect and I-”

“I’d like that, momma.” He replied. Yuna walked up to her son and gave him a long, tight hug, laughing when she felt the baby kicking against her own stomach.

She left the room so he started to take off his clothes. He was pulling his phone on the counter but when he looked at the date, he noticed that it was Saturday, when he used to take his weekly picture for the diary. He quickly stood in front of the mirror and snapped a few pictures of his belly from the front and sides, then stripped naked and sank into the warm water. He wished it was hotter, but that wouldn’t be healthy at this stage.

He was under the water when she came back, knocking on the door and letting him know that his snack would be ready in half an hour. He could eat it in the tub or Ruth would come let them know when it was ready. “So how did it go? With Ilya?”

“We have talked about... everything, our feelings, about what we wanted going forward.” Shane tried. “About what happened. It was a good conversation. Something that we should have done before.”

They talked for the full half hour. Not only about how the day had gone with Ilya, but about Shane’s time while he was ‘away’, and how Yuna had been redirecting the league and his brand

deals. Shane was surprised that he still had all of them in his corner, that they would be waiting for him when he decided to come back.

The league was still using his image everywhere, and Crowell was taking full advantage of the 'favor' Shane had asked of him. His face was prominently displayed on promotional materials, merch had his name and number printed everywhere.

She told that fans were extremely supportive of his and Ilya's relationship and she had received too many joint interview requests. The fact that Shane and Ilya, the two best players in the league were mates, and that Shane had bested Ilya several times throughout their career was fascinating to people and talks were being opened to allow omega's to openly play.

Shane was very happy with that news, but he did wish that they could delay talking about hockey until after he gave birth. The Voyageurs hadn't made it to the playoffs for the first time in years.

He asked his mom if the fans blamed him for the losses of the season, but the answer was no. He asked if he still had his contract in place, she said that they would be hard pressed to let him go, since the fan outcry would be too risky for the franchise.

Shane steered the conversation to the baby nursery that he wanted to have set up at both homes. They both agreed to have Rose, Svetlana, Jackie, and Kip come over soon to help, and Shane almost asked for Harris to join them, but their brief conversation was stopping him to make sure that Harris wouldn't have his feelings hurt.

Yuna said she'd reach out to everyone and let Shane know when they'd be free to come over. She brought up the topic on making an announcement and for a formal photoshoot for Shane, explaining that he had hers done when she was a few weeks from giving birth to him and they were one of her favorite memories from the time.

Shane said he'd think about it, he didn't know what the custom was for male omegas, and while he was ok with taking pictures of himself, having a stranger around and seeing him like that wasn't something he thought he'd like.

When Ruth knocked at the bedroom door asking if Shane wanted to eat in the tub or get out, he slowly rose and dried off, slipping on a pair of soft flannel pajama pants and one of Ilya's old t-shirts. He felt very relaxed and actually a bit hungry again so he followed them to the dining room and grabbed the platter, piling food on his plate while David and Ruth joked about a game show they were into.

"So, did you and Rozanov talk and start to fix things?" Walter asked.

"We started to. I mean, I think there's a lot we need to figure out, but it feels better this time. A lot more honest than the other times we've had problems and tried to make it work again."

Walter shrugged, a gesture of profound practicality. "Arguing is normal. You swear, you pace, it's not always a perfect picture, but if you can be old enough to hop into bed with an alpha, be old enough to talk about your problems when they come up."

Shane choked on a ice cream dipped beet when he heard that, covering his mouth, blushing furiously and looking towards his parents with big eyes. "That is your advice?"

"Been working for longer than you've been alive, son. You think my Ruthy and I always get along? With her temper?"

"We've done alright for ourselves," Ruth added with a sweet smile towards Walter.

"For thirty-seven years," Walter picked up her hand and kissed it, a faint smile touching his lips.

Shane watched Walter, he reminded him of Hayden and Scott. He could see the wheels turning. Walter was an Alpha, strong and steady, but he didn't dominate the space. He didn't monitor Ruth, didn't need her obedience to feel secure. His protectiveness was a quiet, constant presence, like the foundation of a house. It was a model of Alpha behavior Ilya had likely never encountered.

Then Ruth turned her clear gaze on Shane. “Your turn.”

He felt his face turn red when their attention was focused on him.

“What does being his Omega mean to you?”

Shane’s answer was immediate, defensive. “Nothing.”

Across the table, Ruth saw it. Yuna had made as if she was going to interject but Ruth shook her head. “Try again,” she said, her voice leaving no room for retreat.

Shane pushed his plate away, frustration bubbling up. “I don’t know, Ruth. It’s... bonding. Scent recognition. Hormonal stuff. Something in my brain that will make it turn off when Ilya is around.” The words were sterile, but angry.

“That’s a rather bleak way to think.”

“Why does everything I say sound like it’s wrong to you?” Shane burst out.

“Because,” Ruth said calmly, “you spent your whole life hiding this beautiful part of yourself. Even when you don’t have to hide anymore, you bury everything in your mind. Being an Omega without ever admitting your experiences is not healthy. What happens if that baby is an omega? Are you going to have it grow up thinking that they were born wrong?”

The truth of it hit Shane hard, heavy and silencing. Shane looked down at his hands. When he spoke again, his voice was smaller, stripped bare. “I feel him. I know his scent before I see him. Sometimes I know when he’s... distressed. When we’re apart too long, everything feels...” He struggled for the word. “Wrong. Out of tune. My body settles when he’s close. Bean responds to him. I reach for him without thinking.” He finally looked up, meeting Ilya’s gaze. “When he’s gone too long, everything feels wrong. I was struggling with leaving even while I was planning it. I have headaches when he’s around me since I want his touch so bad

but part of me remembers all the bad things he's done. All the hurtful things we've done to each other."

David reached across the table and squeezed his sons hand, knowing that he struggled with admitting everything.

Ruth pressed on, her voice gentler now. "Does needing him make you less independent?"

Shane truly thought about it. The old fear rose, the terror that any admission of need was a crack in his armor, a surrender. But the last few months had taught him a harsh lesson- denying the need hadn't made him stronger; it had left him isolated and terrified. "I used to think it did," he admitted. "I thought if I admitted how much I needed him, eventually I wouldn't be able to tell where he ended and I began. I thought needing him meant he owned me."

"And would that be such a bad thing? Knowing that you have someone that will catch you if you fall? Because I'd bet anything that you own Ilya just as much as he owns you. And ownership is just a word. Ask any well established omega and they would use the word 'belonging' more. You belong with Ilya and he belongs to you. Omegas can have a lot more power if they knew about it."

"It sounds different when you explain it like that, but my head says something else sometimes." Shane whispered.

Walter pushed the plate back towards him, "Finish your snack. Nothing needs to get fixed today"

Later that night, Shane laid awake on the bed, phone next to him and opened to his text messages with Ilya. Ilya had asked him if he'd made it back ok and asked if there was anything he needed. Shane had replied that he was fine, but tired. Without thinking and before he could take it back, he texted that it would be nice if Ilya came over that weekend, so they could talk some more. Ilya's response was immediate and he said he'd be over whenever Shane wanted him there.

Shane woke to the pale cottage light and the immediate, stomach-dropping recollection: Ilya is coming this weekend. Because I asked him to.

He didn't regret it. The want was still there, a quiet, persistent hum beneath his ribs. But the theoretical wanting him to come was now the very concrete Ilya Rozanov driving here in a couple of days. The knowledge turned his morning into a series of fidgeting, abortive tasks. He rearranged the nest pillows for the tenth time, fluffing and then de-fluffing them. He showered, dressed in soft jeans and a hoodie, then immediately changed into sweatpants and a different hoodie, then stared at the first outfit crumpled on the bed, paralyzed by the absurdity of it all. He opened the refrigerator, stared at its contents without seeing them, and closed it.

He caught himself, for one ridiculous second, pulling Ilya's Centaurs hoodie from the nest, as if its presence would be too obvious, too telling. He held the worn fabric in his hands, then shoved it back into the pile with a grunt of frustration. Removing it specifically because Ilya was coming felt even more pathetic.

Through it all, Ruth moved through the kitchen with a placid, unnerving calm, the click-click of her knife against the cutting board as she chopped fruit a metronome to his chaos.

"Can you stop watching me?" Shane finally snapped, leaning against the counter.

"I'm not watching you, honey." she said, not looking up.

"I feel your eyes on me."

From his chair at the table, Walter didn't glance up from his newspaper. "She does most things judgmentally. It's her love language. Give her some grace."

Shane sighed, a long, suffering sound. Eventually, as Ruth set a plate of toast and fruit in front of him, she asked, "What are you nervous about?"

“I’m not.”

“Good,” Walter said, turning a page. “Glad we cleared that up.”

Shane scowled at his toast. The silence stretched, filled only with the crunch of Walter’s newspaper and the distant call of a loon. “I don’t know what happens when he gets here,” he admitted, the words quiet.

Ruth sat across from him, cradling her tea. “Why does something have to happen?”

The question was so simple it disarmed him. He blinked at her.

“You invited him over to talk. To spend time with him. So spend time with him,” she said, as if explaining that water was wet. “You keep treating every minute with that man like it has to decide the rest of your lives. No wonder you’re exhausted.”

The truth of it landed, a gentle correction. He’d been braced for a summit, a negotiation that would determine their future. He hadn’t considered just... an afternoon.

Ilya arrived just after one o’clock that Saturday. He came alone, driving his insane sports car that made Shane frown. They would need to discuss Ilya’s car collection for when the baby came, he couldn’t strap a car seat in his most of his collection.

And because he was Ilya, he arrived bearing offerings. Shane, watching from the window, saw him emerge from the car laden like a pack mule: a large insulated cooler, a paper bag from a bakery, a smaller, neatly wrapped gift box, and... a bouquet of sunflowers. Ilya looked at the flowers in his hand, his expression shifting to one of mild horror, as if they’d spontaneously materialized there. He quickly shoved them back into the passenger seat and closed the door.

A smile, unbidden and fond, touched Shane's lips.

He heard the knock, a firm, respectful rap on the front door. Not the opening of a door that had once been his. Walter, who had been closest stood and went to let him in. Shane hovered in the hallway, out of sight but within earshot.

"Mr. Fischer." Ilya's voice, uncharacteristically tentative.

"Good to see you again kid," Walter drawled.

Walter made a show of looking him up and down. "Well come on in."

There was a few seconds of silence. Shane could picture Ilya's awkward shift in weight. "It is good to see you again," Ilya said, followed by the rustle of bags. "I brought... some things."

Walter peered past him at the SUV, then at the cooler now sitting on the porch. "Plannin' on staying through winter?"

"I did not know what Shane would want."

"So you bought the grocery store?"

"Only some of it. I noticed cravings for Russian snacks and they are not easy to get around here. He can be a picky eater."

From the hallway, Shane couldn't help it. "I can fucking hear you!"

The effect on Ilya was instantaneous. Through the open door, Shane saw his posture change, the tension melting into a soft, open anticipation. Walter noticed it too, his eyes flicking from Ilya to the hallway behind him.

Shane stepped into view.

Time didn't stop, but it slowed, crystallizing around the details. The way the late morning sun caught the gold in Ilya's stubble. The careful, neutral set of his shoulders. The way his eyes found Shane's and held, a blue anchor in the whirl of Shane's nerves.

His body recognized its mate instantly. the tight coil of anxiety in his gut loosened, just a fraction. A wave of warmth, of rightness, flowed through him, settling his jittery limbs. Bean gave a slow, rolling kick, a contented sigh. Across the space, Ilya's scent shifted subtly on the air.

They both felt it. The silent, biological yearning. This time, neither of them flinched from it. It was nice, to not be so tense around each other.

"Hi," Ilya said, the word gravel-rough.

"Hi," Shane breathed back.

Then they were just standing there, five feet apart, for a while. The absurdity of it broke the spell when Walter made an impatient noise. Shane rolled his eyes, a smile tugging at his lips. "You can hug me, you know."

Ilya's eyebrows lifted slightly. "You sure?"

"Yes, for God's sake."

Ilya crossed the distance, his movements deliberate but not hesitant. The hug was warmer than the one in the Troy's house. Ilya's arms came around him, solid and sure, one hand splaying high on his back, the other curving with practiced care around the swell of his stomach. Shane sank into it, turning his face instinctively into the column of Ilya's throat. He inhaled deeply, the scent flooding his senses, a direct line to calm. It was so automatic, so deeply satisfying, that for a second he just let himself have it.

Then his brain caught up. He'd just scent-marked him, openly, in front of Walter. He stiffened.

Old Shane would have jerked back, made a joke, brushed it off as nothing. Instead, he forced himself to relax again, his cheek still resting against Ilya's skin. "I wanted to do that," he mumbled, the admission meant for Ilya's ears alone.

He felt Ilya's breath hitch. Then, softly, just for him: "Okay."

No gloating. No interpreting it as surrender or forgiveness. Just... acceptance. The permission to have a need, and the space to let it simply be.

Later, Walter recruited Ilya to help him outside. "Got the last pieces of that crib to sand. Extra hands wouldn't hurt."

Ilya followed him to the shaded side of the porch where the unfinished crib pieces lay across two sawhorses. He stopped dead at the sight. The sanded, smooth wood, the careful joints, the tangible evidence of preparation for a child he had not been present to prepare for.

"You made this?" Ilya asked, his voice strangely hollow.

"Shane helped," Walter said, not unkindly, but without softening the blow. "Designed it, mostly. My hands did the tricky bits."

Ilya reached out, his fingers tracing the curve of a future crib rail. The ache was visible, a physical weight on his shoulders. “Would Shane... want me to help?” he asked, the question directed at the wood.

Walter leaned on his own sawhorse. “Ask him.”

So Ilya did. He found Shane arranging snacks in the kitchen. He stopped by the doorway, charmed as usual with his mates quirks. ‘Putting away snacks’ meant that he had opened everything and was eating while figuring out how he wanted to store everything. He walked in and asked, his voice carefully neutral, “Walter is working on crib. Would it be okay if I helped him?”

Shane looked at him, saw the quiet hope and the fear of overstepping warring in his eyes. “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, I’d like that.”

Back on the porch, the rhythmic whisper of sandpaper on wood helped Ilya relax enough to talk. After a while, Walter spoke, his gaze on his work. “What happens when Shane tells you no?”

Ilya’s sanding paused. He considered the question, discarding the easy lie. “Recently? Or before?”

“Let’s start with recently.”

“My body... reacts. Before my mind. Anger. Fear. The feeling that I must... correct the situation.” He resumed sanding, the motion aggressive. “It is not good.”

“What comes before the anger?” Walter asked.

Ilya didn’t have to think. “Fear.”

Walter nodded, as if he understood Ilya, but didn't condone it. "There it is. Your body says, 'My mate is leaving,' or 'My mate is refusing me.' Your body says, 'Stop him. Fix it.' You need to slow down and remember that this is your partner, not your child. You can and should protect him, but not in a smothering way. That's not healthy for either one of you."

"And if I think he is making a mistake?" Ilya challenged, the sandpaper stilling again.

"Tell him."

"And if he does it anyway?"

Walter shrugged, a gesture of profound, weathered acceptance. "Then he's an adult making a mistake. You swear, you pace, you chop firewood until your arms ache. You can call me or any of your friends and complain about what an idiot he's being. Whatever keeps you from becoming the asshole who tries to stop him."

"This is a terrible plan," Ilya muttered, but there was no heat in it.

Walter chuckled. "Marriage usually is." He set his sanding block down and met Ilya's gaze. "Listen. Protection isn't about preventing somebody from ever getting a splinter. Sometimes it's just making sure they know where to come when they need the damn tweezers."

Inside, watching from the kitchen window, Shane saw Ilya laugh, a real, unguarded sound in response to something Walter said. He saw Walter clap Ilya on the shoulder, a brief, solid contact. His throat tightened.

Ruth came to stand beside him, following his gaze. "He needs that," she said softly.

"Yeah," Shane whispered. Then, the realization dawning with a soft clarity: "So do I."

Ruth's hand came to rest between his shoulder blades, a warm, steady pressure. "Yeah."

The four of them gathered around the table for a late lunch, the cooler and bakery bag yielding a feast of sandwiches, pickles, fresh bread, and a still-warm apple pie. The atmosphere was easier now, the initial formalities sanded away by wood dust and shared food.

It was Shane who steered the conversation into deeper waters, his curiosity outweighing his defensiveness. "So, what are we actually supposed to do?" he asked, gesturing between himself and Ilya with a pickle spear. "When the bond is, like, yelling different things at each of us?"

Ruth shook her head. "The bond isn't yelling what to do, Shane. It's yelling that something's happening."

Walter jumped in, building on her thought like they'd done this a thousand times. "Right. It's a signal. Like a check-engine light. Doesn't tell you how to fix the engine, just tells you to pop the hood and look."

Ilya cleared his throat and started, looking directly at Shane. "I know that I made mistakes. It got to be too much and I should have taken-" he stopped, looking around to find his words for a few seconds. "I should have taken your feelings into consideration. I want all your attention, all the time and that is not right. I want you to have friends, to be happy, but is hard for me to see you smile at other people, to have jokes with them that I do not understand."

"I get that, but you have experiences that I don't have and I don't hold them against you. You were so jealous of Rose, but you have Svetlana and Sasha. You can walk into a room full of people and have them joking and you can have a real conversation with anyone and I struggle with that, but I'm not begrudging you for it."

"What is this begrudging thing mean? And what do you know about Sasha?"

Walter leaned closer and whispered into his ear. He nodded and turned back to Shane. “I understand now. I will try to not be jealous of attention you give to others. What do you know about Sasha?”

Shane pushed his plate aside, leaning forward. “I know enough that you two slept together. He made that very clear and said that you had a type, and it seriously didn’t describe me.” Shane stood up as quickly as he could and waddled away.

Ilya sat back and couldn't hide his grin. Shane was jealous. He was green with jealousy and had the angry kitten face that Ilya wanted to take a picture of and look at forever. “Excuse me.” he said when he finally sobered enough and followed Shane inside.

He found him in the bedroom, angrily attacking a pile of laundry and not even folding it like he usually did. “Sweetheart? I’m sorry.”

“Forget it. It was dumb.”

“No. nothing that upsets you is stupid. No one else matters to me, Shane. I thought that was obvious. I can’t take back that I had sex with others, but they didn’t mean anything.”

“What if you get bored of me?” Shane whispered, still not looking up.

Ilya moved closer slowly, gauging Shane’s body language to make sure he wasn’t crossing some hidden boundary. “What? Do you know how insane that sounds?”

“You call me boring.”

“Yes, as joke. Boring means to me that you are sweet, funny, safe, and calm. I love you, Shane. Everything about you is fascinating to me. I could have mated with any one of those other people, but since I met you, I only wanted you. Since I found out you were an omega, I

was determined to bond with you, to do whatever it took to make you mine, to have a family with you. You're all I think about, you're all I will ever want."

Shane pulled him closer, burying his face into Ilya's chest. Ilya held him tightly, whispering little Russian phrases into his hair. After a few minutes, Shane had calmed down enough to break apart and went to the bathroom to splash some cold water on his face before they went back outside.

"So how do we fix this? How can we get back on track?" Shane asked once they sat back down with Ruth and Walter.

Ruth didn't hesitate. "When you stop asking what the other person wants, because you think your instinct already gave you the answer."

To illustrate, they told stories on themselves. Walter recounted the time early in their marriage when Ruth, experiencing a brutal pre-heat migraine, had insisted on driving to her sister's farm an hour away. Walter, convinced the drive was dangerous in her state, had secretly followed her.

"I found him parked behind a billboard two miles down the road," Ruth said, her eyes sparkling with the memory. "I got out, marched over, took his suitcase from the passenger seat, and threw it into the creek."

Walter nodded mournfully. "Good suitcase. Had my favorite clothes in it."

"Shouldn't have followed me."

"She was right," Walter conceded. "I should have expressed my concerns better." He paused, then added with a wry grin, "Didn't mean I liked it."

Emboldened, Shane asked the question that had tangled in his gut for years. "What if... part of me likes it?" He didn't elaborate. He didn't need to. The flush on his cheeks said it all. The

possessive attention. The intensity. The feeling of being so thoroughly claimed. “I can see how I sent him mixed signals. How is he supposed to know which version he’s getting? The one who wants that, or the one who’s scared of it?”

Ruth’s answer was blunt. “He isn’t.”

Shane stared at her. “That’s not helpful.”

“It’s the truth though. You’re expecting him to be a mind-reader. He can’t be. You have to tell him. ‘I like that right now.’ Or, ‘Not like that. Like this.’ Or, ‘Not today.’”

Walter added, “And something being welcome yesterday doesn’t make it a standing invitation for today. Just like something being scary today doesn’t mean you were lying when you liked it before. Sometimes, after being together for a long time, couples just know, they develop that dynamic.”

Ilya, who had been listening with intense focus, turned to Shane. His question was direct, but his tone was soft, genuinely seeking. “You still like when I am... possessive?”

Shane’s blush deepened. He couldn’t meet his eyes. “Sometimes,” he muttered to the table.

“Sometimes when?”

Shane glared at him, then at Ruth and Walter, who were watching with undisguised interest. “This is kinda personal.”

Ruth raised her teacup in a toast. “Congratulations. You’ve discovered communication. It’s awful.”

The tension broke into laughter, Shane’s own a reluctant, embarrassed chuckle.

The afternoon bled into evening, filled with the easy, mundane rhythms Ruth had prescribed. Walter and Ilya argued amiably about playoff strategies from a decade ago with David. Ruth shooed Ilya away from hand-feeding Shane bites of pie “He has arms, Ilya. They work.”, which only made Shane steal a forkful directly from Ilya’s plate, a glint of challenge in his eye. Ilya’s resulting smile was small, private, and utterly delighted.

As the sky turned indigo, Ilya began quietly gathering the dishes, rinsing plates and stacking them neatly. He moved with a sense of closure, of a visit coming to its natural end. He fetched his jacket from the hook.

Shane watched him, a knot forming in his stomach. Ilya was preparing to leave. He hadn’t asked to stay. He wasn’t assuming. Ilya turned to him, his expression warm but final. “Thank you for letting me come today.”

The words were polite, distant. They sparked a sudden, sharp panic in Shane’s chest. “You’re leaving?” The question came out more plaintive than he intended.

Ilya blinked, confused. “I thought... you said for the day.”

Shane realized his own failure. He had invited him over. He had never specified stay. Ilya had operated on the information given, respecting the boundary that he thought was there.

Shane took a breath. “I want you to stay.”

Ilya went perfectly, utterly still, as if the world had paused on its axis.

Shane immediately qualified it, building his own boundary even as he opened the gate. “Tonight.”

“Okay, if you’re sure.”

“In the nest.”

Ilya's eyes darkened, a flicker of intense emotion he quickly banked. "Okay."

"Sleeping," Shane added, pointlessly.

A faint, knowing smile touched Ilya's lips. "I understood."

"Only sleeping. I think Bean would like that. I would too."

"I was trying not to look too happy." Ilya confessed, his voice low.

Ruth, passing through the hallway with a basket of laundry, didn't break stride. "You boys are so cute." she said, and disappeared into the bedroom.

Ilya smiled as Shane blushed and looked away. Finally, Shane reached out and took Ilya's hand. It wasn't a solution. It was a choice, made with a clear mind, and Shane wanted to start to move forward.

Shane's declaration hung in the cottage air, a decision made. The reality of it immediately began to assert itself in a series of small, practical complications. Ilya stood there, holding his jacket, looking adorably and infuriatingly confused.

"You want to get changed for bed?" Shane asked, gesturing vaguely at him.

"Changed?" Ilya countered, his brow furrowed.

"Yes, pajamas."

“You know I don’t sleep with clothes,” Ilya said, making a face.

“I’ll loan you some shorts.”

“Ok.” Ilya said, making Shane smile a bit. He just loved Ilya’s accent with some words.

He grabbed the boxers that Shane had handed him and went into the bathroom. Before he shut the door, Shane called out if he wouldn’t mind not throwing the clothes in the laundry hamper and to just give it to him. Ilya smiled and nodded.

Ilya’s mood was boosted even more when he noticed his preferred brand of toothpaste neatly lined up with his normal toiletries. Shane must have replaced them. A quick look in the shower nook showed his body wash and the shaving cream and hair products Shane insisted he use.

He quickly got undressed and changed, brushing his teeth and using Shane’s fancy face wash. When he came out, Ilya’s gaze then drifted to the nest that Shane had started towards the back corner of the room, taking in the carefully assembled collection of clothes and bedding. His eyes landed on the faded red and black Centaurs hoodie, some old Boston sportswear, and a beanie that he thought he lost a long time ago, integrated seamlessly into the wall of pillows and blankets. He didn’t comment. He simply looked at it, his expression softening with a painful hope he was visibly trying to temper.

Shane watched him notice. He forced himself to stand his ground, to not snatch the hoodie away or make a dismissive joke. “It smells like you,” he said, the admission pushed out on a short breath. “It helped me sleep.”

Ilya’s blue eyes found his, swimming with emotion he was clearly wrestling into submission. Finally, he just said, “Okay.”

For some reason, the simple acceptance irritated Shane. “You can be happy about it, you know. You don’t have to be so... stoic.”

A tiny, genuine smile broke through. "I am extremely happy about it."

"Well, good. Just don't make it weird."

"I am trying very hard."

"I give you privacy, and get you some water." Ilya said, his voice low.

He walked out of the room and went into the kitchen, finding Yuna on her laptop by the kitchen island.

"Hi Mama Yuna."

"Hi Sweetie, you two ok?"

Ilya leaned closer, lowering his voice further. "Yes, I just get drink for Shane in case he needs one later."

Yuna paused, studying him. A flicker of approval crossed her face. "Well. I'm glad to hear that."

"Is hard, trying to follow his lead and not overwhelm him or push for more," Ilya grumbled.

"Growth usually is." She patted his arm. "But I'm learning that it's not my place to intrude. If you need my opinion, I have to know that you both are communicating about it first. Ask him about his limits and discuss that so you are both on the same page."

Ilya sighed, the sound longsuffering. "You are correct. Is just hard."

“The best things in life aren’t easy,” Yuna said, heading toward the stairs, “nobody ever taught you that so now you both learn it together.”

Ilya turned back to the doorway, took a steadying breath, and knocked lightly on the open frame.

“Yes?” Shane called, not turning around.

Shane froze, his hands stilling on the pillow. He felt suddenly shy. For years, Ilya had seen his body whenever he wanted. Shane had changed in front of him, showered with him, slept naked against him without a second thought. Now Ilya was standing outside the door to their bedroom, asking permission to come in, to have access.

“Um, you can come in,” Shane said, his voice thicker than he intended.

Ilya entered the room, leaning against the dresser as Shane began to undress. He moved slowly, his back to Ilya, pulling off his sweatshirt and pants. He could feel Ilya’s eyes on him, not with predatory hunger, but with a kind of aching reverence. At one point, he saw Ilya deliberately turn his head to look at the wall, giving Shane a moment of false privacy.

Shane pulled on his sleep pants and stood there in his t-shirt. “You can look at me,” he said quietly.

Ilya’s eyes returned to him, dark and warm. “Are you sure?”

“Ilya.”

“I am going to ask.”

Shane sighed, a small, exasperated smile touching his lips. “Right. Yes. You can look.”

And something about being observed because he had permitted it, explicitly, consciously, felt entirely different. It felt like ownership, in the best sense. Like his body was his to share, not a territory to be assumed or ordered around.

Then came the nest itself. Ilya approached it as one might approach a sacred space, which, in a way, it was. He stood at the edge, his eyes tracing the components: Ruth’s quilt, a sweater of Yuna’s tucked in a corner, the little wooden fox Walter had carved for Bean, the tiny socks and hats, the scraps of Willow Creek, and woven throughout, his own clothing. His hoodie. His shirts.

He didn’t say anything profound. His voice was hushed, almost wondering. “I am in it.”

Shane looked over from where he was settling against the propped-up pillows. “What?”

Ilya reached out and touched the edge of his own hoodie. “Your nest.”

Shane understood. The nest wasn’t built around a person; it was built around the concept of home. And Ilya was, unmistakably, included in almost every inch. “Yeah,” he said, the word simple.

Ilya’s throat worked. “You kept me in it.”

“Don’t make me regret this,” Shane warned, but the threat had no heat.

“I won’t,” Ilya promised, and it sounded less like a vow and more like a fact.

They lay down. Ilya arranged himself on the farthest possible edge of the large mattress, his body rigid, his hands clasped over his stomach, trying not to roll over and drag Shane to his body like wanted to. Shane waited. Five minutes passed. Ten.

Finally, Shane broke the silence. “What the fuck are we doing?”

“Sleeping,” Ilya said, staring at the ceiling.

“It’s like you don’t want to be next to me.”

“I am giving you space.”

“I invited you into the nest, into my bed.”

“Da.”

“So you’re welcome to assume that I want you close.”

Ilya shifted approximately six inches toward the center.

Shane turned his head to stare at him. “Seriously?”

“You said ‘come closer.’ You did not specify distance.”

Shane grabbed a pillow and considered throwing it. The old, familiar dynamic was resurfacing, but within new, safer banks. “Ilya. Come. Here.”

Ilya moved closer, until they were only a few inches apart. He still didn’t touch.

“Put your arm around me,” Shane directed.

Ilya went perfectly still. “You want that?”

“Yes.”

Slowly, carefully, Ilya lifted his arm and draped it over Shane’s waist, his hand coming to rest lightly on the mattress beside Shane’s hip.

Shane let out a frustrated breath. “Closer.”

Ilya’s arm tightened, gently pulling Shane back until his spine was aligned with Ilya’s chest. Shane’s head fit perfectly into the hollow of Ilya’s shoulder.

And then, it happened. The constant, low-grade tension that had lived in Shane’s muscles for months, since long before he left, even when he was dragged back, simply dissolved. A deep, unconscious sigh escaped him as his shoulders dropped, his spine curving back into Ilya’s solid warmth. The faint headache he hadn’t even acknowledged vanished. Bean shifted, not a frantic kick but a slow, settling roll. The staticky discomfort of the bond, the constant sense of something being missing, smoothed into a quiet, humming calm.

There.

For one terrifying second, the old panic surged. See? You need him. See? You couldn’t do this alone. Your body betrays you. But Shane had new context for it now, thanks to Ruth. His body wasn’t saying that he was weak. I feel safe right now. This feels good. That was all. Not Ilya was right. Not everything is forgiven Just... I want this.

So he deliberately relaxed further, melting into the embrace.

Of course Ilya noticed. Shane felt the slight hitch in Ilya's breathing behind him, the minute tightening of his arm. Ilya could smell the change in his scent, feel the surrender of his muscles, sense the bond settling into a contented purr. But Ilya said nothing. He just held him, his breath warming the back of Shane's neck.

After a long while, Shane grew suspicious of the silence. "You can smell it," he stated into the dark.

"Da."

"That I'm calmer."

"Yes, I feel it in our bond. It's not as strong as before, but it's still there."

Silence stretched again. Shane twisted slightly, enough to see Ilya's profile in the moonlight. "You're not going to say anything?"

Ilya looked genuinely confused. "About what?"

"About that. About how obviously I... needed this." It was a test Shane didn't know he was administering.

Old Ilya might have smiled triumphantly. See? This is why you need your Alpha. Your body knows. This Ilya just blinked, his brow furrowed in thought. "You wanted me to hold you," he said slowly, as if working through a simple equation. "I need it too. That is all I know."

The simplicity of it, the refusal to extrapolate, made Shane's eyes burn. He turned his face back into the pillow.

They lay in the quiet for a time, the only sound their synchronized breathing and the distant lap of lake water.

“I did need it,” Shane whispered, the confession a secret for the darkness. “Your scent. You. Just... lying here. I missed sleeping like this.”

Ilya’s arm tightened, just for a second. “I missed it too.”

“That doesn’t mean I’m okay with everything.”

“I know.”

“I’m still angry.”

“I know. You should be.”

Shane took a deeper breath, the most dangerous truth balanced on his tongue. “Sometimes I still remember your hand on my throat.”

The effect was immediate and total. Ilya went utterly rigid. His arm began to withdraw, as if his touch had suddenly become toxic.

Shane caught his wrist, holding it in place. “No, please. We need to talk about it.”

“Shane...” Ilya’s voice was pained, strangled.

“I’m telling you because we’re supposed to talk. Remember?” This was monumental growth. Before, Shane would have swallowed the flashback, let it fester until it poisoned the moment. Now he named it while still choosing to stay in the circle of Ilya’s arms. “Sometimes you touch me, and I remember it. The pressure. The fear.”

“Okay,” Ilya breathed, the word a vow to listen.

“And sometimes,” Shane continued, his voice dropping even lower, “you touch me, and I remember every good thing your hands ever did. All at once. Both happen.”

Ilya’s breath caught audibly. After a moment, he asked, his voice rough with care, “What do I do when it is the bad memory?”

Shane thought about it. “Ask me.”

“Ask what?”

“If I want you to stop. If I need you to move.”

“And if you say yes?”

“You stop. Immediately.”

“Konechno. Of course.” Ilya was silent for another beat. “And if you say no?”

Shane settled back against him, guiding Ilya’s hand back to its place on his stomach. “Then don’t decide I’m lying or being brave. Just believe me.”

That was the other side of the coin. Shane didn’t want to be treated like fragile glass forever. He needed Ilya to trust his yes as much as he respected his no.

Their heavy conversation was interrupted by a sudden, vigorous thumping against Shane’s abdomen. Bean launched into a spirited bout of late-night acrobatics.

Ilya flinched. “What did I do?”

A surprised laugh burst from Shane. “Nothing. Your child is just an asshole with terrible timing.”

Instinctively, Ilya splayed his hand over the spot where Bean was practicing karate. Then he froze, realizing he’d done it without asking. He started to pull his hand away.

Shane caught it again, pressing it back firmly against the moving curve. “That one’s okay.”

“Always?” Ilya asked, hope and caution warring in his tone.

Shane nearly said yes. Then he caught himself. This was the practice. “Usually,” he amended.

Ilya huffed a soft, amazed laugh. “Usually.”

“And if I don’t want it,” Shane said, echoing their new language, “I’ll tell you.”

“Okay.” Ilya left his hand there, feeling the incredible, alien movements of his child. He leaned down, his lips close to Shane’s ear, and murmured in Russian, his voice a tender rumble. “You have caused enough trouble already, malenkiy. Your papa is finally allowed in the nest. Do not ruin this for him.”

Shane snorted. “Papa almost ruined it all by himself.”

Then Ilya said, simply, “Da, but it will never happen again.” No defensiveness. No excuses. Just acknowledgment.

Shane reached back, found Ilya's hand on his stomach, and laced their fingers together over the kicking baby.

Later, in the deep quiet of 2 a.m., Shane awoke with the urgent, familiar pressure on his bladder. He began the careful process of extracting himself from Ilya's octopus-like hold.

Ilya was instantly awake, a lifetime of hyper-vigilance snapping him to alertness. "What is wrong?"

"I have to pee," Shane mumbled, swinging his legs out of bed.

Ilya was sitting up already, throwing the covers back. "I can--"

Shane pointed a finger at him, squinting in the dark. "Stay."

Ilya stopped, halfway out of bed. It was almost comical.

"I'm going to the bathroom, Ilya. Not crossing a border."

Ilya sank back onto the mattress, a wry smile touching his lips. "Too soon."

Shane paused, then chuckled. "Yeah. Sorry."

"It was little bit funny."

On his slow, waddling journey back from the bathroom, Shane needed an apple so he told Ilya he could grab it himself. Walter was in the kitchen, pouring a glass of water at the sink. He looked up as Shane shuffled in.

“Everything alright?” Walter asked, his voice a low rasp.

“Yeah. Just... baby things.”

Walter nodded, his eyes flicking toward the ceiling. “He behaving?”

“Yes,” Shane said, with a smile.

“Good.” Walter took a sip of water. “That’s the job right now.”

Shane leaned against the counter, the house silent around them. “It feels really good,” he confessed, the words spilling out in the vulnerable night. “Having him here. Like this. It feels... right.”

Walter didn’t turn it into advice or a warning. He just nodded again. “I figured it might.”

“That scares me a little,” Shane admitted.

“Why?”

“Because what if... what if it feels so good I forget why I left? What if I just let myself forget the bad parts?”

Walter set his glass down and looked at him, his weathered face kind. “Then remember.”

“What?”

“You don’t have to stay angry every single second to remember that somebody hurt you, Shane. The memory’s in your bones. It’s in his, too, from the look of him.” He put a hand on Shane’s shoulder. “Feeling safe tonight doesn’t rewrite what happened before. And what happened before doesn’t mean you’re not allowed to feel safe tonight. Let yourself have the good hour. It doesn’t cancel out the bad months.”

The simple, profound wisdom of it settled over Shane like a blanket. He nodded, his throat tight. “Thanks, Walter.”

“Go on back to bed. And tell him if he snores too loud, there’s still room on the couch.”

When Shane returned to the nest, Ilya was exactly where he’d been told to stay, lying on his back, eyes open, watching the door. Waiting.

Shane slid back under the covers. Ilya didn’t immediately reclaim him; he waited for a cue.

Shane noticed, and the careful respect of it warmed him more than any assumption ever could. “You can,” he said softly.

Ilya’s arm came around him again, drawing him close. This time, Shane initiated the contact, shifting until his forehead rested against Ilya’s jaw.

“You actually stayed,” Shane murmured, already drifting.

“You told me to,” Ilya whispered into his hair.

“I know.”

And in those two words hung a world of hard-won trust. Ilya could be told stay. He could be told don't follow. And he could obey. The world didn't end. The sky didn't fall. They just found their way back to each other, one deliberate, chosen touch at a time.

Shane swam up from the deepest, most velvety sleep he'd had in months. Consciousness returned slowly, bringing with it a profound sense of warmth and safety. He was deliciously warm, his cheek pressed against something solid and familiar that rose and fell in a steady rhythm. One of his legs was thrown heavily over a muscular thigh, an arm was draped across a broad chest, and a large, warm hand rested possessively over the curve of Bean. He hadn't slept this well since before he left Ottawa. He hadn't woken once to check his phone or stare into the anxious dark.

His first coherent thought was pure, unadulterated peace. Ruth had been right again. His second was the realization that Ilya was already awake. He could feel the alert stillness in the body beneath him, the faint tracing of fingers along his spine.

Shane opened one eye. Morning light filtered through the curtains, painting the nest in soft gold. He was plastered against Ilya Rozanov like a barnacle. He lifted his head, meeting Ilya's gaze, which was watching him with a soft, unguarded fondness.

"Don't," Shane mumbled, his voice thick with sleep.

Ilya blinked. "Good morning to you, too."

"Whatever you're thinking. Don't say it."

Ilya considered this, his lips twitching. "I was thinking I need to use bathroom."

Shane narrowed his eyes.

“And,” Ilya added, the ghost of a smirk appearing, “that you drooled on me. Maybe a little bit.”

“I did not.”

“There is a small wet spot on my chest. I have forensic evidence.”

“Fuck you, asshole.” Shane said with a laugh.

Ilya’s smile broke through fully then, crinkling the corners of his eyes. “This feels more normal.”

The words, simple and true, quieted Shane’s defensiveness. It did. Not the old, taken-for-granted normal. This was a new normal, fragile and hard-won, but it carried the echo of their old, easy intimacy. The panic that usually accompanied such a realization, *See, you need him, you’re weak* was absent. In its place was a simple acknowledgment.

“Yeah,” Shane admitted quietly, settling his head back down for just a moment. “It does.”

The process of untangling themselves was its own quiet comedy. When Shane finally sat up and began the laborious process of heaving himself out of the nest, Ilya reacted automatically.

“Where are you going?” The question came a half-second too fast, edged with an old, familiar reflex.

Shane froze, one leg over the side of the nest. Not in fear, but in recognition. He saw the same recognition flash across Ilya's face, followed immediately by regret.

"Sorry," Ilya said, the word crisp. He didn't try to explain or justify. He just named the misstep.

Shane studied him for a beat. "I'm going downstairs to eat. Possibly an entire loaf of that bread you bought. It smelled so good."

Ilya nodded. "Okay."

Shane stood, waddled toward the bathroom, then paused at the door. He looked back. "You can come. If you want."

Ilya was already pulling on his borrowed Henley. "Do you want me to?"

Shane groaned, tilting his head back. "Ilya, would you like to join us for breakfast?"

"I am trying to give you an out, to make your choices important."

"Yes, and I appreciate that, but maybe not for everything."

"Yesterday you liked when asked," Ilya pointed out, following him into the hall.

"Yesterday was different. Today I'm hungry and I'd like for us to start talking more and understanding what we need to do to move on."

A low chuckle rumbled behind him. The sound, so familiar and so missed, warmed Shane more than the morning sun.

Downstairs, Ruth was at the stove, and Walter was at the table with his coffee and newspaper. They both glanced up as Shane and Ilya entered. Shane was wearing a pair of Ilya's sweatpants, rolled at the waist, and one of his own t-shirts. Ilya was still in yesterday's jeans and the borrowed Henley.

"Sleep well?" Ruth asked, her tone impossibly neutral.

Shane pointed a finger at her. "Don't."

"I asked if you slept well."

"You know what you're doing."

Walter turned a page of his newspaper without looking up. "She usually does."

Ruth placed a heaping plate of eggs, toast, and sliced fruit in front of Ilya, then another in front of Shane. Ilya stared at the feast before him, then at Ruth, then at Shane.

"She really is worse than your mother," Ilya muttered.

"I told you," Shane said, digging in.

As they ate, Ruth added two more slices of toast to Ilya's plate. "Eat."

Ilya, without a word of protest, picked up a slice and took a bite.

Shane stared, his own fork suspended mid-air. "Holy shit."

Ilya looked over, chewing. “What?”

“Nothing. I just... I never thought I’d see the day somebody bossed you around and you just... listened.”

Ilya pointed his butter knife at Shane. “Do not become so comfortable with this. Is a temporary thing.”

“Noted.”

Later, Shane started to ask Ruth about when they were going to take their daily walk. “Ruth, when-”

“Why don’t you and your parents go today?” Ruth interrupted, not looking up from washing a pan.

“Oh, um, sure.” Shane said, surprised but going off to look for his parents.

“Ilya, come grab snacks for Shane for the walk, I have prefilled ziplocks for him.”

Twenty minutes later, they were ready with Ilya carrying a small backpack for things that Shane might need. They were quiet at first but soon, conversation started flowing, keeping topics light and their pace slow so that Shane didn’t over do it. Ilya was thankful for the bag that Ruth had packed after the first 15 minutes since Shane started to get hungry.

When Yuna brought up the subject of possibly doing some sort of pregnancy announcement, Ilya was about to ask her to not mention it when Shane said that Ilya and he would discuss it and let her know. She smiled and nodded and they carried on, talking about plans for the nursery and when their friends could come over.

Not long after when they returned and Shane change, Ilya tried to ask sometime about last night. “Ruth, do you think Shane probably wants-”

“Ask Shane.”

Ruth dried her hands and turned, leaning against the counter. Her gaze was kind but firm. “You two don't need to be asking people outside of your relationship until you ask and talk to your mate first.”

Ilya recognized that Ruth was right and they weren't meant to be permanent mediators. Ruth and Walter were filling the educational gaps, then stepping back, expecting them to build their own bridge across the chasm.

Walter cleared his throat. “You said something interesting yesterday, Shane.”

Shane immediately grew weary. “Oh?”

“You said sometimes you like him being possessive.”

Shane nearly choked on his orange juice. Ilya's attention, which had been on his plate, snapped to Walter, then to Shane, with laser focus.

Ruth refused to let the moment dissolve into awkwardness. “This is exactly the sort of thing you two need to understand about each other. Not in theory. In practice.”

Under their combined, expectant gazes, and with Ilya watching him with a mixture of hope and intense curiosity, Shane slowly, haltingly, began to articulate the confusing truth. He liked when Ilya got jealous, sometimes. Not the controlling, terrifying jealousy, but the low-grade, grumpy variety that made Ilya hover a little closer at a party. He liked being scented, marked as Ilya's. He liked the feeling of Ilya pulling him back against his chest, a solid wall at his back. He liked the rumble of “*mine*” in his ear in certain, specific contexts. He liked Ilya's protectiveness, the way he instinctively moved between Shane and a perceived threat.

Sometimes, when he was overwhelmed or exhausted, he liked Ilya simply taking charge, making a decision so Shane didn't have to.

"I like when he's jealous," he finally admitted, the words feeling both vulnerable and absurd.

Ilya's head tilted, his eyes darkening.

Shane immediately pointed at him. "Don't."

"I did not say anything."

"I could tell what your thinking about."

From behind his newspaper, Walter muttered, "That face really does cause problems."

Shane took a deep breath, pushing forward. "Sometimes... I like when he acts like I'm his." The admission hung in the air, stark and honest. Then he added, the crucial counterweight, "But sometimes it scares me."

Ruth nodded, as if he'd just stated something she already knew to be true. "Then the behavior itself isn't automatically the problem. The problem is when he decides you're not allowed to change your mind about whether you want it. Something being welcome yesterday does not make it welcome today. Something you enjoyed... intimately," she said, with a delicate cough, "does not become permanent permission outside that context. And something you dislike today does not mean you were lying when you enjoyed it before."

It was the permission Shane hadn't known he needed, to have contradictory feelings without being a hypocrite. Consent could be fluid sometimes. Its absence now didn't invalidate its presence then.

Then Ruth turned her calm, probing gaze on Ilya. “What do you like about Shane being an Omega?”

Ilya looked immediately suspicious, as if the question were a trap disguised as a bouquet. “Everything,” he said, a default, defensive answer.

“That’s not an answer, it’s a deflection. Try again.”

Ilya set his fork down, thinking. His answers, when they came, were slower, softer. “I love his scent. It is... home. I love when he seeks me out without thinking, when he takes my clothes for his nest. I love scenting him. Caring for him. I love when he allows himself to be... soft. When he trusts me enough to be vulnerable.” He looked at Shane, his voice dropping. “I love being someone he reaches for. I love providing for him.” He swallowed. “I like being needed.”

Ruth didn’t smile. “And which one of those likes gets you into trouble?”

Ilya knew. He didn’t hesitate. “Being needed.”

“Why?”

“Because...” Ilya struggled, translating a lifetime of instinct into this new language. “Because I take ‘he needs me’ and I make it ‘he cannot function without me.’ And then I make it ‘therefore I must control everything so nothing hurts him.’”

Walter nodded, setting his paper aside. “There’s a difference between being someone your mate can depend on, and making damn sure he *has* to depend on you. One’s a gift. The other’s a cage.”

The fact that others could see what he had thought about so accurately made Ilya stop. He’d built a golden, gilded world for Shane, removing every obstacle, every worry. And in doing so, he’d unintentionally made himself the sole architect of Shane’s reality. He had wanted to

be everything to Shane, to create a little bubble so that Shane wouldn't seek anyone else. He had been so wrong in even thinking of it.

Later that day, Walter headed back to the porch to put the finishing touches on the crib. Ruth settled with her sewing basket, sewing a tiny sleeve. Shane looked at the stack of nursery boxes in the corner of the living room.

"We should start organizing upstairs," he said.

Ilya was instantly attentive. "Do you want me to help Walter with the crib?"

Shane considered it, then shook his head. "Actually... no."

Ilya stopped. It was a tiny moment, a flicker of the old dynamic, the assumption of inclusion, met with a redirection. But Ilya just nodded. "Okay."

Then Shane said, "I want you to help me upstairs. With the nursery."

Ilya's face transformed, surprise giving way to a joy so pure it was almost painful to see. "Ok."

Upstairs, they opened the first box, unleashing a avalanche of tiny clothes. Newborn onesies in soft pastels and ridiculous patterns, tiny socks, receiving blankets, burp cloths, and stuffed animals. Ilya picked up a white onesie with tiny blue elephants, holding it up between his thumb and forefinger.

"What is this?" he asked, genuinely perplexed.

“A shirt,” Shane said, sorting a pile of washcloths.

“It’s so tiny.” he said with a strange tone.

Shane stared at him. “Of course its tiny, Ilya. We wont need this many I think though. Maybe we can donate the extras?”

“No.” Ilya held the onesie against his own broad palm. The garment barely covered it. “He or she will need to wear everything- we can have baby fashion show to show the people in Willow Creek.” He said with a smile, then looked down at the clothes again. “A baby cannot be this small.”

“They can be but only for a short period of time.”

“This is amazing.”

Shane laughed, the sound bright and free. They bickered their way through the boxes.

Another box yielded a tiny Montreal Voyageurs jersey, complete with Shane’s number 24.

Ilya recoiled as if it were radioactive. “Absolutely not! No, Shane- we must burn this.”

“It’s cute!”

“It is propaganda! My child will not wear the colors traitor team.”

“Our child,” Shane corrected, smirking.

“My child,” Ilya grumbled, but he was fighting a smile.

As they argued, Bean delivered a sharp, unmistakable kick. Shane gasped, putting a hand over the spot. Ilya’s argument died mid-sentence, his attention riveted.

“See?” Shane said triumphantly. “Bean agrees with me. He wants the jersey.”

“Bean does not know what you are saying,” Ilya said, but he placed his hand over Shane’s, feeling the movement. “He is kicking because he hears his papa’s voice and is excited.”

“Or he’s protesting your terrible taste.”

They worked side by side, the initial awkwardness melting away under the simple, shared purpose of preparing for their son. Amidst the folding and sorting, Ilya’s expression grew more serious.

“You said Dr. Alvarez is coming next week,” he said, not looking up from a stack of blankets.

“Yeah. On Tuesday.”

“And you said I can come.”

“If you want to,” Shane said, his tone deliberately light, offering the choice.

Ilya looked at him, almost offended. “Of course I want to.” He hesitated, then asked the harder question, the one that mattered more. “Do you want me there when Bean is born?”

Shane paused, a tiny sweater in his hands. His instinctive answer was a roaring yes, but the old fear whispered that what if they couldn’t figure things out by then?

“Yes,” he said, meeting Ilya’s gaze. “I want you there.”

Ilya absorbed the words, their deliberate simplicity. “Ok.”

“But,” Shane continued, building the boundary alongside the invitation, “we’re talking to Alvarez about everything first. The bond, the instincts, the whole... mess. But before the baby comes, I’d hope that we would be on solid ground again.”

Ilya’s face paled. “Shane-”

“I’m serious. We need to keep communicating, talking before reacting. And I know its not just you, I’m at fault for some things too.”

Ilya thought, his jaw working. The conflict was plain: every Alpha instinct revolted at the idea of being sent away from his mate and child in crisis. But he was learning to separate the signal from the reaction. “I understand,” he said finally, the words clearly costing him.

“Even if you think I’m being irrational? Or hormonal? Or unfair?”

A longer pause. Ilya’s shoulders slumped in surrender to a higher principle. “I will complain extensively from the hallway. To Walter. To Anatoly. To the wall. But I will always come back and we will deal with everything together.”

A wonderful burst of warmth spread throughout his body and Shane smiled up at him again. “Good.”

Their first real test came an hour later. Shane bent to pick up a medium-sized box of books to carry to the newly assembled shelf. It wasn't terribly heavy, but it was awkward with his balance shifted by Bean.

Ilya's reaction was instantaneous, visceral. His Alpha instincts fired before his higher reasoning could engage. "Put that down." The command was sharp, automatic, layered with protective urgency.

Shane froze, the box halfway to his chest. So did Ilya. They both heard it the tone like the old authority, the tone that had preceded so many taken choices.

Shane's defenses slammed up, his spine stiffening. Ilya saw the shutters fall behind his eyes and winced.

Instead of doubling down or getting defensive, Ilya closed his eyes for a brief second, a visible reset. When he opened them, his voice was careful, strained with the effort. "Sorry." He took a breath. "I am worried that box is too heavy. For the baby."

Shane's glare was a physical force. "It's not."

Every muscle in Ilya's body screamed to just take the damn box. He believed it was a risk. He might even have been right. His hands flexed at his sides. "Can I carry it?" he asked, the question tight.

Shane considered him, the box still in his arms. "No."

The refusal hung between them. Ilya visibly wrestled with himself, his jaw clenched tight. Finally, he forced out a single, strained syllable. "Ok."

Shane turned and carried the box the six feet to the bookshelf. He set it down with a soft thump. A moment later, a faint ache bloomed in his lower back. He straightened, his hand going to the spot.

Ilya's entire being seemed to shout, *I FUCKING KNEW IT!* He turned his face away, worried that it would give him away and ruin all the progress they've made.

Shane immediately pointed a finger at him. "Don't. Don't you dare."

Ilya pressed his lips together so hard they turned white. He said nothing.

Shane shifted, the ache persistent. He sighed, the fight going out of him. "...It's a little heavy. I'm sorry I reacted like that." The apology was a bit stilted, but he tried.

Ilya remained silent, but his eyebrows lifted infinitesimally.

"Would you," Shane began, the words dragged out like they were lined with hooks, "...please rub my back? If I don't do something soon it'll hurt later."

The tension in Ilya's shoulders released. He didn't gloat. He simply nodded. "Ok. Yes, of course."

Later, Ruth walked past the open nursery door and paused. Inside, Shane was sitting on the floor, leaning back against the sofa, while Ilya knelt behind him, working strong thumbs into the muscles of his lower back.

"Lower," Shane directed, eyes closed.

Ilya's hands slid down.

"No, my other left."

A grumble, then hands adjusted.

“Harder, please.”

“You are impossible.”

“You volunteered. And its your fault for putting your massive baby in me.” Ilya laughed at that and just kept rubbing where Shane directed.

Ruth caught Walter’s eye as he passed in the hallway, a box of tools in hand. He peeked in, saw the scene, and a slow, knowing smile spread across his face. They exchanged a glance, a silent communication forged over decades. No intervention was needed. No lesson required. Their students were starting to finally understand.

As the long afternoon faded into a lavender evening, Ilya naturally began to gather his few things. He placed his wallet and keys from the dresser into his pocket. He assumed the visit had reached its natural conclusion. He’d been invited for the day, and the day was over.

Shane, coming out of the bathroom, found him standing by the bed, looking momentarily lost. “What are you doing?”

“Getting ready to go, I didn’t know if you wanted me to stay again.” Ilya looked up at him, confused. “I am going back to Troy’s.”

“Oh, um. You don’t need to go back. I mean the doctor appointment is in a couple days. I don't think its worth going back and forth so much.”

Ilya waited, his expression carefully blank, refusing to fill in the blank Shane had left.
“Really?”

Shane’s exasperation bloomed. “Oh my God. You are the most...” He waved a hand, words failing him.

A faint, hopeful smile touched Ilya’s lips. He was enjoying this, the deliberate dance of it. Finally, Shane said it, the words blunt and clear. “Stay tonight.”

Ilya went very still. “You want me to?”

“I literally just said it.”

“Ok. I will stay. Because you look too pretty and I think you are starting to like me again.”

Shane rolled his eyes heavenward and scoffed. “Yes, thats exactly it, asshole.” he couldn’t stop the grin from forming.

Ilya’s posture relaxed, a silent exhale of relief. “Ok.”

Shane started to walk past him toward the stairs, then stopped. He turned back. His heart hammered against his ribs, not with fear of being trapped, but with the terrifying, exhilarating weight of offering more. He kept his tone casual, offhand, as if suggesting what to have for breakfast.

“And tomorrow.”

Ilya blinked. “Tomorrow?”

“I want you here tomorrow, too.”

For a long moment, Ilya just looked at him. Shane watched the emotions play across his face, shock, a dawning, almost disbelieving joy, a deep, profound gratitude, and finally, a serene acceptance. He didn't rush forward. He didn't try to kiss him. He didn't ask what this meant for forever, or next week, or the rest of their lives.

A slow, genuine smile spread across Ilya's face, softening the usual sharp lines of his intensity.

“Ok,” he said again.

For most of their relationship, Ilya had chased forever whenever he felt afraid, and Shane had run from forever whenever he felt caged. Now, standing in the quiet cottage bedroom, Shane offered a single, concrete step forward, and Ilya, having learned the hardest lesson of all, understood that it was more than enough.

Chapter End Notes

♥♥♥♥♥ Next chapter will be up by Sunday- that is the goal I'm determined to meet.

Chapter 49: Chapter 49

Chapter Summary

Hi everyone! ❤️

We are officially in the home stretch now! I can't believe I'm saying this, but after this chapter we have about two more chapters and then an epilogue before this crazy, emotional journey is complete. 🥹

Thank you so much for sticking with Shane and Ilya through all the chaos, heartbreak, questionable decisions, and healing. I hope you enjoy this one because there are some moments I've been waiting a very long time to finally share with you.

As always, thank you for reading, commenting, and loving these two as much as I do.

Thank you Lisa, you make my rambles so much better. Thanks Anna, you chaos enabler and Tony for taking my calls at 3am when I can't sleep and come up with something crazy. I adore y'all ❤️

Now... enjoy. And maybe don't get too comfortable. 😊

Chapter Notes

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

Ilya was awake when Shane started stirring. He was used to not sleeping much since Shane had been missing. Now he took the time to observe him, or talking to the baby, or just thinking about the past few days. To make this relationship work, he knew that they would both need to change their expectations of each other and align with what Walter and Ruth had been talking to them about. The scent of Ruth's coffee and Walter's frying bacon wove through the sunlit air. Would that be them in a few years? Cooking together, sharing private jokes and just being able to relax together?

He heard the other two couples in the main part of the house and smiled. Shane had given him a family- his first real family. Of course he had the memories of his mother and Svetlana, but these people could be his. He could plot and talk to David while they read his boring newspaper aloud, practicing his english pronunciation. Yuna had stood up for him, had been encouraging and protective of him as if he was her own son. What would it have been like to grow up with parents like that? With a father who loved him and supported him? With a mother that was happy and present for everything?

Being here made him relax for the first time in so long. The bone-deep tension of the previous weeks had softened into a watchful, tentative peace. Shane was getting used to the

weight of Ilya beside him in the nest, to the way his own body sighed into rest when Ilya's arm settled around him in the dark. It wasn't forgiveness. It was a like a ceasefire that they both had worked for and sometimes, when their brains could stop over thinking everything, they could just let themselves feel it.

He watched as Shane slowly finished waking up, trying to stretch but Bean stopped him from forming a full arch. They smiled carefully at each other when Shane opened his eyes. Ilya helped Shane get up, loving that he needed him now in that capacity. He loved seeing Shane pregnant over the past few days, it seemed like his belly had grown suddenly overnight and he had never looked more beautiful in Ilya's opinion. He hoped Shane realized that soon, so far he had minimal complaints and from the outside looking in, he thought he was handling the pregnancy very well.

They got ready and dressed for the day and walked to the kitchen together. Shane sat down at the table, leaning against briefly and rubbing his head against his father before laying his head in his arms on the table. Ilya went over to Ruth who was plating up Shane's latest food craving- scrambled eggs with chicken and hot dogs. They both made a face as she plated the food but Ilya hid the expression as he took out the jar of cinnamon apple sauce with it and brought it to the table. He waited until Shane sat up and said thank you. Ilya quickly turned around when he saw Shane happily dump the jar of applesauce on his eggs, he was getting his own plate when he saw Shane frown, staring sadly at his breakfast. "What is it, Kotyonok?"

"I don't know. Something's missing." Shane took a bite of his food and pushed the plate away.

"Do you want something else? Maybe some granola?"

"No! I want this but something's missing." Shane huffed. He glared daggers at Ilya, who was still very calmly trying to figure out what Shane was craving.

"Do you want some pickles? You liked them yesterday." Ilya offered.

"That's disgusting!" Shane pushed away from the table, as angrily as he could while not being the most graceful. He stomped towards the other side of the house and slammed the door. Ilya stood there, wondering what he did wrong. He buried the immediate instinct that

rose up to demand that Shane apologize for the disrespect but now he had poor tiny Ruth frowning, Yuna and David trying to not intrude and Walter was staring directly at him.

He took a deep breath and walked towards their bedroom. He stood by the door for a minute to make sure he can speak calmly and knocked before entering. Shane was on the bed, tears running down his cheeks.

Ilya's heart broke a little and he went over to Shane and sat next to him, turning his body to face him. "Come here, rodnoy," Ilya said softly holding out his hand for Shane to grab. "Tell me what's wrong."

Instead of taking hold of his hand like offered, Shane moved and tried to crawl into Ilya's lap, burying his face into his neck, letting out loud, sorrowful sobs. Ilya immediately wrapped his arms around Shane, adjusting his legs to wrap around Ilya's waist as best as he could with the bump between them and holding him close, rocking his crying mate for a few minutes, whispering into his hair to try to calm him down.

It took a few minutes but Shane managed to calm down, pulling away with a hiccup. Ilya gently wiped his face with the edge of their blanket and put a finger under Shane's chin so he had to look at him. "Tell me what's wrong, Malysh."

"Mol- um Malysh? Baby?" Shane asked.

"Good, yes is correct. Now no distractions. Tell me what brought this on."

"I don't know. My clothes feel funny and I don't know what was missing from the food and my mom used too much lotion." Shane said, listing everything rapidly.

"Ok, well maybe you can change while we're in here- maybe that old henley of mine you like that I took the tag out?" Ilya suggested calmly and Shane nodded, still trying to regulate his breathing.

“Ok, while getting dressed, think about what you want to eat. Something sweet or savory? I can order anything you want, but you have to let me know what it is.” Ilya watched the top of Shane’s ears turn red.

“You’ll all think it’s gross.”

“No sweetheart, you can eat whatever you want.”

After a few seconds, “Shane looked up at Ilya again. “I think I want those tiny pickles and some honey.”

Ilya pulled Shane closer to him again so he wouldn’t see the semi-disgusted look on his face. “That’s fine. See? If you would’ve said something in the kitchen, I would have given it to you. We can ask Mama to switch to some other lotion ok? I don’t think she would mind.”

Shane nodded slowly, trying to look down again but Ilya wouldn’t let him. “Now, you do need to apologize to everyone though. It was rude to act out like that and you hurt Ruth’s feelings after she went through the trouble of making your favorite breakfast.”

Shane’s face flushed fully at that. “Was she mad?”

“I don’t think so, no. but it was disrespectful and I know you will feel bad when you are calm that you acted out like that. So go wash your face and I’ll get you the shirt and we can go eat.” Ilya helped Shane stand up slowly and was pleasantly surprised when Shane reached up and kissed the side of his mouth quickly before rushing off to their en-suite.

He stood there for a few seconds with a smile before he shook his head and went to get one of his old shirts.

They walked out back to the kitchen where Shane went straight to Ruth and gave her a big hug, apologizing profusely and kissing the old woman all over her face while Ilya went into the pantry to get the honey jar.

When they sat back down, Shane smiled as he placed a few of the small pickles into his eggs and smeared honey all over. David, Ilya and Walter all averted their faces when Shane lifted the fork to his mouth but he stopped when he noticed them. “What?”

“Nothing, sweetheart. Go ahead and enjoy.” Ilya replied, trying to give him an encouraging smile.

“Dad? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, kiddo. You enjoy your breakfast.”

Shane narrowed his eyes and looked from David, to Walter, to Ilya. all three were avoiding looking towards him. “What?”

“Nothing, Malysh. You enjoy your food.”

Shane looked at Ilya then down to his plate. It looked and smelled great to him. “You all think it’s gross? Ilya? Is my food gross?”

Ilya looked to Shane again when he heard how sad his tone was.

“No, sweetheart. You can eat anything you want to feed our baby. It looks great!” Ilya tried to be encouraging.

Ilya was very proud of himself when Shane took a big bite and moaned with happiness. But then something horrible happened and by the look on both David and Walter’s faces, they were about to feel his pain too.

His beautiful, adorable mate gathered another heaping forkful of his concoction and instead of directing it to his mouth, offered it to him. The smell was terrible and he felt a bit sick from it but Shane gave him what he called the ‘cute kitten look’ and he took a deep breath a

few inches away from the fork and held it in while he took the bite, trying not to think or really chew. He swallowed it and gave Shane a smile. "Its good! Eat, Malysh. You need energy if you want to go for a walk again later."

He gulped the glass of water then grabbed David's glass quickly when Shane focused back on eating. Glaring at Walter when he caught the older man hiding a silent laugh behind his newspaper.

Later that afternoon, they were sitting in the living room while David and Shane read their books. The others were around the house, Yuna had mentioned that she had some brand deals to over with Ilya later. He had been texting Troy to see if they wanted to come over in a few days while the others were around but looked up when he saw a car pull into their road and tensed. They hadn't been expecting anyone and their security had been ordered to remain out of sight unless something was wrong.

"Whats wrong?" Shane asked, looking up. He'd felt it before he saw the change, a subtle tightening through the bond, a shift from that new, soft calm to a razor-edged alertness. He followed Ilya's gaze. A dark SUV was crunching slowly up the gravel driveway, sunlight glinting off its windshield.

"Anatoly," Ilya said, his voice neutral but his posture now straight, shoulders squaring as if for an impact.

The few days of domestic bliss were about to end, Ilya felt. By the time the vehicle rolled to a stop, everyone had sensed the change. Walter looked up from the stove. Ruth's knife stilled on the cutting board.

Anatoly emerged, his expression as impassive as ever, but he carried a thick, dense-looking folder under one arm, and a green box in the other. He nodded greetings as he entered, his politeness a thin veneer over clear purpose. His eyes found Ilya's. His eyes warmed a bit when they landed on Shane and he handed over the small box. "Treats. They're called sushki. Why don't you find some tea and try them. I had them made fresh this morning."

"Oh! They smell great! Thank you." Shane took the box and reached out a hand and Ilya had to help him up. Shane waddled towards Ruth and Walter in the kitchen, paying attention to his box.

“I need to speak with you.”

Ilya didn't move from his place by the window. “Here is fine.”

Anatoly's gaze flickered to Shane, Ruth and Walter. His meaning was clear. “Alone.”

Ilya turned to Shane and called out that they'll be right outside. Shane waved them off, focusing on watching as Ruth made him some tea on the kettle. Then he turned and followed Anatoly out to the back porch. Anatoly closed the sliding glass door, preventing them from being over heard. He stood there for a bit, the sound of birdsong and lapping water creating a false sense of peace. Anatoly didn't sit. He placed the folder on the deck table in front of Ilya with a soft thud. “We found some the connection. We are still looking for more.”

Ilya leaned against a shelf of neatly organized tools, arms crossed. “Between Kostova and Vasiliev? The money trail?”

“No.” Anatoly flipped the folder open. “Between Kostova and you.”

Ilya's brow furrowed. He pushed off the rail, stepping closer to the table. Anatoly splayed a series of documents, photocopied records, grainy photographs, pages of neat Cyrillic script. His finger landed on one image, pushing it toward Ilya.

It was an old photograph, the colors faded to muted blues and oranges. A group of teenage girls stood in front of a snow-dusted Soviet-era school. They wore identical dark uniforms, their smiles shy or bold, faces flushed with cold. Ilya's eyes scanned them, dismissed them, then snapped back. His breath left his body in a silent rush.

There, on the left, her blonde hair in two long braids, her smile brighter and less burdened than he had ever seen it, was his mother. Irina Tikhonova.

And standing right beside her, an arm linked loosely through Irina's, was a girl with a sharper face, clever eyes already looking at the camera with a knowing intensity. Galina Kostova. Decades younger, but unmistakable.

Ilya stared. He felt light headed, he couldn't get enough air in his lungs. The nausea was immediate and physical, a sour tide rising in his throat. "What the fuck is this?" His voice was a hoarse scrape.

"They were from the same town, same school. Best friends according to the older teachers that are still around." Anatoly's voice was flat, delivering facts like blows. "They were not just acquaintances. There are others." He shuffled more photos, a picnic by a river, Irina laughing, Galina leaning against her shoulder; a formal dance, the two girls dressed in pretty, but simple dresses, arms around each other's waists. "They were friends, Ilya."

She knew my mother. The thought echoed in his mind, hollow and devastating. All those hours in her office. Him on the couch, grinding his teeth, forcing out fragments of memory- My mother... she was kind. She loved music. She hid me from him when he drank. She smelled like lilacs. And Galina, with her notepad and her measured questions, her sympathetic nods. She had known Irina. She had heard stories of her from her son, and she had never once said, 'I knew her. She was my friend.' What the fuck was going on?

It was a violation that cut differently than the medication. The pills had been one thing, this was personal, intimate. She had taken his grief, his most guarded memories, and had secretly held it up against her own private memories, judging, comparing, manipulating.

"She sat there," Ilya whispered, his hand trembling as he picked up the picnic photo. His mother's face, alive and happy. "While I talked about her. While I..." He couldn't finish. The betrayal was so profound it felt like a vacuum in his chest.

"She never disclosed the conflict of interest," Anatoly stated. "This was not merely a doctor experimenting on a famous Alpha. This was personal. A settling of scores, perhaps. Or something else."

Ilya's mind, reeling, latched onto the practical, the dangerous. "Does she know we know?"

“Not yet. We only assembled this last night.”

“Vasiliev?”

“A separate issue. But this... this is the root.” Anatoly tapped the photo of the two girls. “Whatever game is being played, it started long before you sat in her chair.”

Ilya gathered the photographs, his touch oddly gentle. He was holding proof that his mother had been happy once, and it was poisoned. He looked at Anatoly, the cold, tactical part of his brain finally engaging through the shock. “What is your recommendation?”

“Confrontation is an option, legal exposure another. But given her connections, and the unknown depth of her arrangement with Vasiliev, a direct approach could be premature.” Anatoly paused. “You have a more immediate concern. Your family is here, in the open. This information means her interest in you was never professional. She sought you out. It is... obsessive.”

The fragile peace of their home that morning was an illusion. A woman who had been his mother’s friend, who had chemically altered him and lied to his face for months, was a thread connected to the threats swirling around them. His instinctive urge was to storm out, to pack Shane and everyone into cars and move them somewhere, anywhere, fortified and hidden.

But the new lessons whispered through the panic. Talk things out, don’t assume. Protect, but don’t control. He closed the folder, his jaw clenched so tight it ached. “I need to talk to Shane.”

Anatoly simply nodded, surprised with how rationally Ilya was thinking. “How safe are we here?”

“I already ordered more cameras around the property. More guards are going to be patrolling the property. Don't worry, they wont be seen.”

Ilya walked back to the cottage, the folder heavy under his arm. The sunlight felt different now. The peaceful lake was like a taunt. He found Shane exactly where he'd left him, but the room's atmosphere was tense with unanswered questions. All conversation had died.

Shane took one look at his face and stood up, a hand going instinctively to the curve of his stomach. "Ilya?"

Without a word, Ilya crossed the kitchen, the eyes of Shane's parents and the Fischers upon him. He didn't try to hide the folder. He stopped in front of Shane, and offered his hands to help him stand. He grabbed the box of cookies and the tea and lead Shane to their bedroom.

He opened the folder on his own lap and showed Shane the photograph of the two teenage girls.

"This is my mother," he said, his voice rough but clear. He pointed to Irina. Then his finger moved, tracing the line of an arm linked through hers. "And this... is Galina Kostova." The silence in the room was absolute. Shane's eyes widened, darting from the photo to Ilya's face, understanding dawning with horrifying clarity.

"She knew her," Shane breathed.

"They were friends." Ilya looked up, holding Shane's gaze, letting him see the raw, gutted honesty there. "She never told me. All those sessions. She listened to me talk about my mother, and she knew her." He swallowed. "Anatoly says this changes everything. That this could be a bigger threat than we expected. It is a personal grudge."

He didn't say, 'We have to leave'. He didn't command, 'Get your things.' He sat there, presenting the horrific truth, and waited. The choice, the next move, the reaction- he couldn't think straight.

Shane saw how troubled and tense he seemed so he grabbed his hand and linked their fingers together. "Was that all the information that Anatoly had?"

Ilya frowned and shrugged. “Maybe. I don’t know. I needed to be close to you.”

Shane pulled his legs up and leaned against the headboard, encouraging Ilya to lay his head on his lap and ran his fingers through Ilya’s curls a few times. “I think you should take a few minutes then go back to finish your conversation.

Shane stared at the photograph in his hands, the smiling faces of Ilya’s mother from another world, another lifetime. Ilya obviously got most if not all his looks from her- his eyes, lips, birth marks, coloring and cheekbones were all her. He looked from the faded image to Ilya’s face, which was pale beneath its usual golden tone, his eyes holding a kind of hollowed-out shock Shane had rarely seen.

Shane’s mind, always quicker to shift from emotion to practical and goal orientate when under stress, began clicking through the implications. He looked at the folder still tucked under Ilya’s arm. Then back at Ilya’s eyes, which were fixed on him with a fierce, almost desperate intensity.

“Is that everything?” Shane asked, his voice low.

Ilya’s brow furrowed slightly. “I think so, probably. I just took it after I saw the pictures.”

“Ok, I think there must be more information.” Shane knew him too well. He could see the residual adrenaline, the unfinished business in the tight line of Ilya’s shoulders. “Was Anatoly finished talking?”

Ilya hesitated, a fraction of a second too long.

Shane sighed, a sound of profound exasperation. “Jesus Christ, Ilya. Go back.”

“Nyet.” The refusal was immediate, instinctive. “I am not leaving you with this... with this mess, is all my fault.” His hand gestured vaguely at the photograph.

“You’d be going twenty feet onto the porch,” Shane said, his tone flattening. “I am currently surrounded by two Alphas, an Omega who terrifies you, my parents, and more armed security than a presidential detail. I am probably the safest pregnant person in Canada.” He stepped closer, lowering his voice. “If this involves Galina, then it involves us. You cannot protect me by only listening to half the information. I’ll stay right in this room while you go finish the conversation if that makes you feel better.”

The truth was that Ilya was feeling lost at that moment and while it was so uncommon for them, he appreciated Shane guiding him for now. Shane’s calm voice pierced Ilya’s panic. He blinked, the rigid set of his jaw softening minutely. Shane saw the moment he relented.

He reached up, his thumb brushing the tense line of Ilya’s cheekbone. His voice gentled. “Go finish talking to him. Then come back and tell me.”

Come back. The two words were a lifeline, they acknowledged the danger but Shane was willing to talk about it. They gave Ilya a direction that wasn’t about control, but about partnership. At that moment, Shane and Ilya were on completely the same level and Ilya realized that Shane could have demanded that he leave in order to protect their family from being in his proximity but he didn’t.

Ilya leaned down, pressing a soft, lingering kiss to Shane’s forehead, inhaling the sweet floral scent that always came from him. Then he turned and walked back out the door, the folder clenched in his hand.

Anatoly was exactly where he’d left him, now seated at the rustic porch table with the rest of the file spread before him like a toxic puzzle. He didn’t look up as Ilya approached, but his mouth quirked in a faint, knowing line.

“Shane sent you back?” Anatoly observed with a grin, his voice devoid of mockery. “He is good for you, Rozanov. Reminds me of my mate.”

Ilya dropped into the chair opposite him, the wood groaning under his weight. “Yes. When all this is over, I’d like to meet her.” Ilya looked down at the file and straightened up. “Finish.”

Anatoly tapped the photograph of the two girls. “This was only the beginning. They weren’t merely from the same town, Ilya. They were close. Best friends, by all accounts we have.” He slid another document forward, a copied page from a school yearbook, their names listed together under a club photo. “The friendship appears to have ended abruptly. Around the time Grigory Rozanov chose Irina as his intended mate.”

A cold, sharp clarity cut through Ilya’s nausea. “My mother did not choose him.”

Anatoly met his gaze, his own expression grim. “No. She didn’t. Your grandparents saw an advantageous match for their daughter and pushed for the mating. They were on the lower end of the economic scale and this alpha comes knocking for their daughter.”

The confirmation, so bluntly delivered, stole the air from Ilya’s lungs. He had always known his father was a tyrant, that his mother’s life had been one of quiet, trapped sorrow. She had had small doses of happiness but his memory of them were few.

“We spoke to surviving people from the region,” Anatoly continued, his voice a low monotone. “Tracked old correspondence, some family gossip. The picture that emerges... Galina Kostova wanted Grigory. Whether it was affection, ambition for the match, or both, we cannot be certain. Grigory wanted Irina. Irina did not want Grigory. She tried to refuse the arrangement.”

He let that hang for a moment before delivering the final blow. “Her parents refused her let her reject your father. The Rozanovs were well off, influential. Grigory was a strong Alpha who promised security, status. They considered it the match of a lifetime. Their daughter’s feelings were... irrelevant.”

“They forced her.” Ilya’s voice was barely audible.

“From everything we have found?” Anatoly didn’t look away. “Yes.”

Ilya looked back at the photograph of his young, laughing mother. Her arm linked with Galina's. The happiness in her eyes was real. She'd had a friend. A life. Before it was all traded for a cage she never wanted. And the 'friend' beside her? She had wanted the key to that cage. And had watched it be given to someone else.

"The friendship fractured around the mating," Anatoly stated. "The resentment is our working theory. The irony is that Irina never wanted the thing Galina apparently came to resent her for having."

Ilya understood immediately. It was a sick, tragic joke. His mother's stolen life had been the object of another woman's envy, an envy that had perhaps festered for decades, finally finding its target in her son.

"There is another connection," Anatoly said, pulling Ilya from the dark spiral of the past.

Ilya let out a harsh, exhausted breath. "Of course there fucking is."

Anatoly reached into the folder and placed a newer, clearer photograph on the table. It was Sasha. Smiling, handsome, caught in a casual moment at some European café.

Ilya's initial reaction was confusion, not alarm. "What about Sasha?"

"Kostova is his aunt."

The words didn't compute for a second. Ilya stared at Anatoly, then back at the photograph. "What?"

"His mother's sister."

The floor didn't just drop out from under Ilya; it dissolved into a void. Galina wasn't just his mother's former friend, turned resentful therapist. She was Sasha's aunt. Sasha, who had been

his lover. Sasha, who he thought they had remained on friendly terms after their sexual relationship ran its course, one of the first people that knew of his desires, the unvarnished truths he'd whispered in the dark. Sasha, who had heard him talk about Shane long before Shane was anything but a persistent, infuriating fantasy. Who he thought was one of his last few ties to Russia.

Pieces began to snap together. The specific, pinpoint insights Galina had sometimes displayed, small things about his relationship with his father, his insecurities about Russia, the particular flavor of his obsession with Shane. He'd dismissed it as therapist's intuition. It wasn't. It was family gossip.

"He talked to her about me," Ilya said, the anger cooling into something hard and crystalline.

"Yes, we think so."

"How much?"

"We don't know yet," Anatoly admitted. "We have evidence of regular contact between them for years. That alone isn't suspicious; they are family. What is suspicious is the pattern." He laid out a series of printed charts, timelines with spikes marked in red. "Communication between them increased noticeably around major events in your life. When you and Shane became more publicly connected. When Shane's Omega status was confirmed. When Shane disappeared. And again, sharply, when he was found."

Ilya's eyes tracked the dates. He remembered every one. The joy, the fear, the desperation.

Then Anatoly placed a final sheet of paper on the table. It was a printout of fragmented, partially decrypted messages. "This is what changes the investigation," he said quietly.

Ilya scanned the lines. The language was cryptic, incomplete, but certain phrases leapt out, cold and stark:

...Russia remains the optimal environment...

...timing must align with the child's arrival...

...ensure his sense of heritage is preserved...

...is he receptive yet? Progress is steady...

...campaign would boost birth rates...

...Omega initiative is not accepted by younger generation...

...the child is the key to his return...

“What child?” Ilya asked, his voice dangerously calm.

Anatoly just looked at him.

The realization was a physical blow to the gut. “Bean?”

“We believe so.”

Inside Ilya, every Alpha instinct erupted in a silent scream. A primal, white-hot urge to smash, to secure, to destroy anything that even looked sideways at his mate and his child. He stood up so quickly the chair screeched backward on the wooden planks. He paced two steps toward the lake, his hands clenching and unclenching, a torrent of Russian curses spilling from his lips under his breath. He wanted to order a lockdown, to bundle Shane into a car and drive until the world ran out of road, to find Sasha and Galina and-

He stopped. Forced a shuddering breath into his lungs. He looked back at the cottage, at the window behind which Shane was waiting. Protect, don't control. Ask, talk to him. Decide together.

He turned back to Anatoly, who was watching him with the patience of a bomb disposal expert. “What do they want with my child?” The question was leveled, deliberate.

“We don’t know yet.” Anatoly held his gaze. “We have theories. No proof. However, the references... they don’t read like a plan for physical abduction. It suggests something more subtle.”

“They wanted me involved.”

“Obviously. It is your fucking baby.”

“No,” Anatoly said, leaning forward. “I mean they needed you to make something happen. The communications frame you as a participant, not an obstacle.”

The distinction made his heart clench, a feeling that was oily and unsettling. Then Ilya remembered. His last ‘normal’ session with Galina. Her questions had felt off, probing in a new direction. “She asked me about Russia,” he said, the memory crystallizing. “Why I hadn’t been home. Said Bean was Russian too. That he should know his heritage. His ‘true home.’” He repeated her words verbatim, the echo of them now dripping with sinister meaning.

Anatoly’s focus sharpened. “Had she ever discussed you raising children in Russia before? Before Shane’s pregnancy?”

Ilya thought back, sifting through months of sessions. “No. Never.”

Anatoly sat back, nodding slowly. “That is significant.” He chose his next words carefully. “The working theory is that whatever Galina and Sasha have been doing, Shane may not have been the ultimate target. The pregnancy changed the situation. Their communications intensified after it became known. Galina’s pharmacological approach with you became more aggressive in the same period.” He pointed to the fragmented messages. “They wanted the child in Russia.”

Ilya stared at the damning words. “The only way to get me or the baby in Russia is that something happens to Shane.”

Anatoly paused, then gave a single, grave nod. “Yes.”

“How?” Ilya’s voice was flat. “How did they intend to get him there?”

Anatoly spread his hands. “That is what we don’t understand yet.”

But Ilya was already staring into the middle distance, the horrible possibility taking root. They might not have needed to snatch Bean. If they could manipulate Ilya, through the bond, through drugs, through a crafted sense of duty or fear or “heritage”, they could convince him to bring his son home to Mother Russia himself.

Before he could voice the chilling thought, Anatoly delivered a final caution. “We still do not know what Sasha understands about everything. Whether he knew Galina was drugging you beyond standard treatment. We don’t know if their goals are perfectly aligned, or if Sasha believes, in some twisted way, he is helping you.” He fixed Ilya with a stern look. “So you cannot go after him. Not yet.”

Ilya’s eyes flashed with instant rebellion. “I want to talk to him.”

“Nyet. let us take care of this. You focus on your family, we can and will protect all of you.”

The old Ilya would have snarled, would have asserted his dominance. This Ilya felt the surge of the impulse, caught it, and forced it down. He took a breath. “Why?”

The small correction, the demand for reason over authority, did not go unnoticed by Anatoly. “Sasha does not know we have uncovered this. Neither does Galina. That ignorance is our only advantage. If you confront him now, emotionally, we lose it. We get denials, warnings, a buried trail. We wait, we watch. We gather more information.”

Ilya hated it. Every fiber of his being hated the waiting, the calculation, the feeling of being a prey animal studied through a scope. But he nodded, a sharp, curt motion. “Fine.” He

gathered the scattered photographs and documents back into the folder, his movements controlled. “Galina?”

Anatoly studied him. “What about her?”

“I want to see her.”

“Why?”

Ilya looked through the glass doors of the cottage, to where he knew Shane was waiting. His expression was like polished stone. “Because she still thinks she knows me. She still thinks she can predict me.” He turned his icy blue gaze back to Anatoly. “I want to look her in the eye and know what she thinks she can make me do.”

He didn’t wait for permission or a plan. He simply stood, the folder under his arm, and walked back toward the cottage door. He had a promise to keep.

Come back and tell me.

He pushed the door open. Shane was standing right where he’d left him, though the others had tactfully dispersed, giving the illusion of privacy. Shane’s eyes searched his face, reading the new layers of rage, grief, and chilling resolve there.

Ilya crossed the space, the floorboards creaking under his weight. He closed the bedroom door, leaning against it for a second, as if barricading the outside world. Shane reached out for him, his fingers wrapping around Ilya’s wrist once Ilya was close enough, tugging until Ilya let himself be pulled down to sit on the edge of the nest.

“How bad?” Shane asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Ilya looked at him, at the clear, worried eyes searching his face. The instinct to shield him, to say ‘it’s nothing, I’ll handle it, rose and died in the same breath. That was his way of thinking before. It led nowhere good.

“Pretty fucking bad,” Ilya said, the words gravelly.

Shane gave a humorless little laugh. “Great.”

Ilya settled beside him, their shoulders touching. He opened the folder on his lap, not on the photos of his mother, but on the timeline Anatoly had constructed. He started at the beginning, forcing himself to be honest but not to worry his pregnant mate too much.

“Galina wanted my father,” he said, the words tasting like ash in his mouth. “My father forced my mother. Irina.” He pointed to her young, smiling face. “She did not want him. She tried to refuse the mating.”

Shane’s breath hitched. He understood the significance immediately, viscerally, after weeks of Ruth and Walter’s lessons. “She said no.”

Ilya looked down at his own hands, clenched on his knees. “Da.”

The silence was heavy with the unspoken parallel with there own relationship. Had Ilya ever given Shane the choice to be with him? Eventually, Ilya forced the words out. “I did same thing. I’m just like him.”

Shane didn’t pretend to misunderstand. Willow Creek. The desperate, determined retrieval. The conviction that Shane’s refusal was almost a symptom to be treated, not a boundary to be

respected. “You did,” Shane said quietly. The acknowledgment was a stone dropped between them.

Then Shane’s hand found his, lacing their fingers together. “And you’re trying not to do it again. You are not him, Ilya! Yes we have both made mistakes in this relationship, but we are working to make it better, right? That makes you better than your father.”

The distinction was a lifeline and Ilya clung to it. “Anatoly said... I cannot change what I did. I decide what I do next.”

A faint, real smile touched Shane’s lips. “I like Anatoly.”

“Everyone likes Anatoly,” Ilya grumbled, the familiar complaint a touchstone of normalcy. “Is becoming irritating.” The seconds of lightness faded as Ilya’s expression sobered. “There is more.”

Shane groaned, dropping his head back against the pillows. “Of course there fucking is.”

Ilya slid Sasha’s photograph from the folder. Shane’s eyes narrowed in recognition and he stiffened.

“Galina is his aunt.”

Shane stared. “What?”

Ilya explained the family connection, the years of contact, and Anatoly’s charts showing the suspicious spikes, Shane’s name going public, the disappearance.

While Ilya’s reaction had been personal betrayal, Shane’s mind clicked into a cold, analytical thought. “What did he know?” Shane asked, his voice sharp. “Did he know about me before? ... Us?”

With each question, Ilya felt another piece of his privacy, his past, being exposed as potentially compromised. “Yes,” he said to each, the word growing heavier. “Mostly, yes.”

His voice dropped, shame and anger twisting together. “We were not just friends, Shane. We were lovers. There were... conversations. In bed. I stopped sleeping with him right after we met, and he noticed but I thought we ended things on good terms. We still talked though so I told him things I would not...” He trailed off, looking sick. “And he most likely gave them to her.”

Shane’s expression shifted to a deep, empathetic anger. He didn’t offer fake reassurances. “We don’t know how much he told her yet,” he said, sticking to the known facts, refusing to let fear force their hand.

Ilya nodded, absorbing the discipline. Then he took a steadying breath and reached the core of his dread. He handed Shane the page of fragmented messages. “Read it.”

Shane took it, his eyes scanning the cryptic lines. Ilya watched his face, saw the moment his gaze snagged on the phrases: the child... heritage... key to his return. Shane’s free hand moved instinctively, protectively, over the curve of his stomach.

“They’re talking about Bean.”

“We think so,” Ilya said, deliberately using Anatoly’s cautious language.

“What do they want with him?”

“We don’t know.” Ilya told him the theory, Russia, Ilya’s return, the medication possibly making him “receptive.” Then he told him about Galina’s questions in their last session. Your child is Russian. He should know his homeland.

Shane went very still. “You thought that was normal?”

“It was normal,” Ilya said. He paused as he thought about what he wanted to say without causing panic. “That is why it worked.”

The idea was so simple that the sinister genius of it hung in the air. A perfectly reasonable sentiment that had been so easily weaponized.

As Ilya laid out Anatoly’s theory, that they may have aimed to influence Ilya into bringing his son or daughter to Russia, Shane had a small, involuntary reaction. He didn’t flinch or pull away dramatically, but his hand pressed firmer over Bean, his body shifting an inch deeper into the nest’s protective cocoon. His scent spiked with a flash of sharp acidic fear.

Ilya noticed. He knew exactly what Shane was thinking in that moment. “Would you have done it? Taken the baby away from me and gone to Russia?”

His stomach plummeted. “I don’t know,” Ilya said, his voice raw. “I could tell you no, that I would never do that, but I don’t know what could have happened with the pills I was taking.”

Shane looked up, startled. “What?”

“If you are wondering whether they could have convinced me.” He held Shane’s gaze, forcing himself through the shame. I would like to say nothing could make me take our baby from you.” His throat worked. “But a few weeks ago, I did things I also thought I would never do.”

Shane looked down, his breath shaky. Ilya didn’t reach for him, not until Shane’s hand crept back across the blanket and found his. Ilya gripped it, an anchor.

“They will not get the chance to find out,” Ilya said.

Shane let out a wet, shaky sound that was almost a laugh. “Because my mom stole your fucking pill.”

A faint, weary smirk touched Ilya’s lips. “Your mother may have saved our family. I will owe her for the rest of my life.”

Shane snorted despite everything. “Don’t tell her that.”

“Never. She will become unbearable.”

Shane squirmed around and yanked on Ilya to lay down with him, settling back against the pillows, Shane asked, “What are you going to do about Galina?”

Ilya told him Anatoly’s advice- wait, investigate, don’t alert Sasha.

Shane studied him. “That’s what Anatoly wants.”

“Da.”

“What do you want?”

Ilya was silent for a long moment. “Things Walter would disapprove of. I want to torture her. I want to make her beg for death.”

Shane’s turned to look up at him. “You’d kill a woman?”

“Yes, with no regrets.” Then Ilya grew serious. “She poses a threat to you and our child, there is no way in this world that she can be stay living.”

Shane immediately stiffened. Ilya explained why. “I want to do it. I have to protect you. I don’t take death lightly but nothing can be a risk to you.” The difference, between desire and decision, between unilateral action and strategy, hung between them.

So they built a plan, together. Shane asked practical, pointed questions. Will Anatoly know? Security? Recordings? Ilya answered each. Then the most important one: “Why do you need to see her again?”

Ilya looked offended. “I am Russian, saying we talk over the phone is not going to work. She needs to think I’m mad at Yuna and want to hear her side.”

Shane just stared.

Ilya sighed. “I’ll be ok, trust me on this at least.”

They established rules. Ilya explained what Anatoly wanted to do. He would play confused, apologize for his abrupt exit, mention difficulty since stopping the medication. He would let her talk, guide the conversation toward Shane, Bean, Russia. He would listen.

“What if she gets in your head again?” Shane asked, the fear naked in his eyes.

“It wont happen, I made a promise to you. I need to be someone that you could be proud of, someone that deserves your love.” Ilya said.

“If you start feeling off, leave. Immediately.”

“Da.”

“Not after you prove something. Not after one more question.”

“Immediately.” They agreed on a safe phrase, a text to Anatoly that would end the meeting without question.

Then Ilya added his condition. “And if you change your mind before I go, you tell me.”

Shane started to protest that it was Ilya’s decision.

“It is,” Ilya agreed. “But this was done to both of us. I want to know if you become uncomfortable.” It was a compromise, a shared stake.

Once a rough plan was laid, Shane kept staring at the closed folder on the bed. Finally, he reached out, slapped it shut, and pushed it toward the foot of the nest.

“I’m done,” he announced.

Ilya looked from the folder to him. “With what?”

“This. For today.” At Ilya’s skeptical look, Shane pushed the folder completely off the bed. It thumped softly on the floor. “Galina has taken enough fucking days from us. Anatoly is investigating. We have security watching. We don’t have to solve it right now,” Shane said, his voice firm. “Today we were supposed to relax. So we’re going to relax.”

Ilya was almost amused. “You are ordering me to relax?”

“Yes.”

“Very controlling.”

Shane threw a pillow at him.

They changed into soft clothes and burrowed back into the nest. Shane stole another of Ilya's hoodies, complaining his own clothes "felt wrong." They brought snacks upstairs. Shane produced his jar of pickles and honey.

Ilya recoiled. "I proved my love already this morning. I am not eating that."

"Bean likes it, and I think it's your fault." Shane insisted, taking a bite.

Ilya leaned down to Shane's belly. "Your judgment is questionable, malenkiy."

A solid kick answered him. Shane looked unbearably smug.

They watched a mindless action movie, the explosions a distant backdrop to their quiet cocoon. Shane read while Ilya scrolled through his phone. Ilya rubbed Shane's swollen feet without being asked. Shane's fingers absently carded through Ilya's curls. They napped, a tangle of limbs and shared breath, settling closer together than they had been in months.

Hours passed. Shane realized, with a start, that they hadn't mentioned Galina, Sasha, or Russia once. The world had not ended because they'd chosen to step away from the brink of it.

Ilya's phone buzzed with a message. Shane, drowsy against his shoulder, felt him tense slightly. "Troy?" Shane guessed when Ilya let out a soft laugh.

"Da. And Harris. They are... persistent."

“They love you,” Shane murmured. He was quiet for a moment. “You sound like you’ve made good friends on the team. Why don’t we have everyone over?”

Ilya looked down at him. “Everyone?”

Shane immediately lifted his head, eyes narrowing. “Define ‘everyone’ before you answer that.”

It turned playful. They meant their people. A proper gathering again, but now Ilya would have the same amount of people to invite. Food, a fire, hockey debates, giving each other shit, babies and kids all around. No therapists. No conspiracies. Just their chaotic, loyal, loving orbit.

As they listed names, Svetlana, Hayden and Jackie, Scott and Kip, Shane noticed Ilya was only naming his friends.

“What about your team?” Shane asked.

Ilya looked surprised. “What about them?”

“You can invite them. Your people.”

Ilya studied him, the offer sinking in. This wasn’t Shane allowing Ilya into his family event. It was Shane telling Ilya to bring his new family into their space. “You are sure?”

“Yeah. I want to meet them when they’re not trying to put me through the boards.”

Ilya’s grin was swift. “They will love it. You have a lot of fans on the team”

Shane blushed and smiled, agreeing to open a big group text message from Ilya's phone for the invites.

For the next hour, they planned to have everyone over for the day and dinner. Rose, Svetlana, Troy and Harris, the Pikes and Hunters were offered to stay the weekend. They texted people together, shoulder to shoulder. Ilya added the rest of the Centaurs. Svetlana demanded a menu, to which Bood answered that he could take care of the cooking, something that was highly discussed and people on the team sounded excited about. In a separate private text, Svetlana asked if this was going to be their baby shower.

Shane typed back, all caps: NO.

A flurry of gift ideas followed immediately. The few who knew about Shane's 'condition' wanted to celebrate it properly. Ilya's phone began to vibrate incessantly.

Shane watched the notifications pile up with dawning horror. "How many people did you invite?"

Ilya scanned the exploding thread. "This may have gotten away from me."

Shane groaned, burying his face in Ilya's shoulder, but he was laughing. The problems they were solving now were about sleeping arrangements and grill space and whether Walter would tolerate a horde of hockey players. They were good problems.

As evening bled into night, they were still nestled together. Shane was mostly asleep, his weight a warm, trusting pressure against Ilya's side. Ilya's hand rested over the steady, sleeping movements of their child.

Across the room, the folder lay where Shane had pushed it, a dark rectangle on the floor. It contained the photographs, the messages, the connections, the entire threatening shape of the

past trying to claim their future.

Ilya looked at it once. Then he looked down at Shane, at the peaceful slope of his cheekbone, the faint flutter of his eyelashes. He didn't get up. He didn't reach for the folder. He shifted carefully, pulling the quilt higher over them both, and settled deeper into the nest.

The danger wasn't gone. The confrontation was coming. They would need much more information. But their lives, this life they were painstakingly rebuilding, did not have to pause in the meantime.

Shane stirred, nuzzling blindly against his chest. "You're still here?" he mumbled, voice thick with sleep.

Ilya looked down at the crown of his head, his heart a vast, aching thing in his chest. "Where else would I be?"

Shane's eyes didn't open, but his fingers curled tightly into Ilya's shirt, holding on.

"Good," he sighed, and drifted back under.

Ilya rested his cheek against Shane's hair, closed his eyes, and stayed.

Tomorrow, they could think about Galina. This weekend, their friends were coming. Tonight, Shane wanted him here.

For now, it was enough.

The days after the Galina revelation unfolded in a rhythm that felt both foreign and deeply familiar. The cottage became their world again, but the air within it had changed. It was no longer a battlefield or a hospital ward, but something closer to a sanctuary, one where the ghosts of past mistakes were acknowledged but no longer given precedence.

Their nest, which they both kept working on, began to feel like a home within a home. Evenings found them tangled together, sometimes talking for hours in the dark, sometimes existing in a silence so comfortable it felt like its own conversation. Ilya had learned, painstakingly, to listen without immediately trying to fix things. Shane had learned, just as painfully, to speak before the pressure to flee became overwhelming, to work hard on expressing himself and leaning to trust his alpha again.

One such conversation, Shane's fingers traced idle patterns on Ilya's chest. "You know," he murmured, "I used to love it when you'd get all... growly. When someone would look at me too long."

Ilya went still beneath him, the old fear of misstep tightening his muscles. "And now?"

"Sometimes I still do," Shane admitted, the words soft against Ilya's skin. He could feel Shane's face getting warm and smiled at the thought of his mate blushing. "When it feels like you're saying 'mine' and not 'you belong to me.' There's a difference."

Ilya absorbed that, turning the distinction over in his mind. "I am not sure I always knew there was one."

"I'm not sure I ever told you," Shane conceded, shifting to look at him. "I'd lean into it when I liked it. Get pissed when I didn't. That wasn't fair either. Ruth said it was mixed signals."

It was one of many small, compromises and new 'rules' in their relationship that they wanted to test out. Shane acknowledged that running to Willow Creek, however justified by fear, was a cowardly form of solving his problems. Ilya acknowledged that his fear of something happening to Shane did not grant him sovereignty over his mate's choices.

These understandings seeped into their days. Ilya started to pause, hand hovering near Shane's back, and wait for a nod before touching. Shane, feeling overwhelmed by the bond's intensity or his own hormones, would say, "I need a minute," and Ilya would stay exactly where he was, breathing through the instinct to follow.

The physical space between them shrank naturally, without force. They slept wrapped around each other, Shane's back to Ilya's chest, Ilya's hand a warm weight on his bump. Shane would reach for Ilya's wrist in his sleep, pulling his arm tighter around himself. Ilya kissed his forehead, his shoulder, the curve of his belly, small, reverent touches that held no demand, only affection. Shane stole Ilya's hoodies constantly, swimming in the soft fabric that smelled like leather and safety. Sometimes Ilya would catch Shane watching him from across the room, a soft, unguarded look on his face, and Shane would blush and look away, as if caught in a secret.

The damage was still there, like a faint scar tissue over their bond. But the wanting, the deep, gravitational pull that had always existed between them from the very first time they'd met, had never gone away. They were just learning how to navigate its force without crashing into each other.

The morning their friends were due to arrive, Shane stood before the closet, a low-grade panic simmering in his gut. He'd been the one to suggest inviting Ilya's teammates. Now, faced with the reality of it, every insecurity came roaring back. These weren't just friends; they were Ilya's people. Men who had seen Ilya at his most shattered. Men who had only ever known Shane Hollander as the rival, the obsession, the missing Omega.

He pulled on a dark, loose t-shirt. It made his belly look like a separate planet he was carrying in front of him. He scowled and tore it off.

The next option was a button-up he'd bought specifically for this, something meant to look sleek and put-together. He fastened it, but the way it strained across his stomach felt like he was trying to hide a fact everyone already knew. It felt dishonest.

The third was too tight, the fourth, a flowy modified henley that his mother had given him, too... Omega. Whatever that meant. He just knew it felt like a costume.

From the nest, Ilya watched the parade with growing amusement, wisely keeping his mouth shut until Shane emerged in a fifth attempt, a sweater that was definitely from his side of the closet.

“No,” Shane declared, answering the question Ilya hadn’t asked.

Ilya looked up from his phone, eyebrows raised. “I say nothing.”

“Your face did.”

“Well, my face thinks you are beautiful.”

“Oh shut up.” Shane said with a smile and blush, vanishing back into the walk-in.

When the rustling didn’t stop, Ilya finally followed. He found clothes strewn all over the floor and shelves and Shane standing shirtless before the mirror, both hands cradling the full, heavy curve of his stomach, his expression lost.

This wasn’t about clothes.

Ilya leaned against the doorframe. “Solnyshko?”

Shane’s eyes met his in the reflection. “I’m nervous,” he admitted, the words small.

“Ah, I see.”

“They’re your people. They saw you... after. They probably think I’m the asshole who ran away and left you to fall apart.” His hands smoothed over his belly. “And I’m... this. They haven’t seen me like this. What if they’re staring? What if they think I’m weak? Or that I trapped you? Or-” He cut himself off, the underlying fear exposed. He wasn’t just meeting teammates; he was presenting his pregnant, Omega body to a room full of comparative strangers for the first time. At the cottage, it had become normal. Now, it felt like a spectacle.

Ilya didn’t tell him he was being ridiculous. He moved into the room, stopping behind him, his hands coming up to hover just beside Shane’s on his stomach. He waited. Shane leaned back, his spine settling against Ilya’s chest, granting permission. Ilya’s hands settled, warm and solid, over Shane’s.

“Some of them were angry, but they were only thinking that the team was finally winning then it fell apart. I’ve talked to them and everyone understands.” Ilya said, his voice a low rumble against Shane’s ear. “They saw me become... not myself.” He paused, choosing his next words with care. “If anyone is disrespectful to you, they leave. But I think no one will be. Remember, you are Shane Fucking Hollander. You’re the best player in this sport and they know that.”

Shane smiled slightly, “Really? Ilya Rozanov is saying that Shane Hollander is the best player in the NHL?”

Ilya smiled and pushed the long hair aside and kissed the side of his neck, feeling his little mate shiver. “Yes, I think so. Just wait, when you get back on the ice, you’ll be unstoppable. So that you for letting me have some time to shine for myself.”

Shane turned around to face Ilya. “Will you let me play still?”

“Yes, if you still want the same career, I’ll do anything to make it happen. Once the doctor clears you, you go back to playing. I hate that it will be Montreal, but we’ll make it work, no problem.”

He had felt Shane tense slightly, anticipating the old command. Ilya caught himself. “Unless,” he amended, “you want something different.”

Shane heard the correction. He let out a slow breath, some of the tension leaving his shoulders. “What should I wear?” he asked, changing the subject.

Ilya’s eyes scanned the wreckage. He pointed immediately to a soft, heather-gray Henley of his own that Shane had stolen days before, paired with the stretchy black pants Shane lived in.

Shane glared. “Of course you picked that one.” The Henley would cling to every contour.

“You asked.”

“I knew asking you was a mistake.” But he was already reaching for it.

As Shane pulled the familiar fabric over his head, Ilya spoke again, his voice softer. “You are allowed to be nervous. But you do not have to hide our baby.” He rested his chin on Shane’s shoulder. “Wear what feels like you and what you’re comfortable in. No one is a stranger—these are family, our friends.”

The Henley did feel like him. It smelled like Ilya, like safety, like them. It also left absolutely no doubt about the life growing inside him. Shane looked in the mirror, at the way the soft cotton stretched over the proud swell, at Ilya standing solid behind him. He looked... like himself. Pregnant. Mated. Home.

“You’re scent-marking me through your clothes,” Shane accused, but he was fighting a smile.

Ilya’s grin in the mirror was unrepentant. “Obviously, a lot of alphas are about to be around my pretty mate. Have to stake my claim somehow.”

Chaos arrived in waves.

First, their established orbit: Svetlana swept in with enough food to feed an army, kissing both their cheeks loudly. Hayden, Jackie and their kids arrived, Hayden's greeting to Ilya a curt nod that was, for him, practically effusive. When he got to Shane, Hayden carefully hugged him, rubbing the top of his head softly, whispering that he'd missed his best friend. Scott and Kip brought their baby and an aura of calm. JJ arrived, his silent scrutiny now tinged with a wary curiosity. He seemed almost disbelieving when he saw how big Shane was. Troy and Harris showed up together, Troy immediately dragging Ilya into a debate about the new crop of rookies being talked about.

Yuna, David, Ruth and Walter moved through their groups with lively chatter, Ruth directing traffic and shooting down any nonsense with a single look. Then the Centaurs began to pour in, a rolling tide of loud voices, laughter, and oversized personalities. Players arrived with partners, spouses, kids, coolers, and, despite explicit instructions to the contrary, an avalanche of brightly wrapped gifts for the baby. Someone had spread the news so there was no surprised looks or stares, which Shane highly appreciated.

Ilya lit up in a way Shane had rarely seen. This was his world, built without Shane. Teammates yelled his name or 'Cap', insulted him affectionately, hugged him, immediately began arguing about who he would push next to join the team. Shane watched from his perch on the deck steps, a strange warmth spreading through his chest. Ilya had made friends. Real ones. He had a life here in Canada, full of people who cared about him. The rare, possessive part of Shane that wanted to be Ilya's entire universe quieted, replaced by a gladder, quieter feeling, 'He's not alone.'

Initially, Shane stayed close, his fingers often brushing Ilya's arm or hooking loosely in his belt loop. The Centaurs, trying desperately to be normal, became profoundly awkward.

"Mr. Hollander, can I, uh, get you a drink?" a young defenseman asked, frozen mid-step.

Shane stared. Ilya burst out laughing, clutching his side.

"Please," Ilya wheezed, "never stop calling him this."

"Fuck you, Rozanov," Shane shot back, but he was grinning. The ice was broken.

Soon, sincere congratulations were offered for the baby. The players' partners, far less burdened by hockey rivalry, swooped in and began talking to Shane about pregnancy feet, nursery themes, and the merits of different strollers. One of the wives, a no-nonsense woman named Cassie, patted his belly without asking. "Oh, they're sitting low. Bet you're peeing every ten minutes."

Shane blinked, then laughed. "Pretty much."

Little fragments of the past months slipped out. A grizzled veteran sipped his beer and said, "Good to see you feeding him properly. Boy was living on coffee and rage for a while." Another mentioned, offhand, how Ilya had basically moved into the training facility. "We're just happy to see this asshole smiling again," someone else said, clapping Ilya on the back.

The room hushed for a second. Shane looked at Ilya, who shrugged, a faint pink tingeing his cheeks. Rose broke the slight tension when she moaned loudly after taking a bite of grilled chicken, asking to be Bood's second wife just to eat.

Later, as Shane let a teammate's curious young daughter feel Bean kick, he looked up and caught Ilya's gaze across the deck. Ilya was leaning against the railing, talking to Scott, Hayes and JJ, but his eyes were on Shane while he was surrounded by the WAGs and Rose. Watching his worlds merge. Not Shane tolerating his life, or Ilya being absorbed into Shane's, but something new and shared being born right there in the afternoon sun.

The noise and crowd eventually reached a tipping point. The chatter, the sizzle of the grill, the children shrieking close to the lakes edge, it all began to press against Shane's heightened senses, a static building behind his eyes. Instead of shutting down or bolting, he leaned into Ilya's space.

"I need ten minutes," he said quietly.

Ilya's attention snapped to him instantly. "Alone or with me?"

Shane thought for a second, assessing the need. The overload was sensory, not emotional. He wanted the quiet, but he didn't want to be alone. "With you."

They slipped upstairs without fanfare, into the quiet of their nest. Shane lay down, and Ilya sat beside him, a hand on his ankle massaging up and down, saying nothing. After ten minutes of blessed silence, Shane sighed. "Okay. I'm good."

When they descended, Walter caught Ilya's eye from across the deck, gave a nearly imperceptible nod, and mouthed, "Better."

Ilya couldn't help the flash of pride. "I know."

Walter pointed a spatula at him. "Don't ruin it."

By evening, Shane was exhausted in the best way. The cottage was a glorious, messy home with empty plates, laughter, and intertwined lives. They had had a cake, and hundred of pictures had been taken. The baby had acquired a small mountain of gifts- tiny jerseys, stuffed animals, practical items from the veterans. Shane sat propped on the sofa, Ilya a solid presence beside him, arguing good-naturedly with Troy about playoff predictions.

Shane realized he'd stopped thinking about how he looked, how pregnant he was, how Omega he appeared. He was just... Shane. Pregnant. Here. Surrounded by a community that was slowly, organically, becoming theirs. He loved Ilya's team. They had an easy going energy that he'd never felt with his own team and they seemed to genuinely like each other.

He reached over, his fingers finding Ilya's hand and lacing through it.

Ilya broke off his argument, looking down at their joined hands, then up at Shane's face. "You okay?"

Shane looked around, at his mother laughing with Svetlana, at Walter demonstrating a grilling technique to a captivated Bood, at Hayden actually smiling at something a few of the

Centaurs were saying, at the whole, imperfect, beautiful mess of it.

He looked back at Ilya, at the blue eyes that held his whole history and his future, and squeezed his hand.

“Yeah,” Shane said. A beat. A slow, sure smile touched his lips as the truth settled deep, past the fear, past the damage, into a place that felt like peace. “I think I am.”

The last car crunched down the gravel driveway, taillights dissolving into the deep blue twilight. The cottage, which had thrummed with voices and laughter all day, settled into a contented, exhausted silence. It was a pleasant wreck, wrapping paper piled in colorful little mountains, towers of tiny clothes and toys awaiting organization, abandoned glasses ringed with condensation on every surface, the lingering, savory scent of grilled food woven through the piney night air. It was the aftermath of a happiness that had felt improbably, overwhelmingly real.

In the kitchen, Ilya moved with Ruth and Yuna to clean the mess of plates. He had noticed Shane breathing heavier at the clutter so he sent him with Rose and Svetlana to take a closer look at the gifts while they cleaned. Walter, drying a platter, watched him for a moment before nodding toward the back door.

“C’mon. Bring that bag out to the bins.”

Ilya shouldered a heavy trash bag and followed Walter out onto the deck, now empty and strewn with forgotten napkins. The lake was like a sheet of black glass under a sky dusted with early stars.

Walter leaned against the railing, not looking at Ilya. “You did good today.”

Ilya tied off the bag, hefting it into the large bin. “Party was Shane’s idea. He planned most of it.”

Walter shook his head, a faint smile touching his weathered face. “I’m not talkin’ about the party.”

That stopped Ilya. He turned, wiping his hands on his jeans.

“Saw him gettin’ overwhelmed,” Walter said, his voice low and even. “Saw you notice. But you didn’t pounce, you waited. You asked him if he wanted to be alone or if he wanted you with him.”

Ilya shrugged, a defensive gesture he hadn’t quite unlearned. “Is what you told me to do.”

“Knowing what you’re supposed to do,” Walter said, finally looking at him, “and actually doing it when every instinct in your body is screamin’ at you to do the opposite... those are two different things. You did the harder one. I’m proud of you, kid. Over the past couple of weeks its been better.”

The praise, so simple and direct, slipped past Ilya’s defenses and landed somewhere deep and vulnerable. He was accustomed to acclaim for his skill, his strength, his dominance. Being told he was good at being Shane’s mate... it felt like a trophy of a different, more precious metal.

“I almost followed him before he asked,” Ilya admitted, the words quiet in the dark.

“But you didn’t.”

“Was very difficult.”

“I know. The effort was there and for that and all the effort you’ve been putting in, we’re all proud of the two of you boys.” The understanding in Walter’s tone wasn’t patronizing. It made Ilya believe him.

“Don’t go gettin’ too pleased with yourself yet,” Walter continued, his gaze drifting out over the dark water. “Today was practice. Shane was overwhelmed by noise. Nothin’ was threatenin’ him. You knew, in your head, that givin’ him ten minutes wouldn’t hurt.” He turned his head back toward Ilya. “The real test ain’t come yet.”

“What test?”

“The one where you’re genuinely scared for him. Where you think, in your bones, he’s makin’ the wrong choice. Where every part of you is yellin’ that if you don’t take control right that second, somethin’ terrible’s gonna happen.” Walter’s eyes held his. “What are you gonna do then?”

Ilya didn’t have a ready answer. The instinct to take over, to intervene, protect, control was not the right way to handle Shane. He thought about it, the hum of the distant crickets filling the silence. “If I can, I will talk to him,” Ilya said finally.

“And if you don’t like his answer?”

Ilya grimaced. “Talk to him more. We’ve done a lot of talking the past few days. We both agree to work on communication but I let him know that if something is a danger to either him or the baby, I have to take action.”

“And if you still don’t agree? If he fights against you taking over?”

A longer pause. Ilya wrestled with the hypothetical, feeling the ghost of that future fear in his gut. “Then I suppose I have to decide... if it is actual danger, or just something I am afraid of.”

A slow nod of approval from Walter. “There it is. Fear and danger can look the same sometimes. Your job is to learn which is which.” He pushed off the railing. “Protectin’ him don’t mean he’ll always pick what you prefer. Sometimes bein’ a good mate means standin’ right beside him while he makes a choice that scares the hell out of you. And bein’ there after, either way.”

The truth of it was both a burden and a release. Ilya let out a long breath, watching it mist in the cool air. “I do not know how to do this naturally,” he confessed, the admission feeling perilously close to weakness. “Nobody taught me. My father... he taught control. My mother taught survival. Before Shane, everything was...” He waved a hand, dismissing the transient relationships of his past. “And then him. I loved him so much. I thought the strength of that... meant my instincts must be right.”

“Sometimes I don’t know what part is instinct,” Ilya murmured, almost to himself, “and what part is just me being fucked up.”

Walter didn’t offer false comfort. “Probably both, sometimes.” He moved to go back inside, then paused, clapping a heavy hand on Ilya’s shoulder. “Instinct isn’t always right, son. Wantin’ to protect your mate? That’s instinct. How you choose to protect him? That’s character. You’re learnin’ yours.”

“Very slowly,” Ilya said, a wry twist to his mouth.

“You’re Russian,” Walter deadpanned, heading for the door. “We adjusted expectations.”

Ilya stared at his retreating back for a second, then a surprised, genuine laugh broke from him, echoing softly across the quiet lake.

Inside, Shane had escaped to the relative calm of the living room. He sat amid all of Bean’s new things, a tiny, impossibly soft bunny in one hand, slowly directing Rose, Jackie and Svetlana to make organized piles of baby things. The task was methodical, soothing.

Ruth appeared, settling onto the sofa beside him without a word. She picked up a onesie and began folding it with practiced efficiency. They all worked for a few minutes, happy to just be together.

“Good day?” Ruth finally asked, her voice as soft as the lamplight.

A smile bloomed on Shane’s face, tired but real. “Really good.” He set the bunny aside. “I was... terrified this morning. Convinced they’d all hate me on sight. See me as this... fragile, pregnant liability who broke their captain.”

“And?”

“And they were just great people. Nice ones. I actually liked them.”

Ruth nodded, folding another sock into a perfect square. “And Ilya?”

Shane’s fingers stilled on a striped onesie. He considered. “We’re good.” He caught himself, amending with a honesty that had become habit. “No. We’re getting good I should say.”

Ruth’s smile was a small, satisfied thing. “Better.”

The quiet stretched again, filled with the simple, profound trust of shared space. Shane found the words spilling out, lulled by the rhythm of folding.

“The last few days... it’s been scary, Ruth. How nice it’s been. Sleeping next to him. Talking. Just... existing. Sometimes I wake up and for a second, everything is exactly like it was before.” He swallowed, the confession feeling dangerous. “And then I remember everything that **did** happen. And I think... am I being stupid? Letting myself relax? What if I let my guard down and...”

“And something happens again?” Ruth finished gently.

Shane nodded, his throat tight.

Ruth set her folded pile neatly aside. “The goal isn’t to build something where you never get hurt, or misunderstand each other, or get angry, Shane. That’s a fairy tale.” She reached over, stilling his fidgeting hands with one of her own. “The goal is learning what you do during and after an argument. We’re all human and saying that it’ll be a perfect relationship is a lie. You’re learning whether the two of you can repair it when it does.”

Emboldened by the darkness and the quiet while the girls went to the nursery, Shane ventured further. “I... like it. When he takes care of me.” The admission burned his cheeks with shame. “After fighting him for so long about my independence... I like when he helps me up. Makes my food. Rubs my feet. I like being tucked in. I even... sometimes I like the hovering.” He looked down at his belly, a helpless gesture. “And I’m only going to need more help. What if... what if liking it means he was right? That I can’t handle things on my own?”

Ruth’s answer was immediate, sharp as a razor. “Did you ask him to rub your feet?”

“Yes, most of the time, but sometimes he just knows what I need.”

“Do you like it?”

“Yes.”

“Can you tell him to stop?”

Shane thought of the last few days, the way Ilya’s hands would pause at the slightest shift in his posture, the question in his touch. “Yes.”

“And does he?”

“Now? Yeah. Immediately.”

“Then that’s the difference, sweetheart.” Ruth’s voice was firm. “Choosing to depend on someone isn’t the same as having your choices taken away. You can be strong enough to stand on your own two feet and still want someone’s arms around you. The wanting isn’t the weakness. It’s the choice that matters.”

She picked up another tiny shirt, her movements gentle. “You’ve spent a long time wanting that man with your whole soul and being terrified of how much you want him.”

Shane laughed, a wet, choked sound. “With better communication.”

“Annoying, isn’t it?” Ruth said, her eyes twinkling. “Turns out ‘use your words’ applies to grown-ass Olympic athletes too.”

Later, washed clean of the day and wrapped in the familiar sanctuary of their nest, Shane lay half-sprawled across Ilya, his head pillowed on his chest. Ilya’s hand rested on the slope of Shane’s stomach, his thumb idly tracing circles where Bean slept quietly, spent from the day’s excitement. The bond was a low, contented hum, a grounded wire between them.

“I liked them,” Shane murmured into the quiet dark.

Ilya’s chest moved with a silent chuckle. “Of course. They very friendly people.”

Shane’s laugh was a warm puff against Ilya’s skin. He settled back down, but his thoughts were turning, softer now. “I liked seeing you with them,” he said, his voice thoughtful. “Today... I realized there’s a whole version of you I don’t really know.”

Ilya went still beneath him. “What version?”

“Ottawa Ilya. The captain. The friend. The guy people call when they’re in trouble. The man whose house gets invaded because his teammates love him.” Shane shifted, propping himself up on an elbow to look at Ilya’s face. “You looked happy. Really happy. With them.”

The observation hung between them. Ilya felt a flicker of that old, guilt, the happiness had been built in a season when Shane was absent, when he was faking all his emotions.

Shane saw it, the shadow crossing his eyes. He didn’t let it linger. “I’m glad,” he said, the words deliberate and clear. “And I want to know this version of you. The one who built this. Who has people.”

Ilya looked at him, at the earnest, open expression on Shane’s face, devoid of jealousy or insecurity, filled only with a curious, generous affection. His heart swelled, too big for his ribs. “I would like you to,” he said, the words thick.

He leaned up, and Shane met him halfway. The kiss was not desperate like Ilya felt. It was slow, familiar, a rediscovery of a feeling they’d both been afraid was lost. Shane sighed into it, his hand coming up to cup Ilya’s jaw, his thumb stroking the line of his cheekbone. When they parted, Shane’s eyes were fully dilated, somewhat unfocused. Ilya had forgotten how much he loved that Shane could get so lost to the feelings when they were intimate.

As they settled back into the pillows, Shane was about to bring his face up to Ilya’s again, when Bean gave a final, sleepy kick, a punctuation mark against both their sides.

Ilya looked down. “You interrupt everything.”

Shane smiled, snuggling closer, his eyes already closing. “Your kid.”

“Only when annoying,” Ilya whispered into his hair, drawing the blanket up over them. “Otherwise is yours.”

The quiet laughter that passed between them was the last sound in the room, a soft, shared exhalation that held no tension, only the warm, present-tense reality of the nest, the night, and the man beside him. For tonight, there was no conspiracy to unravel, no past to mourn, no future to fear. There was only this, Shane learning the man Ilya had become, and Ilya, wrapped around him, realizing with a quiet, soaring certainty that Shane truly, deeply wanted to know him.

The weekend had to have been one of the happiest in Ilya's life. The cottage seemed to have absorbed the lingering joy like sunlight into the very wood. Shane had showed Ilya his phone the next morning to show that he had been added to the WAGs group text. Harris had shown them all the pictures he took and Ilya asked for a few that hid Shane's condition to post to his socials.

Shane finished opening the gifts and the last one was from Harris himself. It was a lovely card offering to take Shane's pregnancy pictures. After talking about it with Ilya, Shane agreed. That Saturday morning, before dawn, they buddled a sleepy Shane up in his favorite cashmere sweater stolen from Ilya and went out onto the dock.

It took a few minutes for Shane to get comfortable in front of the camera but after an hour when the sun had fully come out they were done. The pictures were beautiful. He loved them and asked Harris to have them sent to him so that he could frame a few. Ilya's favorite one was of the two of them sitting in front of the fire pit, Ilya cradling Shane against his chest, both of them cradling the bump, Shane looking off to the side and Ilya's face buried in his neck. It was the first picture they took together that morning and it was both their favorite.

When they went inside to have breakfast, they showed everyone around the table, managing to not look at Shane's weird breakfast of choice for the day. Yuna loved them all and brought up the fact that they really should announce the pregnancy now before he gave birth. Public records would give them away and it was always best to get ahead of things according to Yuna.

They agreed to post at the same time that Monday. They didn't want to ruin the weekend with guests there and it would give them time to just enjoy them all being together.

It was Anatoly's return, several mornings later, that pulled Ilya back to reality.

He arrived after Shane had gone for an afternoon nap thankfully, the same thick folder under his arm, but his expression was stern. He barely acknowledged the others, no treats for Shane. He just motioned his head towards the dock.

Anatoly laid it all out. The evidence was no longer circumstantial. Financial records showed consistent, disguised payments from an entity linked to Sasha's family to Galina's, but with milestones in Shane's pregnancy. Decrypted message fragments now formed clearer sentences: Ensure paternal connection to homeland is emphasized prior to birth. The child's cultural identity is the leverage point. Phone logs placed Sasha in Ottawa, staying at Galina's residence, the week after Shane disappeared.

"I don't think the goal was abduction," Anatoly stated, his voice flat. "Abduction is messy, traceable, and to take a child from an omega is punishable by death in every country. Their goal was influence. To use your history, your grief, your... instincts, to create a scenario where returning to Russia with your son felt like your idea. Birth rates keep dropping back home, a young, famous hockey player choosing to go back home to Russia to raise his child would be like an endorsement of the Omega Initiative they are trying to push."

Ilya listened, his hands flat on the table. The initial, volcanic fury was still there, a molten core in his gut. But layered over it now was a colder, more intimate humiliation. He had sat in her office, like a specimen under glass. Every vulnerability he'd offered, his love for his mother, his complex pride in being Russian, his ferocious devotion to Shane, had been cataloged.

They made their plans that day. Ilya would call Galina, he would play the confused, regretful patient, seeding doubt about Yuna's motives, framing his withdrawal from therapy as a rash overreaction. He would request an in-person session, a "safe space" to talk.

Anatoly was present for the call, with a recording device in case they needed proof. Ilya's voice, when he spoke into the phone, was perfectly in control. "I have been... confused," he began, the admission tasting like poison. "When Yuna interfered, I believed she was protecting me. Finally, someone on my side. But now... I wonder if her protection was always for Shane first." He let the silence hang between them like a lure.

Galina's voice came through the speaker, warm, mellifluous, devoid of any triumphant edge. "Oh, Ilya. That confusion is completely understandable. You've been through a series of destabilizing events in a very short space of time." She didn't attack Yuna. She simply

reframed her. “Yuna is a mother. It’s natural, even admirable, that her primary lens is Shane’s wellbeing. It doesn’t mean she doesn’t care for you. It simply means her priorities are inherently aligned with her child.” She was gently, expertly, reinforcing the exact narrative Ilya had feigned, that he was alone, that only she had no agenda but his own good.

Listening, Anatoly met Ilya’s eyes, a flicker of professional respect for the enemy’s skill in his gaze. It made Ilya extremely uncomfortable to know that he hadn’t caught on to this before.

The meeting was set for two days later. Anatoly left after that and Ilya went back to their bedroom, finding Shane right where he left him. At 8 months, Shane was constantly tired now, and starting to be uncomfortable in most positions while sitting or laying down. Ilya crawled in next to Shane, scooping him closer to his body and adjusting the blankets around them both.

He laid there for a while, thinking about everything he’d learn. He’d placed his mate and child in danger by just being who he was. They were so close to being back into a good place in their relationship against all odds and didn’t want to risk all the progress they’d made recently.

He must have fallen asleep to because he woke up when Shane was trying to move. He stood and helped him up with a smile and went to the kitchen while he used the bathroom and freshened up.

He came back to their room with a tray of Shane’s current favorites and they settled down to eat. Ilya had to quickly get used to the unusual food combinations quickly because if he made a face or noise, Shane would give him the big eyes look and shove a forkful in his mouth. They ate, talking about what to write under their announcement they would go out that Monday. When Shane winced for the 2nd time while trying to adjust his posture, Ilya stood and let him know he would run him a bath to soak for a little bit. When the oils and bubbles were just right, he went to help Shane stand and helped him gather his hair up. He left the room and told him that he’d be right by the door in case he needed any help.

Shane slowly sank down into the warm water, noting that once he gave birth, he wanted a proper hot bath. He rubbed the oil into his belly, the water soothing his aching muscles. He looked towards the door and saw that Ilya was pacing through the gap at the bottom.

“Ilya? Can you come in?” He called out. The bubbles covered enough of him for now. He watched the shadow at the door stop.

“Are you ok?” Ilya said, still not coming in.

“Yes, come in.”

It took longer then expected for him to open the door, but he still stood at the doorway.
“What’s wrong?”

“Come in, why don’t you sit so we can talk so more?” Shane asked, motioning over to the little stool that was kept in the bathroom to hold little knick knacks and candles.

“I don’t think this is good idea.” He was tense, his posture rigid.

“Why? I mean I know we’re not- that we haven’t really-” Shane didn’t know what to say as he fumbled his words and turned beat red.

“Hey, what’s wrong? What’s running around that head of yours?” Ilya said quickly, not wanting Shane to stress about anything before they had to have their conversation about what Anatloy found out.

“I know my body changed. We’ve kissed and that’s all.” Shane whispered.

“Oh sweetheart! How can you even think that I don’t want you? You’re beautiful, Kotyonok. More beautiful then ever, but I will not push for more while we are working on our relationship.”

“I thought you weren’t attracted to me anymore. I mean I’m all puffy and fat and my hair and-”

Shane was cut off by Ilya leaning down and kissing him, urgently. Passionately. Like before when they couldn't get enough of each other and would spend hours making love. Shane wrapped his arms around Ilya’s neck, pulling him closer and Ilya very willingly followed, holding Shane’s jaw and moving him to the perfect position.

He forced himself to pull back after a few minutes when Shane began to tug his shirt up. Giving him a few nuzzles and kisses all over his face. “Hey, you with me?”

Shane gave him a loopy smile, sinking back against the side of the tub, notably more relaxed. “That was one of the best kisses ever.” He said dreamily.

Ilya chuckled. “Top 10. We have a lot more to do before we rank them.”

After a few moments, Shane turned his head and looked at Ilya. “Do you have any baby names you like?”

“A few. I know that if it’s a boy, I’d like for the middle name to be David. He’s more of a father to me than my own and I think he’d like that.”

Shane grinned at that. “He’d love that. I have a baby name website saved. I liked the name Nikolai, or Constantine.”

“Russian names? Really?”

“Yes. I didn’t find one I really liked in French or Japanese.”

“We might be having a girl though.”

Shane blushed, sitting up a bit. "I thought about that too. And you can say no if you don't like it, but I was thinking Yurina. Yurina Nozomi, I was thinking. We can play around with middle names."

Ilya was embarrassed when he felt his eyes stinging so he leaned over again and gave Shane a soft gentle kiss. Trying to say thank you in that gesture. "It's perfect."

"Good. Now, do you want to tell me what Anatoly came to say? I smell him on you."

Ilya ran his thumb across Shane's freckles gently. "Yes. Why don't you get out of the bath and we can sit to talk?"

Shane nodded and held his hands out for Ilya to help. That made Ilya stop for a second. He had self control, but it was barely hanging on. He grabbed one of the warmed bath sheets and opened it in a way that would mostly cover Shane's body as he rose from the water. It worked just enough and he left Shane to get dressed.

He went back into the room after Shane was dressed and sitting at the vanity. Ilya watched as Shane rubbed an oil on his stomach, then started to put things from his little bottles on his face. As usual, he thought it was so charming how he did the same thing, every night, it order and had to have the bottles just so.

He walked over and grabbed the hair brush and started to brush through Shane's dark hair. "Anatoly found and confirmed everything. We want her to admit everything while recorded so I called and pretended to want to go talk to her again."

"No!" Shane said, turning on the stool. "Ilya, please. Talk to the police, let it go, anything but going to see her again."

"Dusha moya, it will be ok. Anatoly and another guard will be outside. An hour or two and I'll be on my way back to you."

“Ilya, please don’t go. I’ll do anything you want, just please stay here.”

“Shane, do not ask this of me. She threatened you, our child. She could have had me hurt you. It would have been something that we wouldn’t be able to come back from. Do you really think that I could let that go?”

“Ilya please. What if she makes you go back-”

“Trust me, sweetheart. I’ll come back to you. Me. We’ll finish the nursery and make our post and in a few weeks our baby will be here. Nothing is going to keep me away or change that. I swear this to you.”

Shane stood and buried his face in Ilya’s chest. Ilya’s heart broke when Shane sobbed, but he couldn’t back down. This was what Walter had meant. That sometimes, being a good mate would mean making the difficult choices for the safety of his mate. Of course the easy way would be to do as Shane asked and have someone else handle this, but it was his mate and child that were put in danger. He would lose his self respect if he pawned his responsibility off to someone else.

“I wouldn’t be able to handle it if you went back to how you were before, Ilya. It would kill me.”

“Shane, look at me.” Ilya held Shane’s face cradled in his hands. “I swear on our child nothing will happen.”

“What if-”

“Nothing will happen.”

“What if there’s something in the air, or she gives you a water and it’s-”

“I walk out,” Ilya repeated, bringing Shane’s knuckles to his lips. “Anatoly will be listening to everything and we will take precautions.”

“If you feel strange. If your thoughts get fuzzy. If she offers you so much as a fucking mint.”

“I leave.”

“Immediately.”

“Solnyshko. I will come home to you.”

The morning of the meeting, Anatoly picked him up. In the car, the atmosphere was grimly operational. Just before Ilya got out, Anatoly handed him not a weapon, but a small, sealed case. Shane hadn’t spoken to him as he left, just kissed him and rolled over on the nest to look at the opposite wall.

“What is this?”

“Open it.”

Inside, on a bed of foam, lay a pre-filled syringe. Ilya stared.

Anatoly’s voice was gravel. “It’s a sedative. Triazolam. The same compound, the same dosage, sourced from the same pharmacy that filled her last order before your final scheduled appointment. We confirmed it yesterday.”

The meaning crashed over Ilya. she would have used the same on him if Yuna hadn't been with him.

"Only if there is no other way," Anatoly said, his eyes hard. "Or if she attempts to incapacitate you and you cannot disengage. I would prefer you run, even if you must break her door. But if you cannot... this guarantees your safe exit." He paused. "It is also evidence, of intent."

Ilya took the case, and slipped it into his inner pocket. Then he stepped out into the bland, professional plaza where Galina's office waited.

The session began normally, as if the last 'session' didn't happen. Galina welcomed him with a gentle, concerned smile, ushering him into the familiar, tastefully neutral room. She offered tea. He declined with a casual wave. She accepted it without a flicker, settling into her chair, a picture of professional readiness.

For forty minutes, Ilya was convincing. He spoke of the confusion, the feeling of being acted upon by 'forces'- Shane's family, his own team, the media. He voiced the issues that Anatoly and he had discussed for the hour long car ride "Sometimes I wonder if everyone sees me as just... a means to an end. For Shane. For the baby. Not for myself." He was feeding her exactly what she wanted, watching her subtle nods of validation, the soft murmurs of "That's a very insightful feeling to examine."

Then, as if guided by an invisible script, she began to steer. "This pressure you feel... it often centers on Shane, doesn't it? On the expectations surrounding him?" Her tone was light, exploratory. "Do you ever feel that Shane's own... understandable anxiety... might be influencing decisions that affect your child's future?"

Your child. The phrasing was a tiny, deliberate scalpel.

Ilya's control, a fraying cable all along, gave a little more. He kept his voice even. "What decisions?"

Galina leaned forward slightly, a confiding gesture. “Cultural connections. A sense of rootedness. The world you want your son to inherit.” She smiled, benevolent. “These can feel like monumental choices, especially when your mate’s perspective is born of a different world. He may not initially understand the depth of this need. It may frighten him. But a father’s duty to his heir sometimes requires difficult clarity. Shane is half Japanese, does he even recognize that? I mean, he was born and raised in Canada. Speaks english and french- no japanese. Do you really want a child to grow up like that when his real heritage is so rich and a big part of his other parents life experience?”

She was painting as if Shane was just a womb and didn’t really matter what he wanted. Shane as the frightened, insular obstacle. Ilya as the noble patriarch burdened with a painful but necessary duty. It simply enraged him. Ilya could feel the trap, elegant and suffocating. He gave her more rope. “And if he refuses to understand?”

Galina spread her hands, a gesture of compassionate reason. “Understanding can come later, Ilya. Sometimes, for the good of the child, a parent must make the courageous choice alone. Shane does not have to agree with every decision you make for your child.”

There it was again. The final, quiet click of the lock. Your child. Alone.

Something in Ilya’s posture shifted. The performative confusion drained away, leaving a cold, stark stillness. The air in the room seemed to change, the professional veneer cracking to reveal the raw voltage beneath.

Galina noticed. Her sympathetic mask faltered for a microsecond.

“How long,” Ilya asked, his voice now devoid of all pretense, quiet and deadly, “have you been planning this with Sasha?”

Her bland smile froze, she tried to reassemble her expression. “Ilya, I don’t see how my family-”

“How long,” he repeated, the words dropping like stones, “did you know my mother?”

All color leached from Galina's face. The therapist vanished, in her seat was a woman caught.

Ilya stood up, not a rush, but a slow, inevitable uncoiling. He didn't shout. He recited facts, each one a hammer blow. "Irina Lebedev, your friend. My mother. You watched her be sold to a man she feared. You watched her life become a prison, yet you envied her for it." He took a step forward. "You used her son. You used your nephew, who shared my bed, to learn how to take me apart. You drugged me. You tried to turn my love for my mate and my child into a lever to pry me away from them."

Galina's composure shattered into defensive, frantic justification. "I was helping you reclaim your identity! That boy, that life, it's a cage for a spirit like yours! You were meant for more than being Shane Hollander's keeper! Russia, your legacy, your child, they are your destiny! He was always going to hold you back from it! Do you realize the great things you could have, the great things you can represent in your own country?!"

Each word was a match tossed onto the pyre of Ilya's restraint. But it was when she spoke of Shane not as a person, but as a lifestyle, a limitation, a problem to be solved, that the last cable snapped. Not with a roar, but with a terrifying, absolute calm.

Hidden by his hair, the earbud he had with the line open to Anatoly chirped once. "End this Ilya. Let us go in and finish we need to get back."

He paused, then slipped his hand into the pocket, he took the case from his pocket, opened it, and removed the syringe.

Galina's eyes locked on it. Recognition, then pure, animal terror. "That's- you wouldn't dare!"

"You wanted to know," Ilya said, his voice almost conversational as he advanced, "what you could make me do." He moved with the brutal efficiency that his rage managed to focus. A hand clamped on her neck, immobilizing. She struggled, a frantic, weak thing against his strength. He found the vein, not with malice, but with a chilling, clinical precision. "Now you know."

The plunger depressed.

Galina's wide, horrified eyes stayed on his for a second as the chemical chill spread through her bloodstream. Then her eyelids fluttered, her body sagging, consciousness ripped away not with a fight, but a sigh. He let her fall to the floor, her head hitting the corner of the small coffee table.

For a long moment, Ilya stood there, breathing the quiet, sterile air of the office, looking down at the unconscious cause of so much pain. There was no triumph, only a vast, hollow silence where his rage had been. And through that silence, piercing and clear, came a single thought, more frightening than anything that had just transpired. Shane.

He pulled out his cell and saw 5 missed calls from Shane and dozens of others from Yuna and Ruth. He frowned and ran out, dialing his mate's number and receiving no answer. He was outside when Anatoly was getting out of the car.

"We must go! Pavel and Zack are staying and getting her secured in the guardhouse. David called and Shane is on the way to the hospital."

Numb, Ilya turned and slid into the passenger seat of Anatoly's car, the door closing with a soft, final thud.

Ilya stared at his reflection in the black screen. The adrenaline was gone, leaving a crushing fatigue and a dawning, sickening clarity.

He had to go to his mate. Shane had been fine. Upset but fine just a couple hours ago.

The house felt different after Ilya left. It wasn't just the absence of his physical presence, though. It was the silence, thick with unspoken dread. Shane moved through it like a man walking across a frozen lake, listening for cracks.

For the first thirty minutes, he tried to remain calm. He picked up the last book he had stopped with, but it was no use. He sat at the kitchen table with Yuna, David, Ruth, and Walter, a laptop open before them displaying mock-ups for the pregnancy announcement he and Ilya had planned to post together, the one with Shane's profile against the lake, Ilya's hand resting over his belly, their faces turned toward each other, smiling. Shane had chosen it himself from Ilya's favorite options.

"What about this font?" Yuna asked, pointing at the screen.

Shane stared at the elegant script proclaiming *Rozanov-Hollander Family, Coming Soon*. His throat tightened. "Yeah. That's fine." He couldn't look at Ilya's face in the photo. He remembered that exact second, the way Ilya's warm lips slid across his neck, their scent mixed together surrounding them. He checked the time on his phone. The 'appointment' had started twenty-five minutes ago.

He knew the plan. Anatoly was with him, parked somewhere nearby, listening to every word through Ilya's phone. Security was a discreet presence at the edge of the property. Ilya had promised, his forehead pressed to Shane's, his voice gravel-rough with sincerity, that he would leave the second anything felt wrong. Rationally, Shane knew all of this.

But Shane also knew, in a place deeper than reason, that Galina had changed Ilya once before. She had found cracks in his mind and poured something dark into them. What if she found new ones? What if the medication had just been her most obvious tool? The thought was a cold seed in his gut, and it was beginning to sprout tendrils of ice through his veins.

He stood up abruptly, the chair scraping. "I need some air." He walked onto the deck, the summer sun feeling brittle and false on his skin. He checked his phone again. The appointment should be nearly finished, shouldn't it? No messages. His fingers trembled slightly as he typed.

Shane- You okay?

He stared at the screen, waiting for the tell-tale dots. Nothing. The lake was too still. The silence from the woods too complete. A minute stretched into five. He texted again.

Shane- Ilya?

Still nothing. His heartbeat, a steady drum in his ears, began to pick up its pace.

Behind him, the sliding door opened. Yuna stepped out, her expression carefully neutral. “He can’t answer his phone right now, sweetheart. Isn’t he still supposed to be having a session.”

“I know,” Shane snapped, the words coming out sharper than he intended. He took a breath, trying to soften it. “I know.”

Walter joined them, his calm, weathered face assessing. “If anything was going sideways, we’d hear.”

“I know,” Shane repeated, closing his eyes to block them out for a minute. Shane began to pace. It was an awkward, lumbering gait, his body heavy and off-balance with Bean, but he couldn’t stop the restless energy firing through his nerves. One hand stayed anchored over the curve of his stomach, a pointless gesture of protection. He checked his phone again. Nothing. He opened his contacts and pressed Ilya’s name, holding the phone to his ear.

It rang. Once. Twice. Three times. Then voicemail. “This is Ilya Rozanov. Leave a message if you want but I will not listen to it.”

The sound of his voice, so normal, so familiar, was a twist of the knife. Shane hung up before the beep. He tried again. Voicemail. Again. Voicemail.

Memories, unbidden and vicious, flooded him. Ilya in Willow Creek, his eyes glazed with a possessive certainty that bordered on madness. The unstable, volatile energy that had

thrummed through him before Yuna stole the pill. The way he'd looked at Shane sometimes, like Shane was a puzzle he owned the answer to, not a person with his own mind. What if that man was back? What if Galina had simply flipped the switch again? What if Ilya walked through the door and didn't recognize him, or worse, recognized him only as something to be claimed and controlled?

His breathing hitched, coming in shorter, shallower pulls. The world seemed to tilt slightly on its axis.

"Shane," Yuna said, stepping closer, her voice a firm anchor. "Look at me. Breathe with me."

He tried, his eyes wide and fixed on hers, but his chest felt tight, constrained by an invisible band. The oxygen wasn't reaching where it needed to go. David appeared, gently taking the phone from Shane's white-knuckled grip.

"Just for a minute, son. You're staring a hole through it."

The loss of the phone, the tangible connection to Ilya, sent a fresh bolt of pure panic through Shane. "Give it back!" he demanded, his voice cracking. "He could call! He needs to be able to call!"

David's face softened with pity, and he immediately handed it back. Shane clutched it to his chest, his breaths now audible, ragged gasps. Ruth guided him to a deck chair, pressing him down into it. "Walter," she said quietly, her tone leaving no room for debate. Walter nodded and disappeared inside, presumably to contact the security detail or Anatoly's team directly.

But they couldn't get an immediate answer. The uncertainty was the final crack in the dam holding back Shane's terror.

He called Ilya again. Straight to voicemail. This time, when the beep sounded, a broken sound escaped him. "Ilya, please call me." The words were wet, choked. "I'm trying not to freak out, but I can't... I can't feel Bean right now and Dad's taking me to the hospital. Just call me when you get this. Please. I don't care about Galina anymore. Just come back."

He hung up. The admission was out there in a rambling voicemail, the core of his fear laid bare. It wasn't about winning or justice, it was about Ilya coming back as himself.

That was when he started to physically feel the effects of the fear and stress. His heart hammered against his ribs, a frantic, runaway rhythm that made him lightheaded. Spots danced at the edges of his vision. He couldn't draw a full breath, each attempt ending in a shallow, unsatisfying gasp. His hands shook so badly the phone slipped from his grasp, clattering onto the deck boards. A deep, visceral tightening seized his abdomen, not a contraction but a painful clench of sheer terror.

And then he remembered Bean. their little Yurina or Nikolai. In the maelstrom of his own panic, he had lost track of the constant, reassuring movements. When was the last kick? The last roll? He pressed both hands hard against his stomach, searching, pleading.

"Bean?" His voice was a whisper scraped raw.

Yuna knelt before him, her hands covering his. David, Ruth, Walter, they all had come out to be next to him, all their attention narrowed to the curve of his belly. Shane pressed again, desperate. He waited for the answering nudge, the familiar pressure.

Nothing.

David Hollander's usual calm evaporated. His face set into lines of grim decision. "We're going to the hospital. Now."

Shane shook his head, a weak, protesting motion. "Ilya's coming back..."

"He can meet us there," David said, already moving, his voice brooking no argument. Yuna was on her feet, darting inside for Shane's go-bag. Ruth grabbed the small backpack of prenatal records and emergency contacts they kept by the door. Walter was on his phone, his low voice informing security of their destination.

Shane tried to stand. The world swooped violently, the deck tilting like the deck of a ship. He staggered, and David's strong arms caught him, holding him upright.

The drive to the hospital was a blur of muted greens and glaring sunlight. Shane sat in the back, cradled between Yuna and David, a security SUV leading the way. He called Ilya twice more, each call a silent prayer. Each one went unanswered.

In the triage bay of the maternity ward, efficiency took over. His distress, his advanced pregnancy, and the reported decreased fetal movement granted him immediate, serious attention. He was helped into a gown, into a bed. A nurse smoothed gel over his belly and placed the monitor transducer on his skin. Ruth and Yuna held their breath, staring at the silent monitor.

Then it came: a rapid, rhythmic whoosh-whoosh-whoosh. Bean's heartbeat. Strong. Steady. Unbothered by the hurricane of fear raging around his parent.

The sound undid Shane completely. A great, wrenching sob tore from his throat, followed by another, and another. He collapsed back against the pillows, his body going limp with a relief so profound it was its own kind of agony. Yuna cupped his face, her thumbs wiping at the tears streaming down his temples. "Breathe, baby. Just breathe. He's okay. The baby's okay."

But Shane couldn't stop. The sobs shook him, each one releasing the coiled terror of the last hour. Bean was safe. The monitors showed his heart rate was perfect, his movements, when Shane finally calmed enough to feel them, returned to a gentle, rolling rhythm. The doctor explained kindly that sometimes they could just be sleeping or feeling lazy, that they wanted to monitor his blood pressure, keep an eye on the baby for a few hours, ensure the cramping he'd felt didn't develop into anything more.

Shane heard the words, nodded, but a part of him was still suspended, waiting. Because Ilya hadn't called.

Then, his phone, placed on the bedside table, lit up and vibrated with an incoming call. The screen flashed: ILYA.

Every eye in the room locked onto it. The air hummed with a new tension. Shane stared at his name, at the photo that popped up, Ilya, smirking, holding a tiny Centaurs jersey, and a new fear, cold and clear, doused the warmth of his relief. Which Ilya was calling? The one who left? Or the one Galina might have remade?

Yuna reached for it. “Let me-”

“No.” Shane’s hand shot out, closing around the phone. He took a shuddering breath and swiped to answer. He brought it to his ear but couldn’t form a greeting.

Ilya’s voice erupted from the speaker, frantic, jagged with a fear that mirrored Shane’s own. “Shane? Shane, dusha moya, talk to me. Anatoly say hospital. Is the baby okay? Are you okay?”

Shane closed his eyes. A fresh wave of tears spilled over, but these were different. He knew that voice. The desperation in it, the love, the sheer, unvarnished terror for him, it was the Ilya who had kissed his forehead that morning. The Ilya who belonged to him.

“You’re still you,” Shane whispered, the words making his face crumble again.

There was silence on the other end of the line for a few seconds. In that silence, Ilya understood. He comprehended the shape of the hell Shane had just inhabited, not fearing for his life, but for his mind. The realization of what Shane had truly been waiting for, dreading, carved through him. From there, the conversation was broken, logistical. Yes, the baby was okay. Shane was stable, but they were keeping him for monitoring. He needed him. ‘Come to the hospital.’

In the passenger seat of Anatoly’s car, rocketing through traffic toward the hospital, Ilya clutched his silent phone. The relief that Shane and Bean were safe was a tidal wave, but it receded almost instantly, leaving behind the bleak, rocky shore of his own actions. Shane had spent the last hour gripped by the nightmare of Ilya losing control to Galina’s influence.

The sterile white corridors of the hospital were a blur of frantic motion and echoing sound. Ilya ran, weaving around people when they stood in his way or walked too slowly, Anatoly a grim shadow at his side providing clipped directions. Every second stretched into an eternity, each beat of his own heart a hammer against the cage of his ribs. Anatoly had given him the barest details in the car, Shane's room number, that he had already sent for Dr. Alvares to be picked up and a private plane secured.

When he finally reached the correct room, the door slightly ajar, the world narrowed to a single point.

Shane was there. Propped up in the bed, washed out and exhausted, his eyes red-rimmed and puffy from crying, but alive, awake, present. Monitors beeped softly around him. Yuna and David stood near the window, their faces etched with relief and residual worry. Ruth and Walter were by the small sink, speaking quietly with a nurse. And cutting through the low hum of the room was the steady, rhythmic whoosh-whoosh-whoosh of Bean's heartbeat from the fetal monitor.

Ilya stopped dead on the threshold, his breath catching. That sound, the proof of his child's life, nearly brought him to his knees.

Shane's head turned. Their eyes met across the room. For a fraction of a second, Shane's gaze was wide, searching, a silent question hanging in the air. Then Shane's face crumpled, and he whispered, "Ilya."

It was all the invitation he needed. Ilya crossed the room in three strides, bypassing everyone else. He went straight into Shane's open arms, burying his face against Shane's neck, inhaling the familiar scent beneath the harsh hospital antiseptic. Shane's hands came up, one tangling in his hair, the other flattening against his cheek, his touch almost frantic. He pressed his nose to Ilya's temple, his jaw, scenting him deeply, compulsively, as if verifying his molecular composition.

"You're here," Shane breathed, his voice hitching.

"Ya zdes, solnyshko. I am here." Ilya pulled back just enough to kiss him, his forehead, his damp eyelids, the corner of his mouth, his tear-salty cheeks. Then he bent over the bed, his large hand splaying gently over the swell of Shane's stomach. He pressed his lips to the thin

hospital gown. “Malenkiy,” he murmured in Russian, his voice rough. “Papa is here. You scared us. Do not do that again.” He felt a faint, answering shift beneath his palm and closed his eyes against a wave of dizzying relief.

Above him, Shane started crying again, silent tears tracking through the paths of the old ones. Ilya straightened and carefully, mindful of wires and monitors, climbed onto the edge of the bed. He gathered Shane against his chest, tucking him into the curve of his body, wrapping himself around his mate and their child. Shane melted into him, a shudder running through his frame.

“You’re still you,” Shane whispered into his collarbone. Ilya held him tighter, the truth of what Shane had feared, not just of injury, not betrayal, but the loss of himself, hit him with the weight of a stone in his gut. “Yes,” he said, his voice thick. “I am still me. I promised you.”

They stayed like that until Shane’s breathing evened out, until the frantic grip of his fingers in Ilya’s shirt loosened. Only then did Ilya lift his head and acknowledge the rest of the room with a sharp nod. His focus immediately returned to the monitor, to the steady green line tracing Bean’s heartbeat. A nurse explained that the baby was perfectly fine, that Shane’s episode had been triggered by extreme emotional stress, that his vitals were stabilizing. Also that the baby was big and movements would start to slow down a bit until it was time for the birth.

Ilya listened, his expression like granite. It wasn’t enough. “I want Alvarez,” he stated, his tone leaving no room for debate.

Shane gave him an exhausted look. “Ilya.”

“I want Dr. Alvarez. She’s on her way already.”

Yuna, standing by the window, almost smiled. She’d known this was coming. Of course he had already called her.

Dr. Alvarez arrived a few hours later, her demeanor a blend of professional calm and fond exasperation directed at Shane. She examined Shane thoroughly, reviewed every line of data from the monitors, consulted with the attending physician, and finally delivered the verdict Ilya needed to hear.

“Your mate is healthy. Your baby is healthy. There is no evidence of harm to the pregnancy.” She fixed Shane with a kind but firm look. “What you need is rest, hydration, nutrition, and significantly less emotional stress.” Her eyes flicked to Ilya. “That is your job for the next couple of weeks.”

Ilya immediately launched into a barrage of questions- long-term effects of stress, monitoring frequency, contingency plans, if Shane’s wish for a natural birth still possible. Finally, Shane reached over, his hand covering Ilya’s where it gripped the bed rail. “She said we’re okay.”

“I heard,” Ilya said, not looking away from Dr. Alvarez.

“Then stop interrogating her.”

Dr. Alvarez raised an eyebrow. “No, let him finish. I want to see if he can break his previous record for anxious-Alpha questions per minute.”

A faint, real smile touched Shane’s lips. They needed that tiny spark of humor, a reminder that life contained moments lighter than stone.

Back at the cottage, the atmosphere shifted from hospital-sterile to nest-warm. Everyone helped, but Shane’s gaze kept finding Ilya’s, a silent request. Once he was settled on the sofa with water and a blanket, Shane looked at his parents, then at Ruth and Walter. “We’re okay. Thank you. We just... need a minute.”

Understanding passed through the room. They drifted away, giving the illusion of privacy in the open-plan space. Ilya helped Shane to their bedroom, his hands careful as he helped him change into soft sweatpants and one of his own hoodies. He fussed with pillows, fetched a glass of water, adjusted the blanket.

Shane finally caught his wrist. "Come here."

Ilya stopped, allowing himself to be pulled down into the nest. They arranged themselves in their familiar configuration, Shane on his side, Ilya curled around him from behind, one arm draped over his waist, hand resting on Bean. For a long time, they just breathed. The fear and panic of the day receded, leaving behind a weary, grateful sense of quiet.

Bean moved, a lazy roll beneath Ilya's palm. Ilya closed his eyes, pressing his forehead between Shane's shoulder blades.

"They're okay," Shane murmured.

"I know."

"I'm okay."

Ilya opened his eyes, nuzzled the back of Shane's neck. "I know." He kissed the sensitive skin there, then the shell of his ear, tender, unhurried affirmations. Shane sighed, leaning back into him, his guard completely down. In this pocket of safety, with the nightmare of the hospital behind them, he was simply an Omega wanting his Alpha's comfort. Ilya gave it freely, his touches saying what words couldn't yet encompass- You are safe. I have you. This is ours.

Eventually, the real world intruded, as it always must. Shane shifted slightly. "What happened with Galina?"

Ilya went perfectly still. The peace shattered, replaced by a cold, heavy reality.

Shane felt it. He turned in his arms, searching his face. “Ilya.”

So Ilya told him. All of it. The pretense, the confrontation, Galina’s justification, her casual dismissal of Shane as an obstacle. He didn’t soften it. “I used the syringe,” he said, the words flat.

Shane stared at him, his eyes wide in the dim light.

“I was supposed to leave,” Ilya continued, holding his gaze. “I did not.”

“Is she alive?”

“Yes.”

“Where is she?”

Ilya hesitated. “Anatoly’s people have her.”

Shane sat up a little, wincing at the movement. “You kidnapped her?”

Ilya’s mouth twisted. “Technically-”

“Ilya.”

“Yes. same thing she would have allowed to happen to you.”

A strange, choked sound escaped Shane. Of course Ilya would quibble over semantics. But the momentary near-amusement faded quickly, replaced by dawning understanding. Galina was alive, but contained, waiting.

“What happens now?” Shane asked quietly.

Ilya knew exactly what he was asking. He took a slow breath, ordering his thoughts. Under the laws that governed their world, laws forged over centuries to protect the sacred vulnerabilities of a bond, of pregnancy, of lineage, Galina’s crimes were unequivocal. Deliberate, prolonged chemical manipulation of an Alpha. Interference with a recognized mate-bond. Endangerment of a pregnant Omega. Conspiracy concerning the control and removal of an unborn child. The statutes were ancient, brutal, and clear. As the violated Alpha, as Shane’s bonded mate, the right of judgment belonged to him.

Shane reached for Ilya’s hand, lacing their fingers together. His touch was gentle, but his voice was firm. “Let her go.”

Ilya looked at him, waiting.

“Expose her,” Shane said. “Destroy her career. Give everything to the authorities. Take it all from her. I don’t care.” He swallowed. “But don’t... don’t do this. You have enough blood on your hands.”

Ilya flinched, a visible recoil of pain.

Shane’s grip tightened. “I’m not saying... I’m not talking about what was deserved. I’m saying you’ve carried enough, Ilya.” His eyes were bright with unshed tears. “I don’t want you doing this because of me.”

“It is not because of you,” Ilya answered, his voice low. He looked down at their joined hands resting on Shane’s stomach. “It is because she came for my family.”

The distinction hung between them. Shane was pleading for mercy, for a halt to the cycle of violence he saw etching itself deeper into Ilya's soul. Ilya was surveying a battlefield, seeing not a defeated enemy, but a live wire still spitting sparks near a powder keg.

"I don't want to kill anyone else," Ilya admitted, the confession stark and weary. It surprised Shane, that admission of reluctance. Ilya met his gaze. "You think I enjoy carrying them?" The ghosts were there, in his eyes, his father, Dallas, Chris, others, the weight of choices made in fire and fear.

He laid it out, not as a threat, but as a bleak equation. Galina had resources, connections, a pathological fixation. She had worked on this for years. Their society's laws existed for violations this profound for a reason- to sever the threat at the root, permanently. To allow a pack, a family, to sleep without listening for the echo of that particular footstep.

"If I let her go," Ilya said, his thumb stroking over Shane's knuckles, "I will spend every day of our children's childhood listening for her. Wondering. I will spend our lives worried that someone could hurt you. And that... that is not a life for you. Or for our family."

Shane heard him. He understood the logic, the need for protection. But his heart, which had spent the afternoon breaking over the thought of losing Ilya to madness, now broke at the thought of Ilya surrendering another piece of himself to the darkness. "There has to be another way," he whispered, but it sounded hollow even to him.

"I wish there was," Ilya said, and meant it. "I have wished for it since Anatoly showed me the proof."

They didn't scream. There was no storm, no slammed doors. This was the new, painful terrain of their progress. They were in disagreement, with tired voices and clasped hands, Shane realised that this is something that he couldn't order for Ilya to stand down. Shane cried, silent tears for the death he couldn't prevent and the burden he couldn't lift from his Alpha's shoulders. Ilya listened, wiped his tears, and did not insult him by pretending the choice was easy.

"Promise me you'll think about it," Shane finally said, his voice raw.

“I will,” Ilya promised, and it was honest.

“Really think about it.”

“Yes.” Ilya pulled him close again, tucking Shane’s head under his chin. “But not tonight. Tonight, you scared ten years off my life, and you are going to sleep.”

A tired, wobbly smile touched Shane’s lips. “Bossy.”

“Very.”

Shane nestled closer, his breath evening out. Just before sleep took him, he murmured, “I love you.”

The words, so freely given after so long a drought, struck Ilya with the force of a physical blow. He held his world in his arms and whispered back, “I love you too, dusha moya.”

Ilya did think about it. He gave Shane’s request the solemn consideration it deserved. The next day, he sequestered himself with Anatoly, reviewing every document, every timeline, every hypothetical. He wasn’t looking for an excuse to kill her; he was searching, desperately, for a reason not to. But the risk was too great. She must have friends in connected areas and Alpha law demanded recompense.

Anatoly watched him, his expression unreadable. “Are you certain?” he finally asked.

Ilya was quiet for a long time, staring at a photograph of his mother, young and smiling beside a girl who would grow into his tormentor. “No,” he said. “I am certain I don’t want to do it.” He looked up, his blue eyes bleak. “But wanting something does not make it right.”

That was the core of it. He had spent these last weeks learning that his wants, to protect, to possess, to control, were not infallible guides. Here, his want was to lay down this bloody part of his life and just be with his mate and new family and do his job. But his responsibility, under the law and under the primal mandate thrumming in his blood, was to ensure the threat ended. Not diminished, not contained. Ended.

He went to where she was being held, a secure, anonymous location. She knew why he was there. Her composure was gone, replaced by a desperate, calculating energy. She tried to invoke Irina, a final, pathetic grasp at a shared history.

Ilya stopped her with a look. “You don’t get to say her name anymore.”

She switched tactics, insisting she had only ever wanted to save him from a life of diminishment, from being “Shane Hollander’s keeper.”

“And Hollander has made you weak,” she spat, a last, venomous dart.

Ilya almost smiled then, a sad, terrible thing. “No.” He thought of Shane asking him to choose differently, of Walter’s lesson about instinct and character, of the nest, of the heartbeat on the monitor, of the word ‘home’ which now had a shape and a scent and a name. “He made me want to come home. He’s made me stronger, better. I’m happy with him.”

What happened next was swift, clinical, and devoid of spectacle. It was not an act of rage, but of removal. The sentence prescribed by their world’s oldest codes was carried out.

Anatoly had handed him a hunting knife when they reached the heavy door of the guardhouse that they had made over on the neighboring property. The sterile, impersonal room seemed to shrink around him, the air thickening with the scent of her fear and his own cold, metallic resolve. The civilized pretense, the careful rules he and Shane had constructed, evaporated like mist in front of a furnace. What rose in its place was not the feral madness of the

medication, but something older, more terrifying in its clarity: the unadorned, judicial fury of an Alpha whose bond and bloodline had been deliberately targeted. This was not revenge, it was eradication.

His movements were not frenzied, but horrifically deliberate. The hunting knife, was a solid weight in his hand. He did not speak. There was nothing left to say to the woman who had weaponized his mother's memory and his lover's secrets. His free hand closed around her jaw, holding her head still as she stared up, the clever, calculating eyes he'd sat across for months now wide with a primal understanding of her miscalculation. The blade moved with swift, clinical precision. The act of removing her sight was symbolic, she would not look upon his family again, in this world or any other. A wet, choked gasp was her only sound.

He leaned close, his lips nearly brushing her ear as the life began to drain from her. His voice was a low, resonant whisper, every syllable freighted with the cold weight of a sentence passed. "You will have no grave for your family to weep over. No stone. No rites." It was the final, crushing denial, severing her not just from life, but from history, from legacy, from peace. Then, with the same steady, inevitable motion, he drew the blade across her throat, completing the sentence their world's oldest laws demanded.

He stepped back, watching the light extinguish, feeling no surge of heat, only a vast, hollow cold settling into the spaces the rage had vacated. He looked at the knife, then at his hands, the visible blood stains would be washed off and he'd never have to worry about this again. Turning to the security detail standing rigidly by the door, his voice was flat, devoid of inflection. "She is dealt with. Dispose of the remains through the designated channels. Report the termination as executed under bond-protection statute seven, please." He did not wait for acknowledgment. He turned and walked out, leaving the darkness behind, each step a conscious movement toward the light, the warmth, the fragile, precious life waiting for him to come home.

Afterward, Ilya stood outside in the cool air, breathing it in. There was no triumph, no savage satisfaction. Only a vast, hollow silence, and the finality of a door closing forever. The weight on his shoulders was not new, but it had changed shape.

Anatoly approached. "Where do you want to go?"

Ilya looked toward the waiting car, past the grim landscape of the decision, to the road that led back. The only place that mattered.

“Home,” he said.

The next few weeks had what Ilya could only describe as blissful. They had posted their pregnancy announcement and it went viral, news outlets bombarded the Centaurs and Voyguers media teams, Yuna, and their agents. The cottage welcomed Dr. Alvares, Carmen as she preferred now into their mix and Shane was happy, glowing and ordering his minions to do his bidding to get the home ready for their baby, no minion happier than Ilya.

When Anatoly came to see Ilya, their conversation was brief, murmured beside the parked car. When Ilya came back inside, he moved differently. There was a lightness to his shoulders, everything was going to be fine. The Russian government accepted their evidence and the outcome, with vague apologies to the circumstances. Anatoly had reminded his contact that Ilya was a very well respected and loved athlete in the United States and Canada now, in case they had any funny ideas of interference. Sasha was holed in a Parisian apartment with a Beta couple and he was being watched.

He went straight to Shane, who was resting on the sofa, and knelt before him, laying his head in Shane’s lap. Shane’s fingers, of their own accord, speared into his hair. He could feel the exhaustion thrumming through Ilya’s body, the echo of a door closing forever. He could have asked. What happened? Is it done? The questions formed and dissolved on his tongue. Instead, he bent as best he could and pressed his lips to the crown of Ilya’s head, inhaling the scent of pine and leather. He felt Ilya’s arms tighten around his waist, a silent, grateful squeeze. Galina’s name was not spoken again.

Anatoly’s people continued tracking Sasha, but there had been nothing. No movement toward Canada, no suspicious contact, no indication he even knew what had happened to his aunt. The working theory was that Galina had kept the worst of her plans from her nephew, using the information he gave her without ever telling him exactly what she intended to do with it. Ilya didn’t trust him, not completely, but as the weeks passed without incident, even he began

to accept that Sasha might have been a source of information rather than an active participant.

The remaining weeks of the pregnancy unfolded perfectly, a slow mosaic of loving moments with their family. Ruth and Walter's lessons, still happening at least twice a week, were more in the shape of talks, and they began to seep into their marrow, becoming instinct.

There was the afternoon Ilya hovered relentlessly as Shane tried to waddle from the couch to the kitchen, his hands fluttering near Shane's elbows, his back, his hips. "For God's sake, Ilya, stop!" Shane finally snapped, irritation fraying his last nerve.

Ilya froze, his hands retreating. But instead of the defensive cloud that would have descended months ago, his brow furrowed in genuine confusion. "Do you want me to stop helping," he asked, his voice carefully measured, "or stop being near you?"

The question, so simple and so novel, disarmed Shane's frustration. He had to think about it. "Helping," he sighed, the fight leaving him. "You can stay. Just... don't treat me like I'm made of glass. If I need help I'll ask you."

Another evening, Ilya informed Shane he'd rearranged the security detail's schedule and approved a new, more intrusive surveillance protocol for the property perimeter. Shane felt the old, bristling independence rise up. "You didn't ask me."

Ilya opened his mouth, the explanation- it's for your safety, it's more efficient, I've already vetted them, ready on his tongue. He saw the set of Shane's jaw and stopped. He closed his mouth, took a breath. "You are right. I should have. Tell me why it bothers you and we can make changes."

And Shane did. It wasn't about the security; it was about the assumption. The unilateral decision. Ilya listened, his head tilted in that way he had when he was forcing himself to absorb rather than rebut. Later, he came back with a revised plan and three options for Shane to choose from.

One night, a deep, formless terror about the impending birth clamped around Shane's heart. He grew quiet, withdrawing into himself, staring blankly at the flickering fireplace. Ilya, sensing the shift through the bond, didn't press. He didn't engulf him with questions or smother him with reassurance. He simply stayed nearby, a solid, warm presence on the other end of the sofa, reading. Hours later, Shane crawled across the cushions and into Ilya's lap, burying his face in his neck. "I need to tell you something," he whispered, his voice thick.

Ilya set his book aside instantly, his full attention a tangible force. "I am listening."

They were not perfect. They bickered over nursery paint colors. Shane won of course since Ilya currently seemed incapable of saying no to him for long, choosing a soft, buttery yellow over Ilya's preferred "neutral enough 'dove gray'". Ilya could still be ludicrously overprotective, once following Shane to the mailbox and back with an umbrella because a few clouds dared to gather. Shane still sometimes retreated into a shell of silence when the weight of it all, the bond, the baby, the sheer enormity of their shared life, felt too heavy. But now they recognized the patterns. And slowly, tentatively, they began to laugh again.

Shane grew enormous, and Ilya couldn't be more obsessed with touching the belly or talking to it when they were alone. His feet swelled. His back ached. He grumbled constantly about his body's betrayal and his inability to see his own toes. Ilya watched him with a reverence that bordered on the absurd, constantly telling him how beautiful he was, which only irritated Shane more. "You're biased and blinded because this is all your fault," Shane would grouse, even as he preened under the attention.

Bean was a constant, vigorous presence. They kicked with the force of a champion, often aiming for Ilya's face when he leaned down to speak to Shane's stomach in low, rumbling Russian. "Disrespectful," Ilya would mutter, rubbing his chin, while Shane laughed until he winced with round ligament pain.

Yuna filled the cottage with an endless stream of tiny, impractical outfits. David and Walter quietly assembled furniture, his large hands deft with the miniature screws of a crib. Ruth observed from a fond distance, her interventions becoming rarer as Shane and Ilya's problem-solving skills strengthened. They saw Ilya kneel to help Shane put on socks he could no longer reach, his touch gentle and loving. They witnessed Shane, during a 3 AM craving for pickles and chocolate ice cream, wake Ilya not with a demand, but with a softly spoken, "I'm sorry, but I need a weird thing." Ilya, without a word, had pulled on sweatpants and go to the kitchen for his snacks.

As Shane approached thirty-nine weeks, the anticipation condensed into a palpable, electric charge. Ilya became, in Shane's unbiased assessment, completely unbearable. The hospital bag was packed just in case, unpacked, and repacked obsessively by Ilya and Yuna. The car remained permanently fueled. Dr. Alvarez's number was on speed dial and posted on the refrigerator in case she went out of the house when it happened. Ilya had flowcharts. Security briefings occurred weekly, as if the arrival of one small baby was a matter of national security.

"Millions of people do this every day without all this," Shane reminded him, for what felt like the hundredth time, as he waddled past Ilya's latest checklist.

"Millions of people are not you," Ilya retorted, not looking up from his tablet.

It happened a few days later, Shane's labor while they were in the kitchen. Shane was leaning against the counter, complaining about the uncomfortable-ness that Bean's latest acrobatics had inspired all morning. He stopped mid-sentence, his hand going to the side of his belly.

Ilya noticed immediately. "What?"

"Nothing."

"What happened?"

"Nothing."

"Shane."

Shane looked down, then back up at Ilya, his expression shifting from annoyance to surreal disbelief. "My water just broke."

Ilya Rozanov, strong, arrogant, all star alpha hockey player ran to Shane's side of the kitchen island. All color drained from his face. His eyes widened. For a full three seconds, he did not breathe.

Shane, watching the panic short-circuit his Alpha's formidable brain, felt an absurd bubble of laughter rise in his chest. He became, ironically, the calm one. "Ilya. Breathe. Find the others."

The following hours were a long, slow, intense river of sensation and emotion. The prospect of labor had scared Shane when he did his research. The pain was a living thing, vast and consuming. In its grip, his control slipped, leaving raw instinct and fear. Ruth, Carmen and his mother were with him, guiding him to breathe, running cool clothes on his face, Ilya had almost been kicked out of the room a few times, so for now he was the one going back and forth from their nest to give news to David and Walter.

Every Alpha fiber in Ilya screamed to protect, to fix, to do something to take his mates pain away. He could not. So he tried to become his anchor. He listened, his entire world narrowed to Shane's face, Shane's voice, Shane's needs.

"Touch?" Ilya would ask, his hand hovering near Shane's clenched fist. Sometimes Shane would nod frantically, grasping Ilya's hand like a lifeline, squeezing until the bones ground together. Ilya bore it without a sound.

Thirty seconds later, Shane would shove him away, a feral snarl in his throat. "No! Don't touch me! No more babies, Ilya! Not one more!"

Ilya would retreat instantly, giving him space, his own heart cracking with helplessness.

A minute after that, Shane would sob, "Why are you all the way over there?"

And Ilya would come straight back, settling in their nest behind Shane, offering his hand again without a word.

Dr. Alvarez moved through the room with practiced calm, her occasional directives to Ilya delivered with a blend of compassion and utter lack of ceremony. “Rozanov, stop blocking the light. Hold his hand or get him ice, but move.”

As the hours stretched and the final, monumental phase began, the last vestiges of humor fell away. Shane was exhausted, trembling, scared. “I can’t,” he gasped out, tears mixing with sweat.

Ilya framed his face, forcing Shane’s glassy gaze to meet his. “You can. You are doing it. You’re almost there, dusha moya. I am here. You are safe.” His voice was a low, steady chant, a promise woven into each word.

With a final, Herculean effort that seemed to tear something from the very core of his being, Shane pushed their baby into the world.

There was a sudden, profound silence, followed by a thin, indignant wail that grew into a robust, furious cry.

Dr. Alvarez lifted the baby, swift and sure. “You have a daughter,” she said, her smile clear even behind her mask.

She was placed, wet and squalling, onto Shane’s heaving chest. For a moment, Ilya simply ceased to exist as a thinking being. He was pure sensation: the overwhelming scent of his mate and his child, the sound of her cries, the sight of her- her.

She was a perfect, miniature Shane. His nose. His mouth. The very shape of his face, replicated in heartbreaking detail. But dusting her scalp was a shock of pale, almost white-blond fuzz, unmistakably Ilya’s. As her cries subsided into hiccuping gulps and she blinked open her eyes, they revealed a stunning, deep ocean blue. Shane’s face, crowned with Ilya’s hair and illuminated by Ilya’s eyes.

Ilya stared, utterly enraptured. He had imagined their child a thousand times, but this, this was beyond his deepest wishes, she was the best of both of them, she was a miracle beyond

his comprehension. A sob tore from his throat, then another, ragged and uncontrollable. He didn't try to stop them.

Shane, tears streaming down his own cheeks, looked up at the wreck of his Alpha. A weak, triumphant smile touched his lips. "Are you crying?"

Ilya shook his head, wiping clumsily at his face with the back of his wrist, his gaze never leaving their daughter. "Shut up," he choked out, his voice thick with awe. "We made a person, sweetheart."

Later, cleaned up and swaddled, their daughter slept against Shane's chest in the quiet nest. Yuna, David, Ruth, and Walter had come and gone, leaving a haze of joy and quiet exhaustion in their wake. It was just the three of them now.

Ilya lay on his side, curved around Shane, one enormous hand splayed lightly, possessively over their daughter's front, his fingertips lost in the blond down of her hair. "She's so tiny." He whispered.

"Yurina Aiko Rozanova," Shane murmured, testing the name aloud for the first time outside their private conversations.

Ilya's breath hitched. He pressed his lips to Shane's shoulder. "Hollander-Rozanova."

The names hung in the hushed room, they both looked down at the tiny sleeping baby. Irina's legacy would not live on in the grim halls of a Russian estate or in the bitter memories of a stolen life. It would thrive here, in this room, in this child. In the safety of a love she had never known but had somehow, against all odds, helped to create.

Shane's eyes drifted closed, his body spent, his heart impossibly full. Ilya watched them both, his daughter's tiny chest rising and falling in rhythm with his mate's. The blizzard of plans, the gnawing fears, were all gone. His heart was so full of love and bursting with happiness.

For the first time in either of their lives, the future did not loom as a series of obstacles to overcome or dangers to evade. It simply belonged to them. To Shane, to Ilya, and to Yurina. Their family.

The first two weeks with their new family unfolded in a bubble of such profound, simple happiness that it felt almost surreal. The cottage, became a cocoon where the outside world ceased to exist. Even their security team had asked to come in and meet the new baby. They watched as these big burly Russian men seemed to melt at the tiny little girl. Shane recovered extremely well, his body sore and tired but healing cleanly. His entire focus, however, was perpetually tuned to the tiny, warm weight in his arms or against his chest. He was, by his own admission, completely obsessed.

Ilya was worse.

If possible, the Alpha had become even more singularly devoted. He carried Yurina in a soft wrap against his heart, her blond head tucked beneath his chin, as he moved through the cottage doing mundane tasks to ease Shane's recovery. He spoke to her almost exclusively in Russian, a low, rumbling monologue about the weather, hockey strategies, and the dubious moral character of squirrels. He could differentiate between her "I'm hungry" cry and her "I'm mildly inconvenienced" cry within days. He learned to change diapers, becoming an expert at swaddling her, hovered when she wasn't in Shane's or his arms. And he spent hours just looking at her, his expression one of awe-struck bewilderment, as if trying to solve the mystery of her very existence. He insisted, despite all visual evidence to the contrary, that she looked like both of them. "She has your nose," he'd say solemnly, tracing the tiny feature on Shane's face and then on Yurina's sleeping visage.

"She has my exact nose," Shane would correct, amused.

"And my eyes."

"Yes."

“And my hair.”

“A few strands of it, yes.”

Ilya would shake his head, utterly convinced. “She is perfect blend.”

They had also, without discussion, become nearly inseparable. Since Yurina’s birth, they had rarely been out of each other’s sight for more than a few minutes. They slept tangled together in the nest, Yurina’s own tiny nest a inches away, made of everyone’s blankets and clothing. When Shane nursed her in the deep quiet of the night, Ilya was always awake beside him, a silently sliding in behind Shane to wrap his arms around both of them, passing water or a blanket. When Ilya paced the floor with her to soothe a fussy moment, Shane was nearby, watching, his presence a comfort to them both. After the storms they had weathered, this constant, quiet closeness felt less like codependency and more like the natural state of their rebuilt world. Neither felt any urge to create distance.

At two weeks postpartum, Shane finally felt sturdy enough to transition back to their large house in Ottawa. A quiet longing for their own space, for the familiar contours of their shared life, had begun to surface amidst the cottage’s peace. Everyone, friends, teammates, extended family, was gently, persistently begging to meet Yurina. They’d kept the first couple of weeks intentionally small, a private galaxy of seven. Now, Shane was ready to start being around their extended group of friends and their created ‘family’.

The migration back was controlled chaos. The cottage disgorged an astonishing amount of baby equipment- swings, bouncers, stacks of diapers, bags of tiny clothes, that all had to be transported. Yuna, David, Ruth, and Walter helped, their movements familiar and comforting. Security remained a discreet, professional presence, but the threat level in their minds had downgraded from “imminent siege” to “standard precaution.”

Walking into the Ottawa house carrying Yurina, Shane paused on the threshold. This house held ghosts, the chilling silence after brutal arguments, the scent of fear and desperation, the memory of Ilya’s controlling rage and his own trapped despair. For a moment, he braced himself for the echo. But it didn’t come. The foyer was just a foyer, sunlit and clean. The air smelled of the lemon-scented cleaner the housekeeper used and, faintly, of Ilya’s scent. It felt like a clean slate now, simply like home waiting for them to make memories. Theirs. And

now it was Yurina's too. Ilya came up behind him, a large hand settling on the small of his back, not pushing, just connecting. "Okay?" he murmured.

Shane looked down at the sleeping bundle in his arms, then around at the hall that led to their future. "Yeah," he said, his voice thick. "Okay."

The gathering they hosted a few days later was pure, undiluted joy. Their close friends, Svetlana, Hayden and Jackie, and their girls, Marly, Scott and Kip with baby Noah, JJ, and Rose merged seamlessly with a swarm of Centaurs players and their partners. The house filled with overlapping conversations, laughter, the clink of glasses, and the rustle of gift wrap. A mountain of presents for Yurina grew in the corner of the living room, mostly impractical and utterly adorable.

The Centaurs, now thoroughly familiar with Shane, greeted him with easy warmth. Any residual awkwardness had dissolved. He was simply Shane, not just Ilya's mate, Yurina's dad, a man who belonged in their captain's life. Shane had heard that Ilya was the only who lucked out on getting the Shane Hollander. They crowded around, a wall of enormous, gentle athletes, all vying for a glimpse of the baby.

"Alright, alright, line forms to the left," Troy announced, playing crowd control. "No shoving. Rozanov will bite."

Ilya, hovering near Shane's shoulder as he handed Yurina carefully to Harris, looked supremely unconcerned. Harris held the baby as if she were made of spun glass. He stared down at her tiny features, then up at Shane, then back at the baby. "Rozy," he said, his voice full of mock seriousness, "I'm not sure you contributed anything here. She's a carbon copy."

A ripple of laughter went through the room. Ilya's brows drew together in immediate offense. "She has my hair."

Another player, leaning in, pointed out, "That's just decoration, Cap. She's all Hollander."

"And eyes," Ilya stated firmly, as if presenting irrefutable evidence in court. "She has my eyes."

Shane, leaning against Ilya's side, smirked. "Two things."

"Three."

"What's the third?"

Ilya looked down at Yurina, now being carefully passed to Hayden, his expression completely earnest. "Attitude."

Shane stared at him. "She's two weeks old. Her attitude is 'sleepy' and 'sometimes hungry.'"

"Exactly," Ilya said, nodding sagely. "Very advanced. Already knows what she likes. She is genius baby."

The room erupted in laughter. Ilya endured the good-natured ribbing with a faint, proud smile. When JJ reached for Yurina next, Ilya's hand twitched, a barely perceptible hesitation before he let her go. JJ noticed. "She's six feet away from you, Rozanov. She'll survive."

"Seven," Ilya corrected instantly, his eyes not leaving his daughter.

Shane watched it all, a deep, quiet contentment settling in his bones. This cacophony of love, this ordinary chaos, was the life they had fought for, bled for, and almost lost. It was here, real and loud and perfect.

While everyone's attention was on the baby, David came up to Shane and Ilya. "You feeling ok, son?" It was something he'd started doing while Carmen cleaned up Yurina after she was born. While everyone was focused on the new addition, as they should be- David had come to give a soft kiss on his son's sweaty forehead, telling him how proud he was, if he needed anything.

“Everything is perfect dad.” Shane said with a grin.

Eventually, the familiar, rhythmic fussing began. Yurina’s hungry cry cut through the chatter. Shane knew it instantly. “Someone’s ready for dinner,” he said, already moving forward to gently extract her from Svetlana’s arms.

Ilya stood immediately, as if connected to them by a string.

Shane took Yurina, cradling her close, and turned toward the staircase. Ilya fell into step beside him. Shane looked at him. “Where are you going?”

Ilya’s expression was one of genuine confusion. “With you.”

“Why?”

“You are feeding her.”

“Yes. I am aware.”

“So I come.” It was stated as natural law.

Shane couldn’t help the soft laugh that escaped him. “Stay here,” he said, his voice gentle.

A tiny flicker of something, not fear, but unease- passed over Ilya’s face. They hadn’t been apart in any meaningful way since the birth. The party was one thing, being on separate floors felt like a canyon. “Ilya,” Shane said, understanding the unspoken question.

“I can come sit with you,” Ilya offered, a compromise.

“I know.” Shane leaned in, kissing him softly. “But you have an entire hockey team in our living room. Talk to your friends. I’ll be back in twenty minutes.”

Ilya’s hand lingered on Shane’s hip, his thumb stroking once. “You sure?”

He was asking about more than the feeding. He was asking if the peace was solid enough to bear a brief separation. Shane saw the progress in the question itself. “I’m sure,” Shane said, his voice firm and warm. Then he grinned. “Practice your communication skills. Be nice to the rookies that you ignored during the season.”

Someone nearby, maybe Hayden, snorted. “He can survive twenty minutes without them, Rozanov. You’re not surgically attached.”

Ilya didn’t look away from Shane. “Nobody asked you, worst player on worst team.” he grumbled, but his hand dropped. He stayed rooted in place as Shane turned and carried Yurina up the stairs, the line of his shoulders tense but accepting.

Upstairs, the world muted. The noise of the party became a pleasant, distant hum beneath the comforting, familiar sounds of their house. The hallway was warm, lamplight pooling on the hardwood. Safe.

Shane settled into the plush nursing chair in the corner of their bedroom, the one Ilya had insisted was the best engineered for lumbar support. He had been getting a bit overwhelmed from all the noise and people around his baby, but it had been too much fun to say anything. Yurina, smelling of milk and baby shampoo, nuzzled against him and latched on with focused determination. The quiet, rhythmic sound of her feeding filled the room. Shane looked down, tracing the curve of her ear with his fingertip, then smoothing the impossibly soft, pale blond hair on her head.

“You know your papa is downstairs having separation anxiety?” he whispered.

Yurina made a tiny, sucking noise.

“Yeah, I know,” Shane murmured back.

Another noise, a little sigh.

“He’s ridiculous.”

A pause. Shane bent and kissed her forehead. “Don’t tell him I said that. He loves us so much, doesn’t he?”

He sat there, bathed in the peace of the moment, until she finished, her body going limp and heavy with satisfaction. He shifted her to his shoulder, patting her back gently until a soft burp emerged, followed by a trickle of spit-up that soaked into his shirt.

Shane looked down at the damp patch. “Seriously? You’re so lucky you’re the cutest thing alive.” he whispered, exasperated but fond.

Yurina, milk-drunk and serene, blinked sleepily.

“You really are his daughter,” Shane sighed, smiling. He laid her gently in the bassinet beside their bed. She was asleep in seconds, a tiny fist curled near her cheek. Shane stood for a long moment, just watching the even rise and fall of her chest. This. This impossible, perfect reality. He had once believed himself destined for a quieter, simpler life, one that could never contain the volatile, all-consuming force of Ilya Rozanov. Now, he couldn’t imagine a universe without this, the laughter downstairs, the sleeping child here, the love that felt less like a storm and more like the ground beneath his feet.

He glanced again at the spit-up stain. It was his favorite shirt stolen from Ilya. The en-suite bathroom was only a few steps away. The door was open. He could hear Yurina’s soft, snuffling breaths from the threshold. He’d be gone less than a minute.

He stepped into the bathroom, wet a cloth with warm water, and wiped at the stain on his shirt. He washed his hands, the sound of the faucet loud in the quiet room. From below, a burst of laughter echoed up the staircase, followed by the deep, recognizable timbre of Ilya's voice saying something that provoked another round of laughing. Everything was perfect.

He walked back into the bedroom.

And stopped.

His mind, still languid with contentment, took a full second to process. A man was standing beside the bassinet. Blond hair. A familiar, handsome profile. The bassinet was empty.

Shane's eyes, dragged by a cold, plunging instinct, snapped upward.

The man was holding Yurina. Cradled against his chest, nestled in the crook of his arm, her blanket carefully arranged. He was looking down at her with an odd expression.

Then he turned fully to face Shane.

Sasha.

He didn't look deranged. He didn't look furious or triumphant. He looked calm. A little tired, perhaps thinner than Shane remembered, the lines around his eyes a bit deeper. But he was smiling, a small, private smile, as he adjusted the blanket around Yurina's sleeping form. As though he had every right.

Then his eyes lifted and met Shane's.

"She really does look like you," Sasha said, his voice quiet, conversational.

The air left Shane's lungs in a rush, replaced by a void of pure, icy terror. Then instinct, primal and overwhelming, surged up, burning through the shock.

"What the fuck are you doing here?!" The words ripped from him, raw and loud, far louder than the distant party noise.

Sasha's expression didn't alter. He simply continued to look at Shane, the faint smile still playing on his lips.

Shane took a jerky step forward, his hands curling into claws at his sides. "Give her to me."

Sasha didn't move.

"Sasha." Shane's voice dropped, trembling with a lethal intensity. "Give me my fucking baby."

He took another step, muscles coiling to lunge. The other man made a tsking sound with his tongue and Shane froze.

Because Sasha shifted Yurina slightly, just a gentle rocking motion. And Shane saw his other hand. Held loosely, almost casually, down by his side. A syringe. Uncapped. The needle tip glinting in the lamplight. It was held close enough to Yurina's swaddled form that the unspoken threat was horrifically clear. Shane could not rush him. He could not risk a sudden movement, a startled jerk.

His heart hammered against his ribs, a frantic, trapped bird. His daughter, his beautiful, oblivious two-week-old daughter, slept on, her cheek pressed against the wool of Sasha's sweater.

Yurina made a tiny, sleepy sound, a mere sigh. Sasha looked down at her, his smile deepening for a fraction of a second, and automatically swayed on his feet, a soothing rock.

The gesture amid the nightmare made bile rise in Shane's throat. His whole body began to tremble, a violent, uncontrollable shudder. His Alpha was downstairs. His friends were downstairs. Security surrounded the property. But in this room, he was utterly alone. It was just Shane, Sasha, and Yurina. Why had he told Ilya to stay downstairs?

Sasha looked up from the baby, his gaze meeting Shane's again. He was still smiling.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, before anyone comes for me over that ending... I would like to formally blame Anna. 😂 She encouraged this behavior, and therefore I refuse to accept full responsibility for any emotional distress caused by that cliffhanger. You all got happiness! You got healing! You got communication! You got baby Yurina! You got Ilya being an absolutely cute girl dad! I gave you everything you wanted... ...and then Anna helped me choose violence. 😇



See you next chapter. And again: blame Anna for the cliffy, Lisa for the cute funny parts



Chapter 50

Chapter Summary

Hi y'all ❤️

As always, a huge thank you to Lisa, Anna, and Tony for reading, catching the things my brain stops seeing after I've stared at a chapter for too long, and helping me get to where I needed to go. 😂❤️ You guys have made this story so much better, and I genuinely could not have made it this far without you.

And somehow... we're almost done. 😭

After this, we have ONE more chapter and then the epilogue, and then we're officially putting this monster of a story to rest. I genuinely don't know how I feel about that yet. I'm probably going to have a mini cry when I finally hit "complete." 😂

But we're not there quite yet.

Through absolutely no fault of my own, we left off with Sasha standing in Shane and Ilya's nursery, holding their two-week-old daughter with a syringe in his hand.

So... remember when I said we were heading toward the HEA?



Enjoy. ❤️

Chapter Notes

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

The world narrowed to a single, horrifying point, the glint of the needle against Yurina's blanket. Every cell in Shane's body screamed to lunge, to tear his daughter from Sasha's arms with teeth and nails, but the threat was too close, too absolute. He forced his feet to remain rooted to the floorboards, his breath coming in short, silent pants that did nothing to ease the vertigo spinning his vision.

"Give me my baby," he repeated, the words a raw scrape in his throat.

Sasha's gaze drifted down to Yurina's face, his expression softening into something that looked disturbingly like tenderness. "She should have been mine," he murmured, calmly,

almost with the wistful ache of a missed opportunity. “I knew him when he was everything a Russian Alpha was meant to be. Wild. Unbreakable. A force of nature. His ambition was a fire, and I... I could have fed it. Given him what he needed. Connections, respect, a legacy that wasn’t just trophies in a case, but real influence.” He looked up, his eyes meeting Shane’s. “We understood the same world. The same rules. Matings are about building something. Power supporting power, a name like Rozanov shouldn’t be wasted.”

He adjusted his hold on Yurina, his thumb stroking her blanket. “Tyotya Galina saw it too. She knew what he was meant for. And she saw what you were doing. You made him... small, insignificant. Content with this.” He gestured faintly with the hand holding the syringe, indicating the room, the house, the life beyond it. “A quiet life in a boring country, playing a game for crowds who will forget him.”

Shane forced air into his lungs, fighting to keep his scent neutral, to smother the panic that wanted to shriek through the bond for Ilya. He had to keep Sasha talking, looking at him. “You never knew him, not the real him.” Shane said, the words brittle.

“I knew the man he was before you existed to him,” Sasha countered, a flash of heat in his tone. His eyes dropped back to Yurina, and a different, more complicated emotion flickered across his face, a mix of resentment and awe. “She’s beautiful. I can admit that. She has his hair. His eyes too I bet.” His voice dropped, turning almost confidential. “But she barely looks like him, does she? The rest... it’s all you.”

“She’s his daughter,” Shane bit out.

“I know,” Sasha sighed, as if this were a profound disappointment. He looked past Shane, his gaze turning inward. “Our children would have looked like him. Strong. Carrying his name properly. Alpha sons who could have had anything- playing hockey and going to the Olympics, positions in politics, in businesses. Omega daughters who would have made brilliant matches. A family that meant something. That built something.” He said it not with menace, but with a pure conviction, as if describing a beautiful, self developed image that had been stolen from the world.

The pieces, horrifying and clear, clicked together in Shane’s mind. This wasn’t just jealousy. It was a curated fantasy, an entire life story Sasha had written for himself and Ilya, with roles and progeny and a legacy scripted down to the last detail. Galina hadn’t needed to seduce him with lies, she’d simply validated a dream he’d must have been thinking about for years.

“Did Galina say you could have had Ilya?”

Sasha’s placid expression flickered. “I knew him before you existed to him. I knew the man who burned with ambition, who carried his country on his back, who didn’t apologize for what he wanted. He was a free spirit, drinking, fucking, having a party every weekend. She didn’t have to say anything. She simply helped me see that what was natural could be restored. That your... bond... was an aberration. A distraction from his true path. Once he was back where he belonged, once he remembered who he was, who else would there be? The Omega who knew him first. Who understood his world and could help him be greater than he ever thought he could be.”

“And he still chose me.” The words were out before Shane could temper them.

The bitterness beneath Sasha’s calm veneer surfaced, tightening the skin around his eyes. “You changed him, you made him small, insignificant. Content with this... domestic fantasy. My aunt saw it. Years ago, when she saw that we’ve started seeing each other she was so happy. We had a plan and then you had to ruin everything. She tried to remind him of who he was meant to be. And you and your family destroyed her for it.”

In his periphery vision, Shane saw the door to the adjoining master bedroom, left slightly ajar, move. The slender figure of his mother slowly eased into the room. His heart slammed against his ribs. He dared not look directly at her, dared not give it away. He focused on Sasha’s face, on the simmering resentment there.

“You keep talking about what he could’ve been,” Shane said, his voice gaining a shred of steel. “Russia, power, children. His name. You haven’t said one fucking thing about what Ilya wanted.”

Sasha’s composure cracked for the first time, irritation flashing in his eyes. “I knew what he wanted. Do you even know how he was before you?” Sasha asked, his voice dropping low.

Shane didn’t hesitate. “Yeah. he was unhappy. Do you think we haven’t talked about his life in Russia?”

The change on Sasha's face was immediate and made Shane's chest clench. The carefully maintained calm shattered, replaced by a flash of pure, unguarded rage. It was the crack Shane needed to see. He held Sasha's furious gaze, and in that second, his own eyes flicked past Sasha's shoulder to the figure now fully in the room.

His mom. Her face was pale, her eyes wide with a terror that mirrored his own. But she was moving, silent as a ghost, her socked feet making no sound on the carpet. Her gaze locked with Shane's for a fraction of a heartbeat, a full conversation passing between them in an instant. Keep him looking at you.

Shane swallowed, his mouth dry. His mother was moving behind Sasha, but too slowly. She needed time. He needed Sasha looking at him, but more than that, he needed Yurina out of his arms. If there was anything Shane could say that would make him hand her over willingly, he would say it. He would promise him anything.

"He chose a life, Sasha. You and Galina only ever offered him an illusion." Shane's peripheral vision kept track of his mom, so he dropped to Yurina and whatever strategy he'd been trying to hold onto disappeared beneath a fresh wave of panic. "But I don't care. Just give me my baby. I'll break the bond. I'll leave him again. I'll go back to Montreal. You can have him. I don't fucking care. Just give her to me."

The words made bile rise into his throat. He needed Ilya so badly that his chest physically hurt. He wanted him there. He wanted his Alpha. He wanted Ilya to take Yurina and him and wrap them both up somewhere no one could ever find them again. He wished he'd listened when Ilya offered to come upstairs with him.

Sasha stared at him for a moment, and Shane could almost see him considering it.

"You think it's that simple?"

"Yes." Shane nodded quickly. "It can be. You want him? Fine. Take him. I won't fight you. Just put Yurina down and I'll leave."

Sasha's expression twisted. "You have no idea what we offered him!"

"Then tell me."

"We offered him everything!"

"Fine, you're right. You knew him first. You understand parts of him that I don't. Whatever you want, I don't care anymore. Just give me the baby and I can leave right now.

"You don't really believe that, Hollander."

"What does it matter? You don't give a fuck what I believe so just give me my daughter and I'll leave."

"And you do think his obsession will go away? That's the problem- you never really understood him. You never understood what makes him tick, or saw the vision of how great he could have been. You had him switch teams to be closer to you- do you know how pathetic is it for a player like Ilya to voluntarily go to one of the worse teams? Do you know how much he's sacrificed to make things easier for you?"

Now in Shane's line of site he could see his mother moving closer. Slowly, inch by inch she was focused on Sasha and Yurina. "I didn't ask him to switch teams."

"He's been miserable. You really think a player like Ilya wanted to be in such a shitty team?"

Then Shane noticed something. It was a risk, but he had to do something fast. "He would have been miserable. You had him before me. You two had years together, in Russia but he took the first chance he had to leave. He was just a kid when he entered the scouting tournaments."

Yuna moved a few inches closer. Sasha's face turned red with fury, but Shane kept going. "All that and he still didn't choose you."

The syringe moved away from Yurina. "You shut up! He was confused. Do you really think a man like Ilya was alone all those months that you were gone?"

"Maybe not, but he went to find me and bring me back, I didn't come back to him. If you were what he wanted, I think that was telling enough."

Sasha made a savage low noise from the back of his throat and move to point the hand with the syringe at Shane when Yuna stepped right behind him.

It was the moment Yuna needed. She didn't leap. She flowed forward, a silent, desperate wave. Her arm snaked around Sasha's throat from behind, yanking him backward with a strength born of pure maternal terror.

Sasha jerked violently, a choked gasp tearing from him. Yurina, jolted from sleep, erupted into a piercing, terrified wail. The sound ripped through Shane, and he screamed too, a wordless cry of rage and fear.

The syringe clattered to the floor, rolling under the bassinet.

Sasha's grip on Yurina loosened as he flailed, his hands clawing at Yuna's arm locked around his neck. Shane was already moving, he lunged, his arms closing around his daughter, and wrenched her from Sasha's slackening embrace. He stumbled back, clutching Yurina to his chest, his body curving around her as he backed into the wall, his eyes glued to the struggle.

It wasn't graceful. Yuna clung to Sasha's back, her face a mask of rage and determination. Sasha staggered, trying to throw her off, his fingers scrambling for a grip on her forearm. He was stronger, but Yuna had the leverage of surprise and a purpose that was absolute. She saw Shane, white-faced and shaking, pressed against the wall with his child. She did not let go. She squeezed, her entire body trembling with the effort.

Shane sobbed, running his hands over Yurina's tiny body, searching for any wetness, any mark, any sign of the needle. Her cries were loud and healthy, her face turning red as her tiny cries burst out but he couldn't find anything wrong so far. He stripped her down to her diaper, not seeing any mark. He couldn't think about what was happening a few feet away until he checked his daughter over.

"Mom," he choked out, his voice barely audible over Yurina's cries. Sasha's struggles were weakening, his movements becoming sluggish. "Mom, he's out."

Yuna didn't respond. Her face was buried against Sasha's shoulder, her eyes squeezed shut.

"Mom!" Shane cried, louder.

She heard him. He saw her flinch. But her arms, locked against the larger man, did not relent.

The bedroom door flew open and Ilya rushed inside, stopping short when he saw them. His eyes went first to Shane and Yurina, then to the syringe lying on the floor, and finally to Sasha hanging limply in Yuna's arms. His face went white. "Shane?"

He was across the room before Shane could answer, going straight to him instead of Sasha. "Did he hurt her?" Ilya asked, his hands immediately going to Yurina, carefully checking her face and the her body as much as he could see from around Shane's arms, while Shane continued to hold her tightly against his chest. "Did he touch her with needle?"

"I don't know!" Shane was crying so hard he could barely get the words out. "I don't think so. Ilya, I don't

know. He had it right next to her and then Mom grabbed him and it fell. I don't know if he did something before I came back."

"Okay. Is okay." Ilya cupped the back of Shane's neck and pulled him closer, looking over Yurina again even as she screamed between them. His own hands were shaking now. He called out for

Anatoly who had come in right behind him. “Get Dr. Alvarez here now! Is ok, Shane. She’s fine.”

“Please.”

“Yes. Of course.” Ilya kissed Shane’s forehead quickly and then bent to kiss the top of Yurina’s head. “I have you. Both of you. Is okay.”

“Please, please check her.”

Ilya didn’t try to take Yurina. He leaned in, his hands joining Shane’s, their fingers tangling as they gently patted her down, ran trembling hands over her limbs, searched her blanket. There was no puncture. No blood. Nothing but the angry, healthy red of her screaming face.

The room began to fill with others- David, his face ashen; Anatoly, his expression grim as he spoke on the phone. He knelt by the syringe, using a handkerchief to pick it up. David moved to Yuna, kneeling beside her.

“Yuna,” he said, his voice gentle but firm. “Sweetheart. Let go.”

She didn’t move. Her arms were still vised around Sasha’s throat. Ilya looked over, his arm still around Shane and Yurina. His eyes met Anatoly’s, then dropped to Sasha’s prone form. The unnatural angle of the head, the utter stillness. He knew.

David carefully pried Yuna’s hands open. She released her grip and sat back on her heels as Sasha’s body slumped fully to the floor. Her hands, now free, trembled violently in her lap. She stared at Sasha, her breathing ragged. Then her gaze lifted, finding Shane, then Yurina.

Her first question was, “Is the baby okay?”

Ilya answered, his voice rough. “Dr. Alvarez is coming. We will check everything.”

Yuna nodded, a jerky motion. She asked again, her voice small, “He didn’t hurt her? You?”

Shane, tears streaming down his face as Yurina’s cries began to soften into hiccups against his neck, shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

Yuna closed her eyes. “Good.”

When Dr. Alvarez arrived, her usual air of fond exasperation was gone, replaced by a solemn, her movements efficient and professional. Yurina was examined in the safety of the master bedroom, surrounded by her parents and grandparents. Ruth and Walter was getting everyone out of the house with them just saying that they’ll get calls from Shane and Ilya to explain. Security was around to walk them all to their cars.

There was no mark. No sign of any substance administered. She was, aside from the understandable fright, perfectly healthy. The syringe, Anatoly reported quietly, contained a concentrated, fast-acting sedative, easily accessible with the right connections.

The relief that washed through Shane was so profound it left him weak-kneed and nauseous. Ilya simply sagged beside him on the bed, his forehead resting against Shane’s temple, his breath shuddering out.

Anatoly did pull Ilya away, only a few feet since Ilya refused to let Shane or Yurina out of his sight. He bent his head close to not alert Shane. “We found two of the guards outside dead. That was how he got in.”

Ilya schooled his features to give nothing away. “How did this happen? I thought we were keeping track of him.”

“We were. He was seen entering his apartment yesterday morning in Paris. Food delivery from this morning. It was all normal. I will give you a list of companies you can use to replace us with references-”

“Shut up. No one is leaving. Make sure the families of the two are taken care of. I will call them myself when Shane is asleep.” Ilya didn’t wait for a response. He turned and crawled into bed behind Shane as he held their baby.

Later, as the house settled, the adrenaline began to recede from Yuna. She sat on the edge of the bed their room, a blanket around her shoulders, staring at her hands as if they belonged to someone else.

“I heard you,” she said quietly when Shane finished nursing Yurina. He paused. “When you told me he was out. I heard you.” Her hands clenched, the trembling starting anew. “I knew you had the baby. You were safe.” She looked up, her eyes haunted. “I still didn’t let go.”

Shane shifted the newborn in his arms to move closer to his mother. He didn’t touch her, he didn’t think he could handle anyone else’s touch right now except for Ilya’s. “He had Yurina, mom. I can’t thank you enough.”

“I killed someone, Shane.”

“You saved her.”

Yuna absorbed his words, her face pale. She was not a woman who would ever be comfortable with violence, but a new, grim acceptance was settling behind her eyes.

Ilya stared at her for a long moment, Shane went back to staring at their daughter, not paying any attention around him. Ilya kissed the top of his head and moved, he sat heavily in the chair across from her, their knees touching. "He had my daughter."

"I wanted him dead," Yuna whispered, the confession stark and ugly in the lamplight.

Ilya didn't flinch. He simply nodded, his blue eyes holding hers. "So did I, what you did was merciful compared to what I would have done."

As they stared at each other, Yuna comprehended the primal instinct that had guided most of Ilya's decisions, that protectiveness that lived inside Ilya and focused on her son. The line where a threat to his loved ones ceased to be a person and became a problem to be permanently solved.

Ilya told her the news Anatoly gave him, she went very still. "Sasha killed them?"

Ilya's terse nod was all the confirmation needed.

Yuna looked toward the window, toward the darkness and where Sasha's own remains must have been taken. The last of the doubt, the lingering shock at her own actions, seemed to harden into something else. "Then I'm glad," she said, her voice barely a whisper, "I didn't let go."

Neither Shane or Ilya could sleep that night. Yurina lay between them, all traces of what had happened gone, she slept on, perfectly content. Shane lay in the nest of blankets, eyes shifting between watching Ilya and Yurina.

Ilya was moving through the room, checking the locks on the windows for the third time, his movements stiff, his shoulders coiled with a tension that hadn't eased since he'd burst into

the room. He was trying, Shane could see, trying not to overcorrect, not to let the night's terror erase all the progress that they've made over the past few months.

"What are you doing?" Shane asked softly.

"Checking everything."

"You already checked."

"I know."

Shane lifted the edge of the blanket. "Come here."

Ilya hesitated by the window, his profile etched in the faint moonlight. "You sure?"

Shane looked at him, at the man who had learned to ask. "Ilya, someone got into our bedroom and put a needle against our two-week-old baby." He took a slow breath, choosing the words with deliberate care. "I don't want space."

Ilya crossed the room and slid into the nest. Shane immediately turned, curling his back against Ilya's chest, drawing Ilya's arm around himself and over Yurina's bassinet. Ilya's body molded against his, a solid wall of heat and safety.

Then Shane continued, his voice firm in the dark. "I want you hovering. I want the guards. I want the cameras. I want you checking the doors. I want you nearby when I feed her. I want you wrapped around us like this every night." He paused, letting the distinction hang, clear and vital.

Ilya understood. The tension in his body didn't leave, but it changed, transforming from frantic energy into a watchful, ready calm. "Then you have it," he murmured into Shane's hair, his lips brushing his forehead. No argument. No teasing. Just a promise.

He tightened his arm, drawing his mate and his daughter securely against the shelter of his body. Enclosed in that guarded warmth, the scent of his Alpha surrounding him, the soft sound of Yurina's breathing a steady rhythm in the dark, Shane finally allowed his eyes to close.

Ilya didn't sleep. His phone was in one hand while he texted with Anatoly and the rest of his security team. He would make sure that the two guards were properly buried and that their families were taken care of of course, but it bothered him how easily someone still managed to get to his family. Shane would hate it, but this would need to be a conversation where he might have to go over his own wishes and tighten the security around their home.

He looked down and watched them sleep. Yurina had the tiniest hiccups now while she was cradled in Shane's arms. Carmen had assured them that she was perfectly healthy, a little jostled but not shaken or punctured. She had given Shane a very mild sedative to help him rest and Ilya had given it to him once David forced Yuna to their room and to bed with her own pill.

He put his phone down and curled up around Shane. He would watch what happened in the room when he could, but his mate had needed him and he hadn't been there. If anything had happened to either one of them, he wouldn't have been able to live with himself. Shane burrowed himself closer to Ilya, thankfully not waking their daughter up with the movement. Ilya smiled as he thought back to her first two weeks. Shane had been worried when he noticed that she was always being carried in someones arms. He'd read that it was healthy for babies to learn to self sooth early on or something ridiculous like that but Ilya constantly woke up and found him rocking a sleeping baby.

Between all of them, they had hundreds of pictures of her first two weeks, but Ilya had noticed that while everyone constantly were very vocal about Yurina, only David, Ruth and himself were really focused on Shane. He had made the mental note to make sure his mate was ok, but Shane himself loved to divert the attention back to the baby. He understood Shane and why he would do that, but Ilya would need to come up with something to make sure Shane's needs were being met, even when he didn't want the attention.

When the sun rose and Shane started to wake up, Ilya felt the tension in his shoulders come back and he sat up with a start. Ilya tried to get him to calm down and it took a few minutes but they managed to settle down. Ilya texted everyone that they'd prefer to stay in their room for the day and that he'd appreciate if food would be left by their bedroom door.

Yuna said that they'd knock once on the door when the trays would be there and to not worry about them. Ilya showed Shane the phone and they spent the first part of the morning together, not speaking much but spending time with their little family. All things considered, it was one of the best few hours of Ilya's life.

After they had breakfast and Yurina went down for a nap, Ilya pulled her moses basket and Shane into the bathroom. He filled the tub with the oils and salts that Shane liked and went to leave him to get undressed and into the tub. Shane stopped him and asked him to stay in the room. Ilya had to turn away while Shane undressed, not trusting his control that far. When he heard Shane settle, he checked on Yurina and she hadn't woken up.

He sat down on the stool close to the tub and watched as Shane leaned his head back and stare at nothing. "You have something to say that I won't like," he said, not looking at Ilya.

Ilya thought on how to frame what he wanted to really say. "I almost lost the both of you, Shane."

"Yes, I don't think there would have been a way for us to come back if she would have been hurt or-" His voice hitched and Ilya went on his knees to wrap his arms around him.

"Shh. I got you. You're both safe now."

"Ilya, he had our baby. He-"

Ilya couldn't bear the sound of his voice breaking. He moved before he thought about it, dropping to his knees beside the tub and wrapping his arms around Shane. "I know you won't like it, but I at least hope you understand that I will need to have extra security around you both. I have asked Anatoly to have more cameras installed and you might see them from now on."

Shane actually seemed to agree. “Will it be permanent?”

“I don’t know. If I see that things calm down, then we can go back to normal security.”

Shane nodded slowly after a few seconds. “Ok. I trust you.” he answered, burrowing his forehead into Ilya’s neck.

The words settled in the steamy air of the bathroom, simple and world-tilting. Okay. I trust you. For a long moment, Ilya didn’t move. His breath hitched, a tiny, almost imperceptible sound swallowed by the lap of water. For so long, trust between them had been a warped want for them. Shane’s trust had sometimes meant he had to hide what he wanted, letting Ilya take the wheel because fighting was too hard. Ilya’s interpretation of being trusted had been a license to decide, to act unilaterally, convinced he alone knew the path to safety. This was different. Shane had listened, questioned, weighed, and then chosen. It was a gift Ilya felt unworthy of, and it lodged behind his ribs like a warm, heavy stone.

He pressed his lips to Shane’s damp temple, the kiss lingering. “You can change your mind,” he murmured against his skin.

Shane pulled back just enough to look at him, brow furrowed. “About the security?”

Ilya nodded, his gaze serious. “If it becomes... too much. If you start feeling watched instead of protected. You tell me and we can discuss.”

A faint, wry smile touched Shane’s lips. He studied Ilya’s face. “And you’ll actually listen?”

Ilya’s expression shifted into one of mock offense. “I am trying to be emotionally mature, Hollander. Do not ruin moment.”

A laugh burst from Shane, short, startled, and utterly genuine. The sound seemed to shock them both. In the heavy silence that had clung to the house since Sasha, it was a sudden, bright crack. Ilya stared at him, and then a real smile, relieved and wondering, broke across his own face. He had needed to hear that sound more than he'd realized.

“Right now,” Shane said, the laughter softening into a sigh as he settled back against Ilya’s chest, “you don’t need to worry about me complaining. I don’t want privacy. I don’t want space. I honestly don’t even want to walk to the bathroom without someone checking there isn’t a fucking psychopath hiding behind the shower curtain first.”

“Six guards,” Ilya offered immediately, his tone deadpan. “Stationed in and around the house. Rotating shifts.”

“Oh. Isn’t that a little much?”

“Four.”

“Ilya...”

“Three.”

“One.”

“Two. Final offer.”

Shane snorted, shaking his head. “You’re such an asshole.” But he was laughing again, a quiet, breathy sound that vibrated through Ilya’s chest. The humor was ok right now, when it was just the two of them, a way back to themselves. It didn’t make light of the horror, but he felt safe and there baby was sleeping within he line of sight.

As the laughter faded, Shane felt the tension that never fully left Ilya's body. The way his eyes periodically tracked to the door, how his listening posture was still that of someone alert. He waited a moment, then asked quietly, "You think this was your fault, don't you?"

Ilya stiffened. "No."

"Try again, the truth please."

A muscle ticked in Ilya's jaw. He looked away, focusing on the tile wall. "I wanted to follow you upstairs. I almost did. You told me you were fine, and I stayed downstairs because... because I am supposed to respect when you say you are fine. Now I cannot stop thinking that if I had ignored you, he never would have gotten near her."

Shane turned in the water, facing him. "No." The word was firm, absolute. "I told you I was fine."

"You weren't."

"I was going upstairs in our own fucking house, Ilya." Shane's voice was low, intense. "Our friends were downstairs. Our parents were there. Anatoly's team surrounded the property. There were cameras. Armed guards. I was walking up one flight of stairs to feed our daughter. You were supposed to be able to let me do that." He reached out, his wet hand coming to rest on Ilya's cheek, forcing his gaze back. "What happened doesn't mean you were wrong for listening to me."

Ilya searched his eyes, the conflict clear on his face.

"Wanting you close now is different," Shane explained, his thumb stroking Ilya's cheekbone. "I'm frightened. Someone invaded our home. He touched her. I'm asking for the extra protection because I need it. That's not the same as you deciding I'm incapable and taking my choices away." He let Ilya process the distinction, clear and something that he needed to understand if they were going to move past this in a healthy way. "I'm asking you to hover. That's different from you deciding I'm not allowed to tell you to back off."

The rigid line of Ilya's shoulders softened a fraction. He understood. He leaned into Shane's touch, closing his eyes for a second. "When you say it is becoming too much," he promised, his voice a low rumble, "we will talk about it. Together."

After a long, quiet moment where the only sound was the cooling water, Ilya took a slow breath. There was more. Withholding it now, after everything they'd just said, would be a violation of the very partnership he was trying to build. "There is something else," he said, his tone shifting.

Shane heard it immediately. He went still. "What?"

Ilya met his eyes, bracing himself. "Sasha did not simply evade security. He killed his way through. Two guards."

Shane's face paled. He didn't speak for several seconds. "Which ones?" he finally asked, his voice thin.

Ilya hesitated, and Shane saw it.

"Ilya. Which ones?"

"Petrov. And Vance."

Shane knew them. Alexei Petrov, who had a dry sense of humor and had helped carry Yurina's nursery furniture upstairs from the delivery truck, making a joke about 'the tiny fairy princess'. Liam Vance, who'd shyly congratulated them in the driveway after Yurina was born, showing them a picture of his own newborn nephew. Shane remembered, standing at the back door earlier that afternoon, waving a platter of food. 'Come in, grab a plate, there's plenty.' Vance had smiled, shaking his head. 'Someone's gotta keep watch out here, Mr. Hollander. You enjoy your family.'

A choked sound escaped Shane. He bent forward, his forehead nearly touching the water, tears dripping from his face to merge with the bath. “They were out there because of us.”

Ilya’s hand came to rest on the nape of his neck, a solid, grounding weight. “They were doing their jobs. Sasha killed them. You did not. I did not. Not our fault.”

After a minute, Shane swiped at his eyes with a trembling hand. “What about their families?”

“Already being taken care of.”

“We need to make sure they’re taken care of. Financially. Everything.”

“Already done, sweetheart.” Ilya said softly.

Of course it was. It usually didn’t show, but Ilya loved all the people around them. He would have taken care of everything without needing to be told. It was as instinctive as breathing to him.

Shane was quiet for another long moment, then asked, his voice small, “Are you going to call them? The families?”

“Yes.”

Shane looked up, his eyes red-rimmed but clear. “Can we do it together?”

The request, the shared burden, struck Ilya with a force that left him momentarily wordless but thankful too. He simply nodded, pulling Shane back against him, holding him as the water finally grew tepid around them. “Yes.”

They stayed like that for another few minutes until the water had gone from pleasantly warm to uncomfortable. Shane finally sighed and shifted away from him. "Okay. I think I'm ready to get out."

Ilya immediately started to reach for him, but stopped himself. "You need help?"

"No. I'm okay."

There was the smallest hesitation before Ilya nodded. "I will take Yurina into bedroom. Call me if you need help, yes?"

"I will."

Ilya stood, checking the sleeping baby before carefully lifting the Moses basket. He gave Shane one last look before carrying Yurina into the bedroom, leaving the bathroom door open behind him.

Shane reached for the robe hanging beside the vanity and caught his reflection before he could pull it around himself.

He stopped.

It wasn't like he hadn't seen himself naked since giving birth. Obviously he had. But looking in passing and really looking were apparently two different things, and for the first time in months there wasn't a giant pregnant stomach distracting him from everything else that had changed.

He was softer. Everywhere, really. Months of eating whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted it had apparently caught up with him. Ruth's cooking probably hadn't helped. Neither had Ilya appearing with food every time Shane so much as mentioned being hungry. He wasn't fat. Shane knew that. But the sharp definition he'd carried for most of his adult life was gone. His abs had disappeared completely beneath the lingering softness of pregnancy, his

thighs were thicker but in that softer way- not with the usual muscle, and when he turned slightly, his hips were definitely rounder than he remembered them being.

Even his face looked fuller. Shane frowned at himself. It was stupid really. He knew it was, he'd just given birth. Of course he didn't look like he had before getting pregnant. He hadn't trained properly in months, hadn't been following his diet or skated in so long he had forgotten when was the last time. His body had grown an entire person, so expecting it to immediately snap back into the pro athlete state was ridiculous.

Knowing that didn't stop him from turning sideways for different angles though. He hand moved over his stomach, pressing lightly into the softness there before sliding down over his hips. Shane suck in automatically, watching his stomach flatten slightly, but nowhere near the hard plane he was used to seeing. He let the breath back out with an annoyed huff.

He didn't hate it, that was the weird part. Looking at himself didn't make him feel ugly really, but just...unfamiliar. This wasn't the body that he had worked hard for to be as perfect as it could be. Shane had always known exactly what he weighed, how much muscle he carried, every calorie as accounted for during 10 months out of the year. His body was as much a part of his career as his equipment were. Now he looked at himself and didn't quite recognize the figure he was looking at.

And because his brain had decided he hadn't suffered enough that day, Sasha's voice chose that exact moment to crawl back into his head.

Do you really think a man like Ilya was alone all those months that you were gone?

Shane's hand stopped on his hip. He hadn't thought about it when Sasha said it. There had been the adrenaline blocking parts out, he remembered now. He knew Ilya loved him. There wasn't a single part of Shane that doubted that anymore, but love and attraction weren't exactly the same thing.

His eyes stared at his stomach again. Who had Ilya been with while Shane was gone? He hated thinking about it, but Ilya was a very sexual person and he hadn't tried to do anything past kissing since he was back. Even though Shane had told him he wasn't ready for that part of there relationship to start again, to not have Ilya trying to convince him for more hurt his feelings a little.

Worse, he thought about how Ilya could have had practically anyone. He always could. Beautiful Alphas. Beautiful Omegas. Athletes with hard bodies who hadn't spent months pregnant and then pushed a baby out of them two weeks ago. People without softer stomachs and rounder hips and fuller faces. People who hadn't spent the last several months eating scrambled eggs covered in applesauce, pickles and honey.

“Stop,” Shane muttered at his reflection.

From the bedroom, he heard Ilya murmuring something softly to Yurina in Russian. Their daughter made one of her tiny squeaking noises and Ilya immediately answered her like she'd made a profound contribution to the conversation.

Shane's chest tightened. This was ridiculous. Ilya had never given him a reason to think he wasn't attracted to him. Quite the opposite. The man had spent most of Shane's pregnancy once he was back to acting like Shane's changing body was personally designed for his enjoyment. Half the time Shane had caught him staring at his stomach like it was the most wonderful sight in the world.

Still, when Shane reached for his robe again, he pulled it around himself quickly and tied the belt tighter than he normally would.

He caught himself doing it.

His frown deepened.

“Great,” he whispered. “That's healthy. Pull yourself together!” He mumbled to himself as he went to the counter and started his nighttime routine.

Shane left the bathroom and stepped into the bedroom. Ilya was leaning over the Moses basket, one enormous hand resting beside Yurina's tiny body while he whispered to her. He looked up when Shane entered, and his expression immediately softened.

Then his eyes moved down Shane's body. It was nothing. A glance. Probably the same appreciative look Ilya had given him a thousand times.

Shane pulled the robe closed anyway.

Ilya's eyes came back to his face. "You okay?"

"Yeah." Shane walked toward the bed. "Just tired."

Ilya watched him for another second. "Okay." And, truly like everything they'd just promised each other, he didn't push.

The days that followed were quieter. Not normal, exactly. Shane wasn't sure any of them remembered what normal felt like anymore, but quiet was enough. The increased security became part of the background of their lives, visible now because Shane had agreed that he needed it that way.

Ilya had changed too. He had become almost annoyingly good at asking instead of assuming. If Shane headed upstairs with Yurina, Ilya would glance up and ask, "You want me?" Sometimes Shane said no. Sometimes he made it halfway across the house before changing his mind and calling him. Ilya never teased him or treated it like proof that he'd been right all along. He simply came, and every time he did, asking became a little easier.

They were also, amidst the lingering tension, learning to be parents, which provided its own happiness and their new level of devotion towards their little family and each other. One night, Shane woke to find Ilya already awake, standing over the bassinet in nothing but his underwear, his hair a wild blond curly halo, staring intently at their daughter while she was in his huge arms.

“She is making hungry noise,” Ilya announced solemnly when he felt Shane sit up.

Shane, bleary-eyed, propped himself on an elbow. “Can you grab a burp cloth for me please?”

As if on cue, Yurina, still mostly asleep, turned her head and began nuzzling against Ilya’s bare chest, her mouth making little searching motions.

Ilya looked down, then over at Shane, his nose scrunched up. “Can’t help you there, Zolotko. That’s daddy’s job.” He kissed the top of her head as he handed her over to Shane.

Shane couldn’t help the laugh that bubbled up, tired and fond. “Come here, my little doll.” He murmured and brought her high unto his chest and she easily latched on.

Ilya’s expression softened as he watched them. “See? Brilliant already.”

“Because she knows I’m the one that food comes from?”

“No. Because she knows which parent is more useful.”

Shane stared at him then laughed. “You got that from me feeding her?”

“Yes. Very useful.”

They bickered over who was better at swaddling- Ilya won that one without a doubt, who could decipher cries faster- Shane, since he knew every single one of her queues, and who had changed the last diaper- a constantly disputed one. Yurina, with impeccable timing, seemed to reserve her most impressive spit-up episodes exclusively for Ilya’s shoulders, a fact Shane noted with undue satisfaction.

It happened again two nights later. Shane had just finished feeding Yurina and was changing his shirt when Ilya came out of the bathroom. Shane turned away before pulling the shirt over his head.

Ilya stopped.

Shane felt him looking and immediately became irritated. "What?"

"Nothing."

"You're staring."

"I am always staring at you." Normally that would have earned him an eye roll. This time Shane tugged the shirt down farther over his hips.

Ilya's smile disappeared. "Shane?"

"What?"

"Why you keep doing that?"

"Doing what?"

Ilya gestured vaguely toward him. "Hiding." Shane dismissed it, reaching up and giving Ilya a sweet kiss and a smile as he left the room.

When Shane bent over the bassinet, the line of his back under a soft t-shirt caught Ilya's eye. When he padded through the bedroom in the middle of the night, hair mussed and eyes sleepy, Ilya thought he was the most beautiful creature he'd ever seen. He would watch Shane

nurse Yurina, the fierce, tender focus on his face, and feel a love so vast it was terrifying. But because Shane was now carrying the secret bruise of Sasha's words and the unfamiliar shape of his own body, he either didn't see these looks or misinterpreted them. Once, he caught Ilya's gaze lingering on the fuller curve of his hip as he turned, and he immediately yanked the shirt lower again, his cheeks flushing. Ilya noticed that, too. He made a mental note of it and decided that he'd bring it up again if it became a problem.

A few days before Yurina turned one month old, Dr. Alvarez returned for a routine postpartum check. Yurina, of course, was thriving. Shane was healing well, everything progressing normally. Ilya hovered near the sitting area, pretending to be engrossed in a baby care book.

As Dr. Alvarez finished her examination, Shane casually asked, "When can I start working out again?"

Ilya's head came up.

Dr. Alvarez gave a kind, firm smile. "Your body is still in a major recovery phase, Shane. You need to give it time. Light walking is fine, but anything more strenuous should wait until at least six weeks, and even then, we start very gradually. You're used to pushing a professional athlete's body. This is different."

Shane nodded, then asked, "What about skating? Not full practice, just... being on the ice."

Ilya set the book down entirely.

The older woman considered him. "Skating is low-impact, but it still requires core stability and balance that you might not have back yet. Again, six weeks is the absolute minimum before even considering it, and you'll need to listen to your body, not that competitive brain of yours." She fixed him with a knowing look. "No fancy moves yet."

Shane asked a few more questions about timelines and milestones, his tone practical but engaged. When she left, Ilya moved to sit beside him on the sofa.

“You want to skate?” he asked, his voice neutral.

Shane shrugged, looking down at his hands. “Eventually.”

“You miss it?”

Shane hesitated. The truth was complicated. “I don’t know,” he said, which wasn’t entirely a lie, but Ilya heard the evasion.

Alone later in the tub, which was a rarity but Ilya had put the baby monitor on the counter so he had a live feed wherever he was at in the house, Shane grappled with the feeling. It wasn’t just about weight, though the reflection in the mirror still felt vaguely alien. It was about knowing. For over a decade, he had known how to work with his body and how to be the best. He knew its speed, its endurance, its precise breaking points. He knew how long he could skate before his legs turned to fire, how quickly he would recover, how hard he could push. Pregnancy had changed everything. Giving birth had been the most painful thing he’d ever experienced, but now that seemed like nothing compared to what they had gained, but even that had had lasting impact as he tried to get Ilya out of the room to ask Carmen's medical opinion, he wouldn’t leave so he would have to find a way to ask his personal questions another way.

The desire to exercise, to skate, was a longing to feel like himself again, to feel at home inside his skin again. But underneath it all, Sasha’s voice was a persistent whisper- Do you really think a man like Ilya was alone all those months? It conjured ghosts, faceless, beautiful people with hard, perfect bodies. Bodies that looked like the old Shane. He hated the thought every time it surfaced, but he was almost tempted to ask Ilya if he’d been with anyone else while he was gone.

A week later, they had a rare, quiet evening. Yurina, milk-drunk and calm, was asleep against Shane's chest on the living room sofa. Ilya had a Centaurs game tape playing on the television at low volume, more for background noise than anything. Shane was half-watching, one hand absently stroking Yurina's back, the other reviewing some emails that Yuna wanted his eyes on. He had ignored the brand partnerships long enough and pretty soon he'd need to reenter that part of the world.

Then, without paying too much attention, he muttered, "What the fuck was that pass?"

Ilya glanced over from the other side of the couch, as he was texting with the team group chat while they were all watching the same tape.

A few minutes later, Shane's head tilted. "He's wide open on the weak side. How does he not see him?" Frustration tinged his voice.

Ilya slowly lowered his phone, trying to see what Shane saw.

Shane grew more animated, his player's mind engaging despite itself. He criticized a defender's control, predicted a breakout play before it developed, and groaned aloud when Ilya took a bad shot exactly as Shane had known he would. "For fuck's sake, Bood, you're smarter than that!"

Finally, Shane felt the weight of Ilya's stare. He looked over. "What?"

Ilya tried for nonchalance. "Nothing. You're right, and is Chouinard's last year. We are getting the 3rd pick this year for the draft."

Shane knew that tone. He narrowed his eyes. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

Ilya held his gaze for a long moment, the noise of the game filling the space between them. Then he asked, quietly, "You miss it?"

The question made Shane stop, and he had to think about how to answer. He looked back at the screen, at the swift, graceful chaos of the game that he loved, that had been the bedrock of his identity since he was a child and his dad taught him how to skate to get him to be around more kids his age. He hadn't allowed himself to think seriously about going back to playing in months. He had been focusing his whole world around the pregnancy, then Yurina, then mending his life with Ilya. But watching the play unfold, the strategic part of his brain lighting up with criticism and insight, made an old, familiar ache bloom in his chest. He missed the burn of his lungs after a hard shift. The crisp sound of blades cutting ice. The specific feeling of an area cheering for him. The sheer, physical joy of knowing exactly what his body could do.

He looked down at Yurina, her blond hair fine as dandelion fluff against his shirt, then back at Ilya. "Yeah," he admitted, the word feeling both like a confession and a release.

A few nights later, after Yurina was down for the night, Shane broached the larger truth. They were in the nest, the lights dim. "I was talking to Hayden when we had the get together," he said quietly, stroking Yurina's arm softly as Ilya settled behind him.

Ilya went very still beside him. After a moment, he asked carefully, "And? What did he say?"

Shane shifted and he watched as Ilya moved with him and sat up, giving him his full attention. "Most of the team would have a problem playing with an omega." He said quietly, looking down at his hands.

"Hey, hey, none of that. Look at me and let's talk. Who has problem with you?" Ilya gently cupped Shane's face and made him look up so their eyes met. But still Shane resisted, his eyes dropping to Ilya's lips or nose instead. "Talk to me, rodnoy."

Shane gestured around them, a vague sweep of his hand encompassing the room, their baby, to Ilya himself beside him. "I want to keep playing hockey. I've worked so hard to get to where I was, but I also want this. I don't want her growing up with her fathers constantly flying between two cities. I don't want to spend half the season waiting to see you. I don't want to rebuild this just to go back to the same distance as before even when we live in the same house. Like who would take care of Yurina when we have away games? I don't want a nanny or someone else raising her." He took a breath, his voice firming with conviction. "I

want to wake up beside you whenever our schedules allow. I want her to have one home. I want to come back after a game and find my family here.” He met Ilya’s eyes. “I want both.”

Ilya studied him, then said simply, as if stating a fact of physics, “Then have both.”

Shane gave him a withering look. “Life isn’t that simple. My contract, Crowell... it’s a mess. I can’t just go complaining that my teammates won’t like me anymore.” His voice was sad and Ilya stroked his thumb across his freckles. He didn’t interrupt though, letting Shane process what he wanted to say.

“I gave everything to that team. I thought I had friends there, that I would play there for my entire career.”

“If you could choose,” Ilya asked, his tone neutral, “what would you want?”

Shane didn’t need to think about it. The answer had been sitting in his heart, unexamined but fully formed. “Ottawa. When we got to play together on the same team, I never had such a good time. I remember just letting myself have fun.”

Ilya smiled, remembering the same game. “Same, ever since I met you I wanted to play on the same line with you. We are the best, we can read each other so easy on the ice and it felt like different energy.”

“It was amazing. It felt like when I first started playing. It was fun and exciting and you kept up with me.”

Ilya’s expression became soft, and he smiled at his mate. “Okay.”

Shane’s eyes narrowed. “What does ‘okay’ mean?”

“Means okay.”

“Ilya.”

“What?”

“Do not commit a felony. You can’t go after people just because they have their own opinion on playing with someone.”

Ilya looked genuinely offended. “Why does everyone always say this to me?”

Despite himself, Shane laughed, but the suspicion didn’t leave his eyes. In the following days, Ilya began asking seemingly innocent questions. He inquired about the specifics of Shane’s contract with the Voyageurs, going off on private talks with Yuna, what financial or legal leverage might compel a trade, what the league’s transfer regulations entailed. His questions were precise, analytical, but he told everyone he was just getting information, nothing would go through without him talking to Shane.

Shane grew increasingly wary as he noticed more phone calls and textings. “What are you planning?”

“Nothing.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“How could you not believe this face? I am very handsome.”

“It’s the same face you use when you’re about to do something wildly excessive or crazy.” Shane said with a laugh.

Ilya's only response was to lean over and kiss him, a deep, distracting kiss that effectively ended the line of questioning. But Shane knew that look. It was the look Ilya got when he had identified a problem that stood between him and something he loved, and he was methodically, ruthlessly working out how to dismantle it. Shane had stated what he wanted. Now Ilya was preparing to move heaven and earth to clear the path. The trick, Shane thought as he kissed him back, would be ensuring the path was cleared without leaving a trail of metaphorical bodies in its wake. With Ilya, one could never be entirely sure.

Their home office was quiet, insulated from the gentle chaos of a home adjusting to a newborn. On the large monitor, the face of Crowell, appeared. He looked irritated, his posture rigid in his own office chair. "Rozanov. This is highly irregular. If Shane Hollander has concerns about his contract, he or his agent should be scheduling this meeting. Not his... partner." The pause before 'partner' was deliberate, dismissive and with a slight sneer.

Ilya, seated comfortably in a leather chair, a simple file folder resting closed on the desk before him, offered a thin smile. "This is not about concerns. This is about solution."

Crowell's eyes narrowed. "There is no 'solution' to discuss. Shane is under contract with the Montreal Voyageurs for three more years. His career is tied to that organization. Not yours."

"I agree," Ilya said easily, leaning back. The calm unnerved Crowell more than shouting would have.

A beat of confused silence. "You... agree?"

"Yes. My interest is not in his contract. My interest is in the obligations you attached to it that were outside league rules and, more importantly, outside the law."

Crowell's jaw tightened. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I want you to release him," Ilya continued, as if Crowell hadn't spoken. "Cleanly. No breach designation, no financial penalty, no attempt to damage his reputation with other teams. You can process it as an agreed mutual termination for personal reasons, Montreal will wish him the very best and that any team will be better with him. The paperwork can say whatever makes both look like this was a mutual decision. But Shane Hollander walks away from Montreal free and clear. Otherwise, I know my lawyers will be very interested to know how my omega was able to go on the IR list the morning before he disappeared. Not only that, but how his likeness was showing up on sponsorships that he's always refused."

A bark of laughter, harsh and without humor, burst from Crowell. "Release him? Are you insane? Do you have any concept of his value? Why in God's name would the Voyageurs just give one of the best players in the league to a division rival? That team is built around Hollander."

"Because the alternative," Ilya said, his voice dropping to a conversational murmur, "is that I give this to the league, the Players' Association, the Canadian Alpha/Omega Rights Commission, and every major sports network on the continent." He flipped open the folder.

He began laying out pieces of evidence, holding printed timelines up for the camera to see. Printouts of internal emails from Crowell to team public relations, discussing "managing the Hollander situation" and "mitigating the distraction of his... association with Rozanov." Notes from meetings where Crowell had pressured Shane's previous agent to "encourage distance." A timeline, painstakingly assembled by Yuna and Anatoly, correlating Crowell's directives with periods when Shane had been pressured to publicly deny or downplay his relationship. Witness statements, anonymized but credible, from former Voyageurs staff who had heard Crowell make disparaging comments about "bonded drama" and "omega complications." in the recent months.

Crowell's face paled, then flushed with anger. "This is out of context! Every action I took was to protect my player and my league. His relationship with you was volatile, a media circus waiting to happen. He was hiding his secondary gender; the stress was affecting his play. I was trying to help him focus!"

Ilya didn't raise his voice. "Shane being frightened of what would happen if people knew he was Omega did not give you permission to use that fear against him. To threaten the stability

of a recognized bond. The law is very clear, Crowell. Deliberate interference by an employer carries penalties that are not limited to fines.” He tapped a specific document. “This email, where you suggest trading him to a West Coast team to ‘create necessary geographic distance,’ after you had confirmed knowledge of our bond? That is premeditated.”

“You can’t prove intent!” Crowell snapped, but the defiance was cracking.

Wordlessly, Ilya slid another sheet forward. It was a memo, marked ‘Confidential,’ outlining a strategy for using Shane’s contract negotiations as leverage to secure a “commitment to lifestyle choices conducive to team focus.” The language was veiled, but the meaning, in the context of everything else, was unmistakable.

Crowell stared at it, his breathing audible through the speakers.

“So,” Ilya summarized, closing the folder gently. “Choice is simple. You let him go, quietly, and this file remains between us. Or I release it. You can explain your ‘protective’ decisions to league investigators, to prosecutors, and to the court of public opinion while every sports analyst picks apart how you systematically tried to break up a bonded pair because you thought their love life was bad for ticket sales.”

He leaned forward slightly, his blue eyes glacial. “And consider this: you originally saw us as a liability. You were wrong. Since our relationship and pregnancy became public, the narrative has shifted. We are, apparently, ‘media darlings.’ Fans are invested. Sponsors are interested. The world is waiting to see Shane become a sire. So now, if this comes out, the story is not about a distracting romance. It is about a beloved Omega athlete, who hid his identity out of fear, who was persecuted by his own organization for finding love and starting a family. Shane is not a liability anymore, Crowell. He is the most sympathetic figure in hockey. And you are the man who tried to take his mate and his child away from him.”

Crowell’s hands clenched on his desk. “This is blackmail,” he hissed.

Ilya paused, reached for his coffee cup, took a slow sip, and set it down. “Yes.”

The blunt admission seemed to steal the air from Crowell's lungs. He sputtered, searching for leverage. "Shane would never approve of this. He's a straight arrow. He wouldn't want you threatening people, digging up...nonsense. He loves the team. He loves being the youngest captain in the history of the Voyageurs."

For the first time, Ilya hesitated. Crowell had stumbled upon the one point of true vulnerability. The promise he had made to Shane in the steamy bathroom, in the quiet nest- I will not decide for you. He took a steadying breath.

"That is the difference between you and me, Crowell," Ilya said, his voice low and precise. "You tried to make his choice for him. I am making sure he actually has one now. I am removing the obstacle you built so he can walk whichever path he wants. If, after you release him from the contractual trap, he looks at his freedom and decides he wants to stay in Montreal, then he stays. I will not stop him."

Crowell stared, disbelieving. "You expect me to believe that? After all this?"

"Belief is your problem. My requirement is his unconditional release. What he does with it is his choice."

Seeing no crack there, Crowell shifted tactics, a businessman returning to the deal. "Fine. Suppose, hypothetically, I entertain this. Montreal doesn't just hand over their star player for nothing. Even in a... negotiated release, there would be compensation. Draft picks. Financial considerations."

Ilya allowed a small, cold smile. "Now we can talk." He had anticipated this. Anatoly and Yuna had prepared several scenarios. "Certain future draft considerations can be arranged. Financial settlements can be structured. But they will not be attached to Shane's name as a penalty. They will be between the organizations."

They haggled, bitterly on Crowell's side, dispassionately on Ilya's, for another ten minutes. The final outcome was clear- Shane would be released from all future obligations to Montreal if he chose to be. In return, Ilya's research will be turned over, and he agreed to do promotional work for the NHL for the upcoming year, two years if the Centaurs made it to the playoffs and he will not play for Russia in any future Olympics he had to play for either

America or Canada, the specifics to be finalized by lawyers, but the public story would be one of mutual agreement and fresh starts.

Finally, Crowell, looking exhausted and defeated, asked, “And what guarantee do I have that once he’s free, you won’t release this... information anyway?”

“My word,” Ilya said simply. “Once the paperwork is finalized and Shane is legally clear, this evidence concerning you remains private. Unless, of course, you retaliate against him, or attempt to interfere with our family again. Then it becomes public before your next breath.”

Crowell gave a slow, grudging nod. “I’ll have our legal department draft the preliminary terms.”

“Good.” Ilya moved to end the call.

“Rozanov,” Crowell said, his voice thick with bitterness. “You’re gutting a team who I personally oversaw. For what? A domestic fantasy?”

Ilya’s hand hovered over the keyboard. He looked directly into the camera. “I am not stealing him. You spent years making him afraid that being himself would cost him hockey.” He paused, the truth of it settling in the quiet room. “I am making sure it doesn’t.”

He ended the call. A fierce, triumphant satisfaction thrummed through Ilya, clean and sharp. He had done it. He had made it so that if Shane really wanted to play after he was medically cleared, he could join any team he wanted. Shane had said he wanted Ottawa, now it could be a genuine choice, not a hopeless dream weighed down by contracts. It would be a dream to have his mate play on the same line, on the same team with him.

He stood, stretching, and walked downstairs. The late afternoon sun streamed through the living room windows. Shane was on the floor on a soft play mat, Yurina on her tummy before him, making tiny, determined noises. Shane was cheering her on in a soft, encouraging whisper all in French.

After a few seconds he picked her up and kissed her pudgy cheeks, praising her. He looked up as Ilya entered, and his eyes instantly narrowed. He knew that expression on Ilya's face, the subtle lift at the corner of his mouth, the lack of tension in his shoulders. It was the look of a man who had just executed a plan perfectly.

"What did you do?" Shane asked, his voice wary.

Ilya's smile widened, innocent. "Nothing, sweetheart."

"Ilya."

"I have possibly improved your employment situation."

Shane slowly closed his eyes, a long-suffering sigh escaping him. When he opened them, they were fixed on Ilya with resigned intensity. "What. Did. You. Do."

Ilya knelt on the floor beside them, reaching out to stroke Yurina's back. She gurgled happily. He looked at Shane, the triumph in his eyes softening into something more vulnerable, aware that the next part of the play depended entirely on his co-star. "I may have had a conversation with Crowell," he admitted. "And you now can choose Ottawa, if you still want it, or any other team. There could be a bidding war for you. No penalties. No traps. Just... a choice."

Shane stared at him, his expression stunned. "You're kidding,"

"Nope, I told you before. I'd give you everything you ever wanted. If you still want to stay with Montreal, that's fine. If you want to change teams, you now can. But I suggest Ottawa. The captain is hot and he'll give you back massages after the game." Ilya teased with a wink.

After a week of reviewing new contracts, having talks with the Centaurs management, coaches, teammates, lawyers, it was settled. Once Shane was medically cleared, he would officially be a Centaur. The team as a whole was thrilled- as Bood said, 'Roz was incredible, but you're Shane fucking Hollander.' Unfortunately he wouldn't be clear for the start of the season, but they didn't care. He would start with just skating with them when he felt up to it and they would make any accommodations for him.

When the contracts were finalized, Ruth and Walter began to prepare to leave. They had stayed far beyond any initial intention, their presence woven into the very fabric of their family, but they had their own home and needed to tend to the farm, and see their kids and grandkids. Shane tried very hard not to break down at the news and they made promises to visit often, for video calls and they would all spend Thanksgiving and Christmas together at the very least. Now, with the house secure and the new family finding its feet, their own lives in Pennsylvania called them home. It was time, but no one particularly wanted it to be.

Ilya pulled them aside when Shane left the room to change Yurina and he took advantage. He asked David and Yuna for their blessing to ask Shane to marry him. A proper marriage, not just a bond. They were all thrilled, ecstatic really and all agreed. Ilya begged the Fischers to stay at least for that since he wasn't planning on waiting any longer.

"Now, I need everyone's help..." Ilya said quickly, knowing that Shane would be back at any minute.

Shane noticed a change in the air. At first he chalked it up to Ruth and Walter leaving. The meaningful glances between Yuna and Ruth when Shane left the room. The hushed phone calls Ilya took on the back porch, his voice a low, serious murmur. David suddenly developing a keen interest in taking him and Yurina for long, leisurely strolls around the property "for the fresh air." The first few times Shane showed his dad his favorite spot, the hill in the back of the garden that was one of his favorite places on the property apart from the gazebo where they had lunch a few times. They spoke about maybe putting a fountain nearby, or expanding the gardens a bit and making half the section a kitchen garden.

The morning of the day before Ruth and Walter were scheduled to leave, Ruth cornered Shane in the nursery as he was folding a pile of tiny socks while talking to the baby. “I need my grandma fix,” she declared, plucking Yurina from his arms before he could protest. “You go bother your Alpha. I’m claiming this baby for the next two hours. My parting gift to myself.”

Shane laughed, shaking his head. “You don’t need an excuse. You know you can just take her.”

“I know,” Ruth said, nuzzling Yurina’s cheek. “But today I’m feeling ceremonious. Now shoo. Walter and I have important matters to discuss with this young lady. Grandparent privileges.”

Amused and oddly touched, Shane left them to it. He wandered downstairs, expecting to find Ilya buried in his tablet or on a call with Anatoly. Instead, he found him standing in the foyer, dressed in dark, tailored trousers and a crisp white shirt, the sleeves rolled neatly to his elbows. He was running a hand through his hair, a gesture Shane recognized as one of rare, genuine nerves.

Shane stopped at the foot of the stairs, leaning against the banister. “Why are you dressed like that?”

Ilya looked down at himself, then back at Shane, his expression carefully neutral. “Like what?”

“Are we going somewhere?”

Ilya considered that, a faint smile touching his lips. “Surprise. Your alpha is very romantic, go change into the clothes I have hanging on your side.”

Shane’s eyes narrowed. “Ilya.”

Ilya walked up to him and kissed him sweetly. “Please go change and then come out. We don't have a lot of time.”

He found black suit trousers and a white silky shirt and white tux jacket, something that Rose had made him buy a while ago and he had never worn it. He quickly got dressed, thankful that everything seemed to fit well enough.

Ilya was pacing when he came out and he watched Ilya look at him up and down. “So beautiful, Dusha moya.” they walked hand in hand to the front door and Ilya ushered them into one of the golf carts they used to get around the property. Before starting it, Ilya asked Shane to humor him and wear a blindfold. Ilya started a conversation about them going to the training camp, Ilya thinking that it would be a good idea to get Shane used to feeling out the vibe for how the team worked together. Shane was very excited. He'd always wondered what Ilya would be like as a captain and from what he had seen of the team, they were all friendly and supportive.

10 minutes later Ilya stopped the cart and told Shane to stay put. He ran around and helped Shane out. “Come with me,” Ilya said close to his ear, making him shiver.

“Where are we? What about Yurina?”

“She is perfectly safe with her grandparents.” Ilya was guiding him somewhere.

They walked a few feet and then Ilya let go and moved a bit. “Ok, take blindfold off.”

Shane did, and then stopped breathing.

The world beyond the doors had been transformed. The late afternoon sun was beginning to dip toward the treeline, casting a golden, honeyed light that danced over hundreds, no, thousands, of flickering candle flames. They were everywhere: in glass jars lining the stone path and steps that led to the gazebo, floating in safe, contained bowls on the ledge and bench. Fairy lights were woven through the branches of the trees and roof, twinkling like captured starlight. The air was soft with the scent of peonies and gardenias, flowers Shane knew Ilya must have had flown in, their blooms lush and perfect.

His gaze teared as it took everything in, the candles, the lights, the flowers, and finally landed on Ilya. His throat was too tight to speak. Ilya was watching him, his blue eyes impossibly bright in the candlelight. He tried for a smile, but it wavered at the edges. "Oh my God." Shane whispered when he saw Ilya kneeling in front of him, the slight tremble in Ilya's clasped hands, the nervous energy thrumming just beneath his skin.

"Ilya..." Shane breathed, the first tear escaping to trace a warm path down his cheek.

"Shane," Ilya whispered.

"What..." The choked laugh that escaped Shane was half a sob. Ilya reached into his pocket, and Shane's heart hammered against his ribs. Ilya pulled out a small ring box, clearing his throat and holding Shane's hand in his.

Ilya cleared his throat again, his eyes scanning Shane's face. His voice low and deliberate. "For most of my life," Ilya began, his words slow, careful, a less polished cadence, "I thought loving someone meant holding them so tight they could not disappear. My mother... she disappeared. People left. People died. My father taught me power was control. So when I finally had you, something I loved more than breathing, I became... terrified. And sometimes, I loved you badly because of this fear. I tried to protect you by deciding. I confused being your Alpha with always knowing what you needed."

He wasn't apologizing. He was stating a truth they had both bled to learn. His thumb stroked the back of Shane's hand.

"I used to think," Ilya said, his voice dropping to a raw whisper, "if I loved you enough, I could keep you."

Shane's eyes searched his, seeing the old ghost of that desperate, possessive fear.

Ilya took a shaky breath. "Now I know... I do not want to keep you." The words lanced through Shane, a fleeting instant of cold fear before Ilya continued, his gaze unwavering. "I

want you to stay.”

“I want mornings with you,” Ilya said, the words coming faster now, painting a future in simple, profound strokes. “I want you stealing blankets. I want arguments about whose turn it is to get up with Yurina. I want you criticizing how I load dishwasher. I want to complain about David’s boring newspapers and secretly keep reading them with him. I want Yuna walking into our house without knocking. I want Ruth calling us, demanding pictures. I want Walter telling me when I am being idiot.” A smile touched his lips. “I want to finish our careers together where its the two of us, at the top, together. I love you so much dusha moya, I spent so much of my life,” Ilya murmured, “thinking you were impossible thing I was lucky to have sometimes. But I see now that I was born to love you. I want a long, happy, boring, crazy life with you.” He bent and kissed Shane’s ring finger.

A wet, incredulous laugh burst from Shane.

Ilya smiled, a real, bright, hopeful thing. “A very long, very boring life.” His voice softened to a near whisper. Then, and only then, did he open the tiny box. Nestled inside was a ring. It was stunning, but not ostentatious- a band of platinum, its design clean and strong. Set within it was a row of black diamonds that caught the candlelight and fractured it into a dozen rainbows.

“Shane Hollander,” Ilya said, his voice thick. “Will you do me the extreme honor and marry me?” He stood and and cradled Shane’s face. “I will love you until my last breath leaves my body and even beyond that. I will spend the rest of my life making sure that you are happy and never regret giving me another chance.” He gently worked the ring free of its box. “Marry me, Solnyshko.”

He looked down into Shane’s eyes, and in that moment, all the swagger, all the arrogance, all the formidable intensity of Ilya Rozanov was stripped away, leaving only a man, vulnerably and completely in love.

“Shane Hollander,” he said, the words clear and sure, “I love you. I love our daughter. I love our life, the family you have given me. I want every life I have left with you.” He held the ring up, a promise glinting in his hand. “Will you marry me?”

Shane didn’t let him finish. The word was torn from him, immediate and absolute. “Yes.”

Ilya surged closer and Shane launched himself into his arms. The kiss was less a kiss and more a collision of joy, relief, and overwhelming love. Shane clung to him, crying freely now, great heaving sobs that were half-laughter against Ilya's mouth. He felt Ilya's arms lock around him, holding him so tightly he thought his ribs might creak, and he never wanted to be let go. He felt the dampness on Ilya's cheeks too.

Eventually, Shane pulled back just far enough for Ilya to slide the ring onto his finger. It fit perfectly, the metal cool and then warming instantly against his skin. Shane stared at it, then at Ilya, then back at the ring, unable to process the reality of it. "You're my fiancé," he whispered, the word strange and wonderful on his tongue.

Ilya made a face, though his eyes shone. "For hopefully very short amount of time."

Shane pulled back, brow furrowing. "What?"

Before Ilya could answer, they heard it. A muffled snuffle, poorly suppressed. Then the sound of someone trying desperately to shush someone else.

Shane froze. Ilya closed his eyes, a long-suffering sigh escaping him.

Another noise, a distinct, poorly whispered, "I told you she couldn't stay quiet."

Ruth's voice, thick with tears, hissed back, "Oh, shut up, JJ!"

Shane's head whipped toward the house. "Ilya?"

Silence for a few seconds. Then all their friends and family began to emerge from the shadowy periphery of the garden and tree line. Yuna, dabbing her eyes with David's handkerchief, David's arm tight around her shoulders. Ruth holding Yurina in her arms with a new tiny pink and white dress, openly sobbing against Walter's chest. Rose, Svetlana,

looking triumphantly smug, her own eyes suspiciously bright. JJ, Scott and Kip, Hayden and Jackie and their kids, the entire Centaurs team and support staff with their partners. Marly, Carter, Carmichael Drapeau and Victor. All their closest people, dressed as if for a celebration, beaming through their own tears and smiles.

Shane's jaw dropped. He looked stunned and turned back to Ilya.

Ilya immediately raised his hands in defense. "I wanted to make honest man out of you! We had daughter out of wedlock- I wanted to start this the right way"

A wave of laughter and happy tears swept over the group as they converged. Ruth reached them first, crushing Shane in a hug that smelled like lavender and joy. Yuna was next, then Svetlana, everyone talking over each other, offering congratulations, touching the ring, embracing Ilya with fierce affection. Shane was passed from hug to hug, overwhelmed by the sheer, buoyant force of the love surrounding them.

As the initial tumult began to settle, Shane's mind, ever observant, caught on another detail. Everyone was dressed with a degree of care that went beyond a simple engagement party ambush. The women wore elegant dresses, the men wore jackets. There were additional chairs arranged discreetly near the garden's edge. Small tables were set with vases and candles overflowing with more white flowers.

He slowly extricated himself from Hayden's bear hug and turned to Ilya, who was watching him with that nervous, hopeful look again.

"Why," Shane asked, his voice trembling with a new kind of wonder, "is everyone dressed like this?"

Ilya took both of Shane's hands in his, his grip firm and sure. "There is one more thing."

Shane laughed, a breathless, incredulous sound. "Of course there is."

“Ruth and Walter leave tomorrow, maybe next day after if I convince them.” Ilya began, his eyes scanning the faces of their gathered family and friends. “Everyone we love is here. Our daughter is here. Your parents are here.” He looked back at Shane. “I thought... maybe we have waited long enough for happiness. If you wanted, we do not have to wait any longer. Someone who can marry us is here. Everything is prepared.” He squeezed Shane’s hands, his voice dropping, intense and sincere. “But only if you want. Tonight. Next month. Next year. Huge wedding. Tiny wedding. Whatever you want, dusha moya. I will marry you whenever you are ready.”

He swallowed, finding the words that meant everything. It would be his choice if they got married tonight. If he said no, it could be just an engagement and going away party. The distinction was perfect. It was everything. He had created the opportunity, laid the world at Shane’s feet, and then stepped back, leaving the choice entirely, magnificently, his.

“I only thought,” Ilya whispered, his voice barely audible over the gentle rise and fall of the voices around them, “we waited long enough.”

Shane looked around. At his mother’s tear-streaked, proud face. At his father’s steady, approving nod. At Ruth, vibrating with barely contained joy, and Walter’s kind eyes. At Svetlana. At their friends, who had stood by them through fire and fear. At Ilya, his Alpha, his partner, the father of his child, the love of his life, watching him with a hope so vast it seemed to fill the twilight.

He didn’t need another venue. He didn’t need six months of planning. He didn’t need the spectacle of the NHL or the glare of magazine cameras. This was his wedding. These were his people. This was his home.

He looked back at Ilya, a slow, radiant smile spreading across his face, brighter than all the candles reflected in his eyes.

“Okay.”

Ilya’s breath caught. “Okay?”

Shane nodded, pulling him close until their foreheads touched. “Let’s get married.”

The sound that erupted around them was pure, unadulterated joy, a chorus of cheers, laughter, and happy sobs that echoed over the water and into the gathering night, a perfect testament to the long, winding, impossible road that had led them, at last, to this moment.

Ruth burst into a fresh wave of tears, clutching Walter’s arm. Yuna covered her mouth with both hands before launching herself at Shane, wrapping him in a hug that smelled like home and jasmine perfume. David was right behind her, crushing Shane with enough force to make him grunt. “Easy, Dad, I need to breathe to say ‘I do.’”

“Sorry,” David mumbled into his shoulder, not letting go.

Svetlana looked unbearably, triumphantly smug, clapping her hands together once before pointing at Ilya as if to say, I told you so. Their friends descended into affectionate mass group of hugs and back slaps, Troy and Harris clapping Ilya on the back hard enough to stagger him, JJ sweeping Shane into a bear hug, Hayden and Jackie kissing both their cheeks, Scott and Kip offering simultaneous, grinning congratulations. The romantic mood when it was just the two of them evaporated beautifully under the weight of shared happiness, becoming something louder, messier, and infinitely more real. It was perfect.

In the midst of the chaos, Ilya’s eyes found Shane’s across the crowd. He smiled, a little dazed, infinitely happy, and gave a slight nod toward the house.

Yuna stood behind him, carefully smoothing his hair with her hands, her eyes fixed on his. “You look...” she began, her voice thick. She stopped, collecting herself. “I think your mothers here. Her spirit is always with you, but today especially. She would be so proud of you, Ilya. so proud. Like David and I are.” She pulled his head down to meet hers and kissed his cheek. “I never could have imagined this. Any of it. But looking at you now... you finally look happy. Thank you for loving Shane like you do now.”

Ilya’s throat tightened. He bent and hugged her, burying his face in her shoulder. “Thanks, Mom.”

Their daughter gurgled softly nearby. He was surrounded by his people, his family. Ilya did this all for me and it was perfect.

A few feet away, Walter and David were performing similar duties for a suddenly, very nervous Ilya. Walter adjusted the cuff of Ilya's dark navy suit, his movements precise. "The hard part isn't the ceremony, son," he said quietly. "It's tomorrow morning. And all the mornings after. Remembering to talk. To listen. To ask instead of assume. That doesn't stop today. It just becomes more important. Love each other madly and respect each other too."

Ilya nodded, swallowing. "I know."

David finished straightening Ilya's tie, then clapped a hand on his shoulder. His eyes were serious. "Take care of each other," he said. The distinction, not take care of my son, was not lost on Ilya. It was a recognition of their partnership, and of their own relationship with Ilya. He nodded again, unable to speak.

They all gathered around the meadow before the garden, near the area where Shane had pointed out to his dad that it was his favorite spot on their land, outside as the last of the sun dipped below the trees, leaving the world in the custody of countless candles and twinkling lights. Chairs had been arranged in loose rows facing an arch draping with soft blue gauzy fabric. Soft, instrumental music drifted from a speaker. At the front, where the most candles gathered, Svetlana stood waiting beside a kind-faced woman introduced as a friend of Ruth's, licensed to perform ceremonies. In her hands, Svetlana held two simple silver crowns, woven with olive leaves, and a single, beautiful chalice.

The ceremony that followed was not strictly Orthodox, but it was deeply Russian in its soul, filtered through Ilya's memory and adapted for them. They each took a lit candle from Svetlana, their individual flames joining the sea of light around them.

The crowning came next. As Svetlana placed the first crown over Ilya's head, then his own, felt that he suddenly could not stop smiling. It was just so much love and happiness that Shane had to bite his lip to try to suppress the grin.

"Don't let this go to your head," Shane whispered after his own crown was settled gently on his brow.

“Too late,” Ilya murmured back, his eyes sparkling. “I am Tsar now.”

Shane choked back a laugh, earning a few soft chuckles from their guests.

They drank from the shared cup of wine, a rich, dark red. “We already did difficult part,” Ilya muttered under his breath as he handed the cup to Shane.

“Don’t jinx us,” Shane whispered, taking a sip.

Then came the circling. Hand in hand, they began to walk three times around the small altar with a cross like Ilya’s necklace, their path illuminated by the ring of candles. It was meant to symbolize their first steps into married life together. On the second circuit, Yurina, held by Yuna, let out a fussy, distinct grizzle.

Shane’s head turned instinctively toward the sound.

Ilya squeezed his hand, leaning close. “One second,” he whispered, reaching the baby and bringing her back for them to finish. Shane grinned, and they completed the third circle, their joined hands swinging between them.

When they faced each other again for their vows, the playfulness faded, replaced by a tender gravity. Ilya went first, his voice clear and steady in the quiet.

“Shane,” he began, his eyes locked on Shane’s. He took a deep breath. “My life will be dedicated to you, to us and our family. When we disagree, I will listen before I decide I am obviously right.” A ripple of affectionate laughter moved through their friends. Ilya’s lips quirked, but his gaze remained intense. “And I promise I will never make your choices because I am afraid of losing you.” He lifted their joined hands. “I choose you, Shane. Not because you are my Omega. Not because you are the sire of my child. Not because of the bond. I choose you because you are you, and that you are my soulmate, my perfect half.” His voice dropped to a near whisper, meant only for Shane. “Dusha moya.”

My soul.

Tears welled in Shane's eyes, but his voice was firm when he answered.

"I spent so much of my life," Shane said, "believing love had to fit perfectly into the plans I'd already made. You were the first... inconvenient, impossible, messy thing I ever wanted anyway." He shook his head slightly, a smile playing on his lips. "And I was so scared that choosing you meant losing some other part of myself. The athlete. The son. The man I thought I was supposed to be." He squeezed Ilya's hands. "Now I know it doesn't. I can be all of it. I can be yours, but still be myself. I can be a father. I can love you, and not lose myself. You've made me better and given me our family." He reached up, cupping Ilya's cheek. "You don't have to earn me every day anymore, Ilya. I'm already yours." He saw Ilya's composure fracture, his eyes glistening. "And you're already mine. Not because of the bond. Because we keep choosing each other. Every day."

They exchanged plain platinum bands, Shane's thinner to blend with his engagement ring. And then, as if on cue, Yurina decided she had heard enough. A full-throated, hungry cry split the peaceful air.

Everyone laughed. Ilya looked toward his daughter, then back at Shane, raising an eyebrow. "She objects."

Shane was already half-turned toward Yuna. "She's hungry."

Shane didn't hesitate. He gently gathered Yurina into his arms, and rocked her gently. So they stood, a complete family unit, as the officiant smiled and pronounced, "By the power vested in me, and by the witness of all who love you, I now pronounce you married."

Ilya kissed him then, carefully, sweetly, mindful of the baby nestled between their hearts. The cheers that erupted were deafening, full of laughter and catcalls and pure delight.

What followed was less a reception and more a spectacular house party. An obscene amount of food appeared, tiny pies, sliders, sushi, fruit platters. Champagne and vodka flowed, but so did sparkling water and juice. Music grew louder. Shoes were kicked off. Jackets were discarded over chair backs.

The Centaurs launched into increasingly outrageous stories of Ilya's first year antics. Shane's friends retaliated with tales of his own fastidious, competitive quirks. Svetlana, armed with childhood knowledge of Ilya and sharp observations of Shane, wielded her power mercilessly and to great comic effect.

Then Shane and Ilya had their first dance to some emotional song called "Love is". Once that was over, everyone else joined, Ruth danced with Walter, her head on his shoulder. Yuna danced with David, smiling softly. Scott and Kip swayed together near the edge of the light. Everyone took turns holding a fascinated, wide-eyed Yurina until Shane finally intercepted her, cradling her close.

"She's being passed around like a Stanley Cup," he mock-complained. Hayden pointed a finger at Ilya. "Your fault for having such a cute kid." Ilya raised his glass in acknowledgment, unrepentant.

It was well after one in the morning when, someone put on a slow song. The chatter softened. Ilya stood, crossed to where Shane was spending time with wives, where he was rocking Yurina, and held out his hand.

"Dance with me, husband."

The word husband stopped Shane's heart for a quick second. He carefully transferred a sleepy Yurina to Cassie's waiting arms, then took Ilya's hand.

They danced a few times before switching partners again, surrounded by the people they loved so it didn't matter. beneath a canopy of lights and stars. Shane rested his head against Ilya's shoulder. Ilya pressed his face into Shane's hair, breathing him in.

"You are stuck with me now," Ilya murmured, his voice a vibration against Shane's temple.

Shane smiled against his suit jacket. “Forever.”

“Better?”

“Much better.”

Later, Shane found Ruth watching them, a serene smile on her face. He went to her and hugged her without a word. “We wouldn’t have gotten here without you,” he whispered.

Ruth patted his back. “You two did the work. We just gave you the advice.” Walter joined them, slipping an arm around Ruth. Ilya appeared a moment later, his presence a warm solidity at Shane’s side. For a moment, the four of them stood together, the two couples who had, in very different ways, shown what enduring love looked like in practice.

The party wound down slowly. Candles guttered low. Guests departed in groups or found spare beds. Eventually, Shane and Ilya slipped upstairs, reclaiming a sleeping Yurina.

The door to their bedroom clicked shut Ilya leaned against it as he watched as Shane settled on their bed to nurse the baby. The distant murmur of their last departing guests faded, leaving only the soft hum of the house and the even softer sound of Yurina’s sleepy breaths against Shane’s chest. He leaned back against the doorframe for a moment, just taking it all in, they had done it. A few hours ago, he hadn’t been engaged. Now, he was married. The weight of it was a golden, bewildering anchor in his chest. It had worked. From an idea, a dream in his head to its actual fruition.

Ilya moved past him, already toeing off his dress shoes with a relieved sigh. He was down to his trousers and an untucked black shirt, his tie gone, the top buttons open. He looked rumpled and real and utterly theirs.

“My husband needs to sleep,” Ilya murmured, his hand finding the small of Shane’s back and guiding him gently lean against him on the bed. “You look like you might fall over.”

Shane let himself be led, sinking into the familiar, cushioning softness of the blankets. Yurina, stirred by the movement, let out a fussy squawk. Right. The world had shifted on its axis, but she was hungry. Normalcy, insistently beautiful, reasserted itself.

“My husband is feeding our daughter,” he said, almost to himself, the wonder in his voice unmistakable.

The first time, Shane just smiled down at Yurina. The second time, he shook his head fondly. By the third, as Ilya passed him the water glass with a murmured, “For my husband,” Shane looked up, exasperated but glowing.

“Are you going to do that all night?”

“Probably for rest of life.”

“I’m going to regret this.” Shane said with a smile, no heat at all behind the statement.

“Too late, husband.”

Once Yurina was fed, burped, and changed into a fresh sleeper by Ilya’s efficient hands, she was placed in her bassinet, her eyes drifting shut almost instantly. The room plunged into a deeper silence. Shane, now stripped down to his soft boxers and undershirt, sat in the center of the nest, turning his left hand back and forth, watching the two bands catch the low light.

Ilya pulled him closer. He took Shane’s hand, turned it palm-up, and studied the rings. He brought it to his lips, kissing the knuckle just below the platinum. “Married,” he breathed against the skin.

Shane smiled, a tired, blissful curve of his mouth. “You keep saying that.”

“I love it.”

Then Ilya kissed him. It was soft, a gentle press of lips that tasted of champagne and home. Shane sighed into it, leaning forward, his free hand coming up to cup Ilya’s jaw. He kissed him back, and for a moment, it was all simple affection. But then something shifted, a current awakening beneath the calm. Shane’s fingers slid into Ilya’s hair, his mouth opening under Ilya’s with a quiet, intentional sigh. The kiss deepened, warmed, became something more than a goodnight. For the first time since the birth, a clear, unmistakable want threaded through Shane’s movements, a deliberate seeking of closeness that went beyond comfort.

Ilya responded instantly, a low sound humming in his throat as he pulled Shane closer. And then, just as suddenly, he slowed. He gentled the kiss, pulling back just enough to rest his forehead against Shane’s, his breath coming a little faster.

Shane went still. “Why’d you stop?”

Ilya blinked, his blue eyes confused in the dim light. “Because you said you were not ready. And Carmen warned me before she left. You’re still healing for another couple of weeks.”

The words landed like a stone in Shane’s stomach. All the vague unease, the silent scrutiny in the mirror, the ghost of Sasha’s voice, it coalesced into a sharp, painful point. His throat tightened. “Do you still want me?” The question was out before he could cage it, quiet and terribly vulnerable.

Ilya recoiled slightly, his brow furrowing. “What?”

Shame flooded Shane. He looked away. “Nothing. It’s nothing.”

“No.” Ilya’s hand came up, his thumb brushing Shane’s cheekbone, forcing his gaze back. His voice was firm but not angry. “We do not do that. We are married now. We need to be honest if something is troubling us. You do not say something like that and then give me ‘nothing.’ What does that mean, malysh?”

Shane tried to shrug, to dismiss it, but Ilya's expression held him fast- concerned, open, waiting. The dam cracked. "My body is different," Shane whispered, the confession tearing out of him. "I know it's normal. I know what it did. But I don't... recognize it yet. And you haven't... we haven't... since before she was born. You've been perfect. You've listened. And I wanted that. I did." He swallowed hard, the deeper fear clawing its way up. "But sometimes it felt like you didn't want to anymore."

Ilya stared at him, utterly baffled. "Because you told me not to."

"I know!"

"Then I am very confused." Ilya's frustration was palpable, but it wasn't directed at Shane. It was at the invisible wall he couldn't see.

"I know it's irrational!" Shane shot back, his own frustration mingling with embarrassment. "I wanted the boundary and I'm so thankful you respected it because I'm not sure I'm even ready yet. And my stupid brain twisted it into... into you not wanting me." He dragged a hand over his face. "And there's... there's something else."

Ilya waited, silent, his attention complete.

"Sasha," Shane said, the name sour on his tongue. "In the bedroom. He said... he implied that you slept together when I left." He couldn't look at Ilya now. "I hate that I even think about it. We were separated. I left, you had every right. But I don't know. And he made sure I'd wonder."

Ilya went perfectly still. The air in the room changed, charged with a cold, retrospective anger that wasn't for Shane. When he spoke, his voice was carefully measured. "You should have asked me."

Shane flinched. "I know."

“No,” Ilya said, his hand coming up to gently tilt Shane’s chin until their eyes met. “Not because you did something wrong. Because I would have told you.” He took a deep breath, his gaze unwavering. “There was no one, Shane. Not a single person. I was...” He searched for the word, his English simplifying to its barest truth. “I was broken. Waiting. Hoping. There was no space for anyone else. There has never been anyone else, not in any way that mattered, since the day I saw you for the first time. After we kissed, I only ever saw you.”

The absolute certainty in his voice began to dissolve the icy knot in Shane’s chest. Ilya saw it, and his expression softened further. “My restraint since coming back,” he continued, his thumb stroking Shane’s jaw, “has nothing to do with lack of attraction. Malysh, I have been trying very hard to behave.”

A startled, wet laugh escaped Shane. “Behave?”

Ilya gave him a look of pure incredulity. “You think I have not wanted you? Every time you walk past in one of my shirts. Every morning when you first wake up. When you nurse our daughter and look so...” He shook his head, as if words failed him. “It has been a... a conscious effort. Because you asked. Because I promised to never pressure or hurt you like that.”

He leaned closer, his voice dropping to a whisper. “And because I noticed other things. You turn away when you change. You pull your shirt down when I look at you. You hide from me.” His eyes searched Shane’s. “I noticed, Shane.”

The observation, spoken without accusation, laid bare the secret Shane had thought he’d kept. He looked down at the oversized shirt he’d changed into, a fortress of soft cotton. After a long moment, his fingers went to the hem. With a shaky breath, he pulled it up and over his head, letting it drop to the blankets beside him.

The cool air touched his skin. He felt exposed, the softer line of his stomach, the changed landscape of his hips and chest laid bare in the intimate dim light. He couldn’t bring himself to look at Ilya, focusing instead on his own hands clenched in his lap.

“You’re staring,” he mumbled, the old defensiveness rising.

“Yes,” Ilya said, simply.

“Ilya.”

“You hide from me for weeks and now complain because I look?”

Despite everything, Shane huffed a faint, almost-smile. But Ilya wasn’t finished. He shifted, kneeling before Shane, his hands coming to rest lightly on Shane’s thighs. He wasn’t grabbing, wasn’t pulling. Just present.

“Look at me,” Ilya said softly.

Shane forced his gaze up.

“I don’t need you to look like before, Shane,” Ilya said, his voice low and fervent. “I need you to look like you. This you. Who carried our child. Who feeds her. Who is coming back to the rink on his own terms.” His eyes traveled over Shane’s torso, not with clinical assessment or hungry consumption, but with a reverence that made Shane’s breath catch. “Your body will change again. You start training, it changes. You get older, it changes. Maybe we have another baby someday,” he said, and when Shane’s eyes widened, he quickly added, “Someday. Hypothetical baby. Very hypothetical. Do not panic.” The flash of humor was so perfectly them that Shane let out a real laugh, the tension breaking like a spell.

Ilya smiled, but then grew serious again, his hand lifting to hover near Shane’s side. “May I?”

Shane nodded, a slow, deliberate motion.

Ilya’s palm settled on the soft curve of his waist, warm and solid. His touch was claiming, possessive, but of the gentlest kind. “I liked your body before. I like it now. I will like it later. As long as you’re you, I’ll love it. Dusha moya, my soul. No matter what, I belong to you now.”

The words sank in, finally quieting the last, nagging whisper of doubt. Shane covered Ilya's hand with his own, lacing their fingers together. Their wedding bands touching.

Shane leaned forward, closing the distance, and kissed Ilya. It was slow, exploratory, impossibly tender. He guided Ilya's hand, letting it slide over his skin, trying not to focus on the 'extra' Ilya would find there but only how good it felt for his husband to touch him again. His touch did not feel like it held a trace of disappointment, only awe and a deep, patient desire.

After a while, Shane pulled back, resting his forehead against Ilya's. "I want this," he whispered. "But not... not everything yet. Okay?"

Ilya's answer was immediate, a brush of his lips against Shane's. "Okay."

Later, as they lay tangled together in the nest, skin warm against skin, Shane traced the line of Ilya's shoulder. "I'm not saying I'm ready for everything yet," he murmured into the dark.

Ilya kissed his hair. "I know."

Shane hesitated, then nuzzled closer. "Soon, though."

Ilya's entire body went rigid, a full-system shock of pure, undiluted hope. He didn't say a word.

Shane started laughing, the sound bright and free. "Oh my God."

"What?" Ilya asked, his voice strained with the effort of nonchalance.

"Your entire body just reacted. I felt it."

“I said nothing.”

“You didn’t have to.” Shane was grinning now, the joy of it bubbling up. “You have a very expressive body.”

Ilya huffed, pulling Shane tightly against him, burying his smile in Shane’s hair. “Is very hopeful body,” he corrected, his voice thick with affection.

The laughter settled into a contented silence, broken only by their breathing and Yurina’s soft snores. Shane lifted his hand again, watching the rings gleam. He felt Ilya’s steady heartbeat against his back.

“Husband,” Shane whispered, testing the weight of it, the joy of it.

Ilya’s arms tightened around him. “Yes, husband?”

Shane had nothing else to ask. He just wanted to say it. To feel the truth of it in the air. He tucked his hand over Ilya’s where it rested on his stomach, their rings meeting once more.

After a few minutes of silence, Shane held his left hand up again, turning it so the two bands caught the dim light from the moon. “We’re married,” he said, the wonder evident in his voice.

Ilya turned his own hand, aligning it with Shane’s so their rings touched. “Yes.”

Shane smiled, rolling onto his side to face Ilya. “I can’t believe it.”

“You regret already?”

“Ask me again in fifty years.”

Ilya pulled him closer, until Shane’s head was tucked beneath his chin. “I will,” he promised. He pressed a kiss to Shane’s forehead. “Spokoynoy noche, dusha moya.”

Shane settled against him, his body relaxing completely for the first time all day. From her bassinet, Yurina made one tiny, sleepy sigh.

And for the first time in what felt like forever, there was nothing waiting outside their door. No threat lurking in the shadows. No secret poised to unravel them. No urgent decision hanging over their heads. There was only this: Shane, Ilya, their daughter, and the vast, quiet beginning of the ordinary, extraordinary life they had fought so hard to claim.

Chapter End Notes

After everything I’ve put these two through, I think they’ve earned a little happiness, don’t you? And yes, I have been waiting a long time to finally let Ilya call Shane his husband. 😭❤️

Thank you guys so much for sticking with this story through all the chaos, angst, babies, Russians, murder, therapy, and all the communication problems. 😊

We officially have one chapter left and then the epilogue. I’m not emotionally prepared to say goodbye yet, so we’re just going to pretend that isn’t happening.

See you for Chapter 51! ❤️✍️

Chapter 51: Chapter 51

Chapter Summary

Well, here we are. The final real chapter. 🥺❤️

First of all, yes, I know this chapter is ridiculously long. I tried to shorten it, I really did, but after everything Shane and Ilya have been through, I couldn't bring myself to rush their happiness. They deserved every single moment of it, and apparently I have absolutely no self-control when it comes to these two.

I'm genuinely a little sad to see this story coming to an end. I've spent so much time with these versions of Shane and Ilya that saying goodbye feels surprisingly bittersweet.

Thank you so much to everyone who has been reading, commenting, leaving kudos, and coming along with me. Your comments have meant more than you know, and I've loved sharing this story with all of you. ❤️

We're not quite done yet! There's still an epilogue coming, which I'll hopefully have posted later today or tomorrow morning. We'll get one last glimpse of Shane, Ilya, and the beautiful, chaotic life they've built together.

For now, enjoy this monster of a chapter. You might want snacks. 😄

All my love to Lisa, Tony and Anna you three are all the good things and amazing and I'm very thankful for y'all ❤️💕

Chapter Notes

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

After Ruth and Walter left, Shane and Ilya decided to spend a week at the cottage for a short honeymoon. It was a much-needed change of pace for Shane. He'd genuinely enjoyed having a house full of family and friends, but after months of constant activity, he needed some peace and quiet to recenter himself. For the first time since Yurina's birth, it was just the three of them. No Yuna and David in the guest wing, no Ruth and Walter down the hall offering advice, and no friends dropping by. The security team remained a discreet presence along the property's perimeter, a necessity they both accepted without allowing it to intrude on their lives. The cottage felt different this time, like a little world of their own where they could finally relax and simply be together.

They were tired, of course. Yurina was three months old, which meant she slept in stretches just long enough to trick them into thinking they'd figured it out before waking with a furious, hungry cry at 3 a.m. The living area was full of burp cloths, discarded onesies, a sterilizer perpetually humming on the counter, and an obscene array of baby contraptions Ilya had insisted on transporting for a seven-day stay. "She needs options," he'd declared, loading a bouncer, a swing, and three different types of floor mats into the SUV when they were packing.

But within the clutter, they figured out how to become a unit, a team. They started cooking together, they took long, leisurely walks together with Yurina strapped to one of them, Ilya encouraging and helping Shane slowly get back in shape. Shane fed her on the sun-dappled porch, watching the lake, feeling the weight of her in his arms and they marveled at the perfect little girl that they had made. They napped together in the afternoon, a tangle of limbs on the big bed, Yurina dozing in her crib beside them.

One afternoon, Shane stood at the top of the stairs, Yurina in his arms, ready to descend. Ilya looked up from the book he was reading, his body tensing slightly. A few months ago, he might have simply crossed the room and taken her, or issued a command masked as concern. Now, he asked, "You want me?"

Shane considered it. "No, I've got her." He took a careful step down.

"Okay," Ilya said, and went back to his book, though Shane knew part of him was listening to every footfall.

Later, as Shane was bathing Yurina in the tiny plastic tub on the bathroom floor, Ilya lingered in the doorway, his anxiety a scent on the air. Instead of masking it, he said quietly, "I don't like the tile. It is slippery."

Shane, who had been hyper-aware of the same thing, nodded. "Here," he said, shifting. "Come hold her for me? She's being very wiggly tonight. I'll do the soap."

Ilya sank to his knees immediately, his large hands gently supporting Yurina's upper body. The anxiety in his scent began to fade as they worked together, Shane washing her while Ilya kept their squirming daughter steady. Shane made a mental note to involve him whenever he noticed him hovering. It wasn't as though Ilya needed encouragement to help with Yurina. If

anything, they were both a little ridiculous about wanting to do everything for her. But Shane was learning that sometimes Ilya didn't need reassurance so much as he needed to feel useful, and there was certainly no shortage of things to do with a three-month-old baby.

One evening, after Yurina had finally fallen asleep, they brought her portable bassinet and a thick blanket down to the dock. The water stretched before them like a sheet of black glass, reflecting a sky crowded with stars. They'd started making a habit of spending a little time outside before bed, enjoying the fresh air and the peacefulness of the lake while Yurina slept nearby. Shane settled between Ilya's legs, leaning back against his husband's chest, with a second blanket draped over them both. For a long while, neither spoke. They simply listened to the gentle movement of the water, content to be together. The future, which had so often seemed like a cliff edge, now felt as vast and calm as the night around them. Unknown, certainly, but no longer frightening.

For a long time, they just listened to the lap of water and enjoyed just being together. The future, which had so often felt like a cliff edge, now felt like this vast, calm night, unknown, but not frightening.

"Preseason starts in three weeks," Shane said eventually, his voice quiet.

"Mmm."

"I'm nervous."

"I know."

Shane tilted his head back to look at Ilya. "You're not going to tell me I'll be perfect?"

Ilya looked down, his face serious in the starlight. "Maybe first game is shit."

Shane snorted. “Wow. Thanks.”

“Maybe second game also shit.”

“You’re really good at this supportive husband thing.”

Ilya kissed his temple, his lips lingering. “And then maybe third game you remember you are Shane fucking Hollander and make everyone look stupid and slow.”

Shane laughed, the sound echoing softly over the water. The honesty was better than empty reassurance. They talked about logistics, who would watch Yurina during road trips, and that Yuna and David had already drawn up a schedule, how much travel she could handle, the nanny agency Ruth had vetted but Shane and Ilya really didn’t like the idea of it. They admitted their nerves about balancing it all, neither pretending to have answers, both trusting the other to help find them.

“When we have next one, we should think about nanny,” Ilya murmured, tracing idle patterns along Shane's shoulder. “I don't want you stressed or overwhelmed. Especially with two little ones.”

Shane went still. “When?”

Ilya froze, then backtracked instantly. “If. *If*. Very hypothetical second child.”

Shane bit back a smile, secretly warmed by the assumption. “How many kids would you like?”

Ilya glanced toward the playpen, “Yurina is so perfect- however many you want to have I’ll be happy with.”

“But?” Shane said, pulled back and turning to face him.

“You’re the one who carried her. And you made it look fine, better than I expected so I’m happy with however many you’d like.”

“Ok, I get that, but what’s your dream number?”

Ilya was quiet for a moment, and Shane noticed the tips of his ears turning pink. “Well, dream number? If you really want to know?” He hesitated, suddenly looking almost bashful. “Six.”

“Six?” Shane repeated, turning to stare at him.

“Da. Six. We have whole family hockey team.” Ilya grinned, looking ridiculously pleased with the idea. “But I am happy with however many you want, of course. You are one who has to carry them.”

Shane narrowed his eyes. “There’s a but coming, isn’t there?”

“Maybe small but.”

“Ilya.”

“We have to beat Pike!” Ilya announced, as though this were a perfectly reasonable consideration when planning their family. “He already has two, and when Jackie has next baby, that is three Pikeletts! Three! We cannot let him win.”

Shane stared at him for a moment before bursting into laughter. “You’re seriously trying to turn having children into a competition with Hayden?”

“Not competition,” Ilya said, looking offended. “Friendly rivalry.”

“Oh my God.”

“Besides, imagine six little babies with your beautiful face. How can I say no to this?”

Shane shook his head, still laughing, and settled back against his husband's chest. “Six kids might be a lot. Let's just take it one at a time.”

Ilya kissed the top of his head, smiling against his hair. “Okay, malysh. One at a time.”

A few afternoons later, Shane came inside from the porch to find Ilya sprawled on the couch, Yurina a tiny, sleeping mound on his chest. His laptop was balanced precariously on the cushion beside him, hockey footage playing silently. Shane smiled, about to leave them to it, when Ilya's eyes flicked up.

“Come look,” he whispered, careful not to disturb Yurina.

Shane settled beside him, expecting maybe a highlight reel of last season's goals. Instead, it was raw, unedited prospect footage, clunky camera angles, bad lighting, the frantic energy of junior league games.

“What do you think?” Ilya asked, pausing the video on a lanky defenseman winding up for a slapshot.

Shane gave a casual shrug. “Looks okay.”

Ilya shook his head minutely. “No. Watch and give me a real answer. I want your opinion.”

Shane looked at him. Ilya wasn't making conversation or asking for an opinion he could politely dismiss. He genuinely wanted Shane's analysis. The realization brought a small, unexpected warmth to Shane's chest. They'd spent years studying each other as opponents, learning every weakness and anticipating every move, but this was different. Ilya was asking him to help evaluate players who might someday become their teammates. He trusted Shane's judgment, and that meant more to him than he could explain.

So Shane gave him his honest critique. He pointed out the prospect's slow pivot, his tendency to watch the puck instead of reading the play developing behind him. "He's reacting, not anticipating. At this level, maybe it works. In our league, he's a liability."

Ilya nodded, making a note on his tablet with his free hand. "Yes. Next one."

They spent hours like that. Ilya played clips; Shane dissected them. They disagreed sometimes, Ilya favored a brawny, aggressive forward Shane thought had the hockey IQ of a potato. Shane liked a nimble defenseman Ilya found "too pretty, not enough bite." They rewound, argued, laughed softly so as not to wake Yurina. Ilya kept taking notes.

Then another clip appeared, this time featuring a smaller player wearing number eight for the Kelowna Vipers. He moved with a quick, intelligent grace that immediately caught Shane's attention. He wasn't just fast on his skates, he was fast in decisions, spotting opportunities before the other players seemed to realize they existed. He slipped into narrow openings between defenders, avoided checks, and kept the puck moving even when the opposing team tried to overwhelm him physically. His name appeared at the bottom of the ticker screen: Luca Haas (O). An Omega.

Shane leaned forward. "Go back."

Ilya rewound. They watched the shift again. Shane pointed at the screen. "See there? He gets bumped off the puck along the boards, but he recovers and immediately finds the outlet pass. He's compensating. He's trying to prove he can take the hit and still make the play, because he knows they're watching for him to fold."

Ilya nodded slowly, his eyes narrowing. "His positioning before hit is... unusual. He turns into it, but not to absorb. To redirect. Is smart. But looks like mistake unless you see what he does after."

They dissected Luca Haas for twenty minutes, pulling up other clips, tracking his shifts. The kid was good. Really good. Not just “for an Omega.” For anyone.

“You like him?” Ilya asked finally, his voice low.

“I think he’s really fucking good,” Shane said.

Ilya nodded, a faint smile touching his lips. “Me too.”

Shane glanced at him. He wondered if Luca Haas had a mentor, anyone to tell him he didn’t have to prove his toughness on every single play.

“They’re going to be harder on him,” Shane said quietly.

Ilya didn’t pretend otherwise. “Probably.”

“Every mistake will be because he’s an Omega. Every success will be in spite of it.”

“Then he needs team that doesn’t do that,” Ilya said, his gaze fixed on the frozen image of Haas celebrating a goal, his smile bright and unguarded. He picked up his tablet, typed a brief message, and sent it.

“What did you write?” Shane asked.

“That we should bring Haas in. For development camp. See him close.”

“Because I said so?” Shane asked.

Ilya looked offended. “No. Because you explained why and you were right.” A paused, considering. “Mostly.”

Shane elbowed him gently, but the warmth in his chest expanded. Ilya wasn't humoring him. The notes he'd been taking were for the Centaurs' scouting department, and he'd genuinely considered Shane's observations before making his recommendations. It was Ilya letting him know his professional opinion mattered. They were going to be teammates soon, and for the first time, Shane was beginning to understand just how much he was looking forward to that.

They were, as predicted, terrible at leaving Ruth and Walter alone. On the first day, Shane reasoned they should call to say they'd arrived safely. The second day, Ilya needed Walter's advice on a booster pact he wanted to get for one of his cars. By the third, they'd both given up pretending they needed an excuse and found themselves FaceTiming them during breakfast simply because they missed them..

Walter answered, his eyebrows raised. “You know we left so you two could learn to function without us.”

“We are functioning,” Shane said, holding up a spoonful of yogurt.

From off-screen, Ilya called, “Ask him if propane regulator should make clicking noise!”

Walter closed his eyes, a long-suffering smile on his face. Ruth's face popped into view, her expression fond and exasperated. “Put me on with the baby. I need my fix.”

Yurina, propped on Shane's knee, heard Ruth's voice and gave a gummy, delighted smile, cooing at the screen. Ruth's eyes instantly filled with happy tears.

Later, Ilya told Ruth about the prospect footage they'd been watching and the young Omega player they'd discovered. Ruth listened with interest, occasionally glancing at Shane when

Ilya praised his observations. They talked for nearly an hour, drifting from hockey to Yurina's sleeping habits to what Walter was planning to do with the garden that weekend. By the time they hung up, Shane was smiling. He liked knowing they could call Ruth and Walter about absolutely nothing, the same way he called his parents. They weren't asking for help or looking for reassurance. They simply wanted to hear their voices, and it was nice knowing the feeling was mutual.

Back in Ottawa, Ilya announced that Yurina's three-month birthday required a party.

"That's not a birthday," Shane said, folding a tiny sweater.

"It is three-month birthday."

"That's not a thing."

"It is now." Ilya was already online, looking at decorations. "We missed first two. We must celebrate this one."

Shane stared at him in horror as the implication dawned. "We are not having twelve birthday parties in her first year."

"We have to make up for lost time," Ilya said, as if this were obvious.

He kept it small, at least by Ilya's standards. Yuna and David came, along with Rose, Svetlana, the Pikes, the Hunters, Troy, and Harris. Ruth and Walter made the trip up for the weekend, too, which Shane suspected had been Ilya's real motivation for organizing the whole thing. The house filled with the familiar chaos of people who loved them, and somehow, Ilya had managed to turn a three-month milestone into an actual birthday party. There was a cake Yurina couldn't eat, complete with a single candle, and an enormous banner proclaiming "3 MONTHS!" across the living room. Someone had brought a ridiculous little

headband decorated with a felt cupcake, which Yurina tolerated for about thirty seconds before deciding she'd had enough and attempting to pull it off.

Shane watched as Yurina was passed gently from Yuna to Ruth to Svetlana, each person melting a little as they held her. He saw David deep in conversation with Troy, gesturing with a beer. He saw Rose laughing at something Scott said, her hand resting on Kip's arm. He saw Ilya, holding court in the center of it all, arguing passionately with Svetlana about the proper way to pronounce some Russian word, a plate of forgotten snacks in one hand.

This, Shane thought. This is what we almost lost. Not just the two of them, but this expanded group of people, of connections. It was loud, messy, cluttered with wrapping paper and abandoned glasses, and it was absolutely perfect.

Harris found him in the kitchen later, stacking plates by the sink. "Need a hand?"

"Nah, I've got it." Shane smiled. "Thanks for coming."

"Wouldn't miss it." Harris leaned against the counter, his expression turning more serious. "Have you guys figured out how you're announcing the Centaurs move yet? Once the paperwork's final, it'll leak fast."

Shane sighed, wiping his hands on a towel. "Press release, probably. Maybe a team statement."

Harris made a face. "Boring."

Shane laughed. "What, you want a skywriter or some billboards?"

"I want you to own it," Harris said, his expression turning serious. "Think about it, Shane. For years, other people have controlled your story. Montreal made a fortune selling the rivalry between you and Ilya. The media speculated about your relationship, your mating, your pregnancy since it came out. Every time something came out, you were stuck reacting to it."

Shane leaned against the counter, listening.

“But look at what's happened since you two went public. The response has been overwhelmingly positive. People are talking about Omegas differently, especially here in Canada. And Ilya's getting praised for being so progressive because he's ‘letting’ his husband play hockey.” Harris rolled his eyes. “Which is ridiculous, obviously, but that's exactly why I think you should do this. You get to tell people why you're coming to Ottawa. You get to talk about your career, your family, and what being an Omega actually means to you. On your terms, for once.”

Shane felt a familiar knot of anxiety forming in his stomach. “You mean an interview.”

“One interview. With someone you trust. You and Ilya together. You don't have to share anything you're uncomfortable with, but think about what it could mean to someone like Luca Haas. Or some kid sitting at home right now, convinced they'll never get to play professionally because they're an Omega.”

Harris paused, letting that settle.

“You've already changed people's minds, Shane. Imagine what you could do if you actually tried.”

The party flowed around them, a warm current of laughter and easy conversation. Harris, drink in hand while Troys attention was not that focused on him, drifted from Shane's side and settled into a nearby circle where David, Yuna, Svetlana, and Hayden were deep in discussion.

“...just won't be right,” Hayden was saying, shaking his head with a grin. “Seeing him in anything but a Voyageurs jersey. My brain might short-circuit.”

Svetlana waved a dismissive hand. “Nonsense. He will look much better in Centaurs colors. More dignified.”

David chuckled, swirling the wine in his glass. “Funny thing is, Ottawa was actually his first team.”

The group went quiet, all eyes turning to him. Yuna’s face lit up with immediate recognition. “Oh my God. You still have that picture?”

David looked offended, his hand moving instinctively to his back pocket. “Of course I still have it.”

He pulled out his leather wallet. From behind a few other pictures, he extracted a small, rectangular photograph, its edges softened and white from years of handling. He held it out.

In the picture, six-year-old Shane stood on the concourse of a brand-new arena, practically swimming in an oversized Ottawa Centaurs jersey. The team’s original logo stretched across his little chest, the hem hanging past his knees. His dark brown hair stuck up in messy little spikes, his cheeks were pink with excitement, and his grin showed a gap where a front tooth had fallen out. Beside him, a younger David smiled down at him, a hand on his shoulder.

Svetlana cooed, pressing a hand to her heart. “Bozhe moi, he is like a little sunflower!”

Hayden barked a laugh. “Look at him! God he was always supposed to be in this sport, huh?”

“He talked about that game for *weeks*,” Yuna confirmed, her eyes misty. “Drove us all crazy replaying every goal. And he refused to take that jersey off. Slept in it for a month. I had to sneak it away to wash it.”

But Harris had gone very still. He was staring at the photograph, his marketing mind, always quietly whirring in the background, suddenly shifting into overdrive. The noise of the party

seemed to fade away.

“David,” he said, his voice low and intent.

“Yeah?”

“Can I borrow this?”

David’s paternal instincts flared. He pulled the picture back slightly toward his chest.
“Borrow?”

“For thirty seconds.”

“Why?”

Harris’s eyes were already scanning the room, the blueprint of an idea assembling itself behind his gaze. “Because I just had the best fucking idea.”

Before David could protest further, Harris gently but firmly plucked the photo from his fingers and was striding across the room, a man on a mission.

“If you lose that, David will kill you!” Svetlana called after him.

“Damn right I will!” David confirmed, though he was already smiling, caught up in the infectious energy of Harris’s sudden fervor.

Shane and Ilya were cornered by JJ and Scott near the dessert table, Ilya and Scott bickering about how old Scott was, Shane and JJ trying their hardest not to laugh, when Harris inserted himself into their circle.

“Okay. I’m amazing and Ilya, I get to give Shane a kiss for my brilliant idea,” Harris announced, slightly breathless.

Shane blinked. “What?”

Ilya raised an eyebrow. “Excuse me? I don’t think Troy wants to be widow so young.”

“Ilya!” Shane frowned, hitting his ribs hard with an elbow.

“Oh come on! Shane’s too pretty, he’s everyone’s free pass.”

Harris ignored Ilya’s glare and thrust the photograph between their faces.

Shane looked down. For a second, forgot about that memory. Then his own childhood smile stared back at him, a punch of pure, uncomplicated nostalgia to the gut. He froze, his breath catching.

Ilya immediately snatched the picture from Harris’s hand. His eyes widened. “Oh my God.”

Shane reached for it, his cheeks flushing. “Give me that.”

Ilya held it up, out of reach, his face transforming into a look of rapturous delight. “No. This is greatest thing I have ever seen.”

“I was six!”

“You have no tooth!” Ilya crowed, pointing at the gap in the tiny grin.

“I was SIX!”

The group around them erupted in laughter, drawn in by Ilya’s dramatics and Shane’s flustered embarrassment. It was cute. But Harris was vibrating, his focus laser-sharp.

“Guys,” he said, cutting through the noise. His voice held a new, compelling gravity. “This *is* the announcement.”

The laughter subsided into curious silence. Harris took the photo back and held it carefully between his thumb and forefinger, ensuring both Shane and Ilya could see it.

“We start here,” Harris said, holding up the photograph. “Black screen. No music. Then this picture appears. Six-year-old Shane Hollander, missing a tooth, wearing a Centaurs jersey that's about four sizes too big for him.”

Shane groaned quietly, but Harris ignored him.

“Then we start hearing it. Skates on the ice. The crowd. A goal horn. We cut to the players' tunnel at the arena, smoke rolling across the floor, and there's someone standing in the middle of it.” He pointed at Shane.

“You. Full Centaurs uniform. Helmet under your arm. Your number, your name, everything. You walk out of the smoke, look straight into the camera, and give us that little smirk you do when you know you're about to ruin somebody's night.”

Ilya laughed. “I know this face.”

“Exactly!” Harris said, delighted. “Then we cut between the two images. Little Shane in his first Centaurs jersey and grown-up Shane wearing it for real. And at the end, just two words.”

He paused dramatically. “WELCOME HOME.”

For a moment, nobody said anything.

Shane looked at the photograph again. He could almost picture it, that little boy who'd been so excited just to attend a hockey game, never imagining that one day he'd be wearing those same colors professionally.

Ilya looked from the worn photograph in Harris's hand to Shane's face, a slow smile spreading across his face. “You were Centaur first.”

Shane let out a shaky laugh, a little embarrassed. “I was six, it was the home team.”

“Doesn't matter.” Ilya glanced at the picture again, looking ridiculously pleased with the discovery. “Very smart Harris. But no kiss.”

Shane looked back at the photograph. At that little boy's face, untouched by fear or secrecy, lit only by the pure love of the game. That boy had no idea of the long, winding, painful road ahead. He only knew the magic of the ice, the thrill of the crowd, he was young enough to wish for something great, to be the one that the crowd was cheering for.

Shane studied the picture in Harris's hand. He remembered that game, although only in fragments now. The noise of the crowd, his father's hand holding his, the enormous jersey he'd refused to take off for weeks. Back then, he'd wanted nothing more than to play hockey. He hadn't known what being an Omega would eventually mean for his career, or how much of himself he'd spend years trying to hide.

And now he was going to play for the Centaurs. With Ilya.

He glanced across the room, where Yuna was holding Yurina, then back at his husband. Ilya smiled at him, patient and encouraging, waiting for him to decide.

For once, Shane wasn't being pushed into an announcement because someone had discovered something he wanted to keep private. This was his decision, and he liked that.

“Yeah,” he said, looking back at Harris. “Let's do it.”

A collective, happy release of breath came from the small crowd that had gathered. Harris looked triumphant. Ilya's smile could have powered the city, he pulled Shane's waist towards him and gave him a sweet kiss.

“Perfect!” Harris said, already reaching for his phone. “We can film in a few days. We've got the jersey designs started, so I just need you to sign off on the number and the name across the back. Once the announcement goes live, we'll release the interview.”

“Already planning the interview?” Shane asked.

“Obviously. Do you have any idea how long I've been waiting to do something like this?”

“About thirty seconds?” Ilya suggested.

Harris ignored him. “We'll schedule both for the same day. Get everything done at once.”

Shane nodded, feeling surprisingly calm about the whole thing. He glanced at the photograph one last time before Harris carefully returned it to David, who immediately tucked it safely back into his wallet.

The last of the taillights disappeared down the driveway, leaving the house finally in silence. The lingering energy of the party felt like a warm, dissipating hum. Ruth and Walter had retired to the guest suite. The cleanup was a slow, Shane directing Ilya on where to put everything. Wrapping paper was balled up and thrown away, the “3 MONTHS!” banner hung crookedly over the archway, one corner drooping but Shane wanted it up for one more day. The kitchen counter was cleaned between the both of them and the downstairs was getting spotless again.

Shane was rinsing the last of the wine glasses, his movements sluggish with pleasant exhaustion, when Ilya spoke from where he was tossing paper plates into the recycling.

“Harris asked me earlier what name you want on the jersey. For the announcement graphics.”

“Rozanov,” Shane answered without looking up, the word feeling natural, inevitable, as he passed the glass under the stream of water. The silence that followed was just a few seconds too long. Shane glanced over. Ilya had frozen, a crumpled ball of red foil gift wrap in his hand, his expression unreadable.

“What?” Shane asked, shutting off the tap.

“Why Rozanov?”

Shane gave him an amused, puzzled look, drying his hands on a towel. “Because I married you?”

“You did not legally change your name yet,” Ilya pointed out, his tone careful, neutral. “We have not done paperwork. It has been... busy.”

“I know.” Shane leaned back against the counter. “But I was thinking about it. We’re married. Yurina is a Rozanov. It just... makes sense.” The logic felt straightforward, almost

transactional. An omega traditionally took her husband's name. It seemed like the next, obvious step.

But Ilya didn't look convinced. If anything, he looked vaguely troubled. "You don't want me to take your name?" Shane asked, the teasing edge in his voice softening into genuine curiosity.

"Of course I want," Ilya said quickly, abandoning the recycling to cross the space between them. He stopped a few feet away, his brow furrowed as he wrestled with the words. "But I do not want you to lose yours." The statement, simple and profound, made Shane go still.

Ilya pushed a hand through his hair, looking uncharacteristically awkward. "Shane Hollander means something. Is not just famous name. Is name you played under your whole life. It's your father's name." He hesitated, searching for the right words. "After everything you went through, everything you fought for, I do not like idea that marrying me means you have to give up part of yourself. You were Shane Hollander long before you were my husband, and I love that side of you too."

Shane's throat tightened. He'd thought of it as a gain, not a loss. Becoming Ilya's, he hadn't considered that Ilya might see it as him losing something. "You realize," he said softly, a faint smile touching his lips, "most husbands would be absolutely thrilled that I want their name."

"I am thrilled," Ilya insisted, but the conflict was still there in the set of his shoulders.

"You don't look too thrilled."

"I am but I didn't expect you being ok to changing your last name," Ilya grumbled, which drew a real, soft smile from Shane.

Then Ilya seemed to gather himself, his voice dropping, tentative. "What if we use both?"

Shane blinked. “Both?”

“Hollander-Rozanov.”

He let the name hang in the air between them. Shane turned it over in his mind, testing its weight, its sound. Shane Hollander-Rozanov. It was a mouthful. It was unconventional. It was...

And then the second part of Ilya’s implication crashed into him. He wasn’t just suggesting it for Shane. “Wait, ‘we’?” Shane said, his voice low with disbelief. “You’d hyphenate yours too?”

Ilya looked at him almost bashful. “I mean, is just a thought. if you think your parents wouldn’t mind?” He glanced down, rubbing his thumb against his wedding ring. “David has been more like a father to me then my own ever was. And Yuna” He paused, swallowing. “I miss my mama every day. You know this, but Yuna, she takes care of me like I like to think she would have. She worries if I eat enough, tells me when I am being idiot, throws out my cigarettes, makes sure I know I am loved.” He gave a small, embarrassed smile. “Sometimes I think maybe I have parents again. And I would like to have their name, if they are ok with it.”

His words stole Shane’s breath. Ilya was just rejecting tradition, this was the deeper, Ilya being vulnerable and asking Shane for solid confirmation that he had two loving parents for the first time.

A slow, deep warmth spread through Shane’s chest, unfurling like a sunrise. His smile started small and grew until it felt like it might split his face. “Ilya Hollander-Rozanov.”

Ilya made an exaggerated, considering face, as if tasting it. “Is very long.”

Shane laughed, the sound bright in the quiet kitchen. “This was your idea.”

“Still good idea?” Ilya asked, a tentative hope lighting his own eyes.

Shane said it again, quieter, letting it settle into his bones. “Shane Hollander-Rozanov.” This time, it didn’t just sound like a name. It felt like a declaration of a life that was wholly, completely theirs, a fusion of every struggle, every victory, every shattered and rebuilt piece of their histories. He looked down at the twin bands on his left hand, and he knew. “Yeah.”

Ilya’s posture softened, the tension melting away into pure relief. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. Let’s do that.”

The joy that broke across Ilya’s face was instantaneous and brilliant. He closed the remaining distance, his hands coming to rest on Shane’s hips. Then a new thought struck Shane. “Wait. Yurina too?”

“Obviously,” Ilya said, as if it were the most natural conclusion in the world.

Yurina Hollander-Rozanov. The rightness of it was almost dizzying. Their family wouldn’t be the Rozanovs, with Shane grafted on. It wouldn’t be the Hollanders, with Ilya as an adjunct. They would be, from the ground up, the Hollander-Rozanovs. An equal partnership.

Ilya seemed to read the wave of emotion in Shane’s silence. He moved behind him, wrapping his arms around Shane’s waist and resting his chin on his shoulder, holding him as Shane stared, unseeing, at the loved-in kitchen.

After a long moment, Shane’s practical brain re-engaged, and he snorted. “That’s going to be a fucking nightmare across the back of a hockey jersey.”

Ilya hummed, his breath warm against Shane’s neck. “It will fit. Or we make letters smaller.”

“Do you think it’ll look alright?”

“You will make it beautiful,” Ilya stated, as if Shane’s mere presence on the ice could transform a logistical eyesore into a work of art.

Shane shook his head, fondness swelling in his chest. Then he turned in the circle of Ilya’s arms, a new, playful seriousness in his eyes. “What about yours?”

Ilya didn’t hesitate. “Yes.”

“If we’re doing this,” Shane said, pressing a finger to Ilya’s chest, “you’re changing yours too. Legally. Everywhere.”

“Yes.”

“And your jersey?”

Ilya’s smile was soft, certain, and utterly devoid of ego. “Hollander-Rozanov.”

That was what finally undid Shane. He pictured it so clearly that he almost laughed. Two red and black Centaurs jerseys hanging side by side in the locker room, both bearing the same name. Ilya’s #81 besides his #24. For years, they’d stood on opposite sides of the ice, wearing different colors, pretending they were nothing more than rivals. Now they were going to share a team, a home, everything. He’d spent so long believing he could never have all the things he wanted, and somehow, here they were.

“Hollander-Rozanov,” Shane murmured again, smiling.

Ilya kissed his temple, his lips lingering. “Very good name.”

Shane leaned into him, the last of the night's fatigue replaced by a buoyant, quiet joy. "Yeah," he whispered, his eyes falling closed. "It is."

The morning the Centaurs closed the arena felt surreal. The usual echoing cacophony of practice was replaced by the hushed, focused energy of a film crew. Harris had transformed the "Welcome Home" concept into a proper production, but to his credit, the heart of it remained exactly as promised: simple, emotional, and stark.

The morning of the shoot, the Centaurs closed the arena to everyone except the production crew and a handful of staff. Without the usual bustle of players and equipment, the building felt strangely quiet. Harris had turned his *Welcome Home* concept into a proper production, complete with lighting equipment, cameras, and a smoke machine that Shane was already suspicious of.

Shane arrived with Ilya, Yuna, David, and Yurina, who was tucked comfortably into her carrier. Farrah accompanied them, having officially taken over as sports manager for both Shane and Ilya. She was already reviewing the day's schedule on her tablet when Harris spotted them.

"You're here!" Harris called from across the concourse.

Ilya grinned, shifting Yurina's carrier to his other hand. "This looks great, Harris."

"Don't encourage him," Shane muttered, elbowing his husband. He glanced at the elaborate lighting setup and the smoke machine, feeling his nerves begin to creep back in.

They were led to the locker room first. It was quiet, the lights low. Harris gestured. "Thought you should see this before we film."

Shane stopped in the doorway.

There it was. His new Centaurs jersey, hanging neatly in his assigned stall. The familiar number twenty-four was printed on the sleeves, and across the shoulders, in crisp white lettering, was the name they'd chosen together.

HOLLANDER-ROZANOV.

He stepped closer, staring at it. He'd worn the same number for his entire professional career, but seeing it on a red Ottawa jersey was strange enough. Seeing their shared name above it made something tighten pleasantly in his chest.

Then he noticed the stall beside his.

Ilya's jersey hung there, number eighty-one, with the exact same name stretched across the shoulders. Their stalls were right next to each other. Shane had known they would be teammates, had spent weeks preparing for it, but somehow, seeing those two jerseys hanging side by side made it feel real in a way nothing else had.

Ilya came up beside him, his shoulder brushing Shane's. "Too long?" he murmured.

A soft, disbelieving laugh escaped Shane. "It's perfect."

"Looks good."

Shane reached out, his fingertips brushing the raised stitching of their name. "It really does."

The filming was, in typical fashion, far less glamorous than the final product would suggest. The smoke machine malfunctioned, twice enveloping Shane in a coughing fit that ruined a dramatic take. Harris wanted a specific look as Shane emerged from the tunnel.

"I need a smirk. Not a smile. A smirk. Like you know something they don't."

Shane attempted a smirk.

“No,” Harris said, peering at the monitor.

“What?”

“That looks evil. You look like you’re planning a felony.”

From the sidelines, Ilya offered, “I like evil one.”

“Nobody asked you,” Shane and Harris said in unison.

By the ninth take, Shane was beginning to seriously reconsider agreeing to the whole thing. Apparently, he had two facial expressions available on command: the polished smile he used for endorsement deals and something Harris insisted made him look like a serial killer. There was no middle ground.

“It’s a smirk, Shane. You’ve been doing it to opposing goalies for fifteen years. How is this difficult?”

“Because nobody was standing there telling me to do it!”

Ilya, who had been enjoying the entire spectacle far too much, finally wandered over.

“Let me try something,” he told Harris.

Before Shane could object, Ilya leaned down and whispered something filthy in his ear.

Shane's eyes widened. "Ilya!"

His husband stepped back, looking immensely pleased with himself.

"Camera," Ilya told Harris.

Shane was still blushing when Harris called action, but as he emerged from the smoke, he glanced toward Ilya standing behind the monitor. His mouth curved into a small, wicked smirk.

"Cut!" Harris practically shouted. "That's it! That's the one!"

Ilya folded his arms triumphantly. "See? Easy."

Shane pointed at him. "You are so dead when we get home."

Ilya's grin only widened. "Promise?"

The interview set was intimate, with two deep armchairs positioned across from Cara Thorne, a very respected sports journalist known for her thoughtful, considerate interviews. Their two jerseys were hung on a wall behind them, a subtle backdrop- their names clearly visible. Behind the monitors, Yuna, David, and Farrah watched quietly. Yurina, exhausted by the excitement of the morning, slept against David's chest, her tiny fist curled near her mouth.

Shane's nerves were getting the better of him. His palms were damp, his knee bouncing, and he'd twist his wedding ring so many times that the skin beneath it was beginning to feel tender.

Ilya noticed of course. He didn't say anything at first, simply reaching over to take Shane's hand, turned it palm up, and pressed a slow, deliberate kiss to the center.

"You don't have to tell them anything you don't want to," Ilya murmured, his voice too low for the mics.

Shane drew in a shaky breath. "I know."

"We can stop whenever you want."

"I know." Shane squeezed his fingers. "Thank you."

A moment later, the red camera light came on.

Cara began gently. "Shane, let's start with the obvious. After your entire professional career in Montreal, why Ottawa?"

Shane smiled, some of the tension leaving his shoulders. There were a hundred diplomatic answers he could have given, but he decided to tell the truth. "Because I wanted to play hockey with my husband."

Ilya's grin was instantaneous.

Shane glanced at him before continuing. "I'd had an incredible career in Montreal. Two Stanley Cups, a lot of great teammates, and memories I'll always be grateful for. But after everything that happened, I was ready for something different. Ottawa made sense professionally, and for the first time in a long time, I asked myself what I wanted instead of what everyone expected from me."

Cara smiled. “And apparently what you wanted was to play on the same team as your biggest rival.”

“Former rival,” Ilya corrected immediately. “Now he is my favorite teammate.”

“We haven't played a game together yet,” Shane reminded him.

“Still favorite.”

Cara laughed, and the ice was thoroughly broken. Shane explained that the public story was never the whole story, which led Cara to her next question, her tone shifting to one of respectful care.

“Shane, you’ve chosen today to publicly identify yourself as an Omega. Why now? You could have just left your ‘outing’ go with that incident with the late Dallas Kent.”

The room grew quiet. Shane felt Ilya tense beside him, but he took a moment, but he took a moment to gather his thoughts. “Because I’m tired of treating it like a dirty secret,” he said finally. “Being an Omega isn't something I did wrong. It's just part of who I am.”

Cara nodded, giving him room to continue.

“When I was younger, I believed that if people knew, I could lose hockey. And I don't think I was entirely wrong about that. I'd worked my whole life to get where I was, and I was terrified that none of it would matter anymore. That people would stop seeing me as a hockey player and start seeing me as an Omega first.”

He glanced briefly at Ilya before looking back at Cara.

“I made the decision I thought I needed to make. I don't regret protecting my career, but I do wish I'd lived in a world where I didn't have to make that choice.”

“Do you regret hiding?” Cara asked.

“No,” Shane said firmly. “I wish I hadn't needed to. That's different.”

When Cara asked whether learning Shane was an Omega had changed how he viewed him as a player, Ilya's answer was immediate and firm. “No.”

He glanced at Shane before continuing. “Changed things personally, of course. I worried more when he got hurt, hated watching someone put him into the boards. But as hockey player? No. Shane was always Shane. First time I saw him play, I knew he was special. Fast, smart, impossible to predict.” He smiled a little. “Very annoying to play against.”

Shane laughed. “You weren't exactly easy.”

“Da, but I am bigger, so is expected.” Ilya shrugged, earning another laugh from Shane. “When I found out everything he had been doing just to stay on his team, I respected him even more. But I never thought less of him as player. Not for one second.”

Shane looked at his husband, smiling softly. He hadn't expected Ilya to say quite so much, but he was glad he had.

Cara glanced toward the two jerseys hanging behind them. “I think there's something else fans are going to notice. You've both got the same name on your jerseys now.”

Shane pointed at Ilya. “His idea.”

Ilya looked profoundly pleased with himself. “Very good idea, too.”

“So why Hollander-Rozanov?” Cara asked. “Most people probably expected one of you to take the other's surname.”

“Because we are family,” Ilya said simply. “And I wanted our name to show both sides of it. Shane should not have to give up being a Hollander, and I wanted to be part of that name too.”

Shane's expression softened.

“Plus,” Ilya added, grinning, “now everyone knows he is stuck with me.”

“Pretty sure the wedding rings already gave that away,” Shane said.

“Extra reminder.”

Cara laughed. “And your baby shares the name?”

“Yes, of course,” Shane confirmed. “All three of us. Hollander-Rozanov.”

Ilya reached over and squeezed his hand, looking entirely too pleased with their decision.

“Congratulations, by the way,” Cara said warmly. “I know you've decided not to show your baby's face publicly, and we're respecting that, but I understand they're absolutely beautiful.”

“Prettiest baby in world,” Ilya declared without hesitation.

Shane nodded solemnly. “He's right. Completely unbiased opinion, obviously.”

Cara laughed. “Has becoming parents changed the way you approach hockey?”

“A little,” Shane admitted. “I’m still just as competitive. I still hate losing, and I probably always will. But a bad game is just a bad game now. I get to go home, and suddenly I’ve got a whole different set of responsibilities. It doesn’t matter if I missed a shot or had a terrible third period.”

“Exactly,” Ilya agreed. “We still give everything in us to win, but when we come home, we are home. Family comes first.”

“And what’s surprised you most about fatherhood?” Cara asked.

Ilya considered the question for a moment. “How afraid you can be,” he said finally. “And still be so happy. I worry about everything now. If baby sleeps too long, if they don’t sleep enough, if we hear strange noise.” He smiled sheepishly. “I never thought I could love anyone as much as I love Shane. Then they came, and somehow there is room for both of them.”

Shane’s smile softened, and he reached for Ilya’s hand.

“That’s a pretty good answer,” Cara said.

“Is true,” Ilya replied simply.

Cara guided them toward the future, bringing up the growing leadership role of Ilya’s, about him taking the team up to the playoffs in his first year with them, their growing roles. Ilya mentioned coaching. Shane looked at him, a silent *you haven’t said that before* passing between them. Shane shrugged. “Management, development, ownership someday maybe. Ask me when my knees stop working.”

Then Cara mentioned they had asked to make an additional announcement. Ilya’s posture straightened, his expression becoming solemn. Shane took his hand.

Together, they announced the Irina Foundation. Ilya's posture straightened as he spoke about his mother, his voice softer than it had been throughout the rest of the interview. "My mama was a very good woman. Strong, kind, so funny and beautiful. Always trying to do what was best for her children. But she lived in a country where being an Omega meant there were many things she could not choose for herself. Much more restrictive than here in Canada or America." he paused, glancing down at his wedding ring. "I cannot change what her life was life, I wish I could, but maybe we can make things better for someone else. This is why we name foundation after her."

They continued to speak passionately about their goal. The foundation would focus on legal advocacy, mental health support, workplace inclusion, and emergency resources for Omegas. They also hoped to create educational and athletic opportunities for young Omegas who might otherwise struggle to access them.

"There are kids right now looking at careers they want and deciding not to even try because they've never seen an Omega doing it," Shane explained. "We want to change that. We're starting with hockey camps, because that's what we know, but eventually we'd love to expand into other sports, education, and STEM programs. Whatever helps give people more opportunities."

"And is not just for Omegas who want to be in sports," Ilya added. "Is about having choices in any career path. Everyone deserves this."

Near the end, Cara produced a copy of David's photograph. The image of six-year-old Shane filled the monitor behind her.

Shane groaned. "Oh God."

Ilya beamed. "Best photograph ever taken."

Cara asked, "Looking at him now, knowing everything between that first game and today, what would you tell him?"

Shane studied the boy's joyful, oblivious face. "That kid still thinks anything is possible. He doesn't need advice from me."

“Okay. Then what would you tell the seventeen-year-old Shane Hollander who decided nobody could ever know he was an Omega?”

The silence in the studio was absolute. Behind the monitors, Yuna’s hand flew to her mouth. David looked down at his sleeping granddaughter. Ilya held his breath.

Shane looked at their joined hands, then back at the photograph of the boy who had loved hockey more than anything.

“I’d tell him,” Shane said, his voice thick but clear, “that he gets to keep playing hockey. That some things are going to feel impossible, and there’ll be times when giving up seems easier than fighting. But he’ll get through them. And one day, he’ll have a life that’s so much better than anything he ever let himself dream about.”

Cara’s final question was gentle. “So what does Shane Hollander-Rozanov want now?”

Shane looked at Ilya, then toward the corner where his family watched. He smiled, a real, full, unguarded smile. “Everything.” He laughed at the audacity of it. “I want my husband. I want my child and future children. I want to crush my first season with the Centaurs. I want to help make this easier for whoever comes after me.” He shrugged, the weight of old compromises finally gone. “And I don’t think I should have to pick one.”

Ilya’s thumb brushed over Shane’s wedding ring. “Greedy,” he murmured, his eyes shining.

Shane met his gaze. “Very.”

Ilya’s smile was a sunburst. “Good.”

“Cut,” said the director. The lights brightened. The spell broke, but the truth of it remained, solid as the ring on his hand and the name on his back. He was home.

The Ottawa Centaurs posted the video at nine in the morning on a Tuesday. By nine-fifteen, it was trending. By nine-fifty eight, it had broken the internet. By ten, both Shane and Ilya's phones were practically unusable with all the notifications and calls coming in.

The video was only thirty seconds long. It opened with the photograph of six-year-old Shane, missing a front tooth, drowning in an oversized Centaurs jersey, his smile so wide, 1998 underneath. The faded to black before smoke rolled across the frame, revealing a silhouette in the tunnel. The arena sounds swelled. Smoke billowed across the frame, lit from within by arena lights. A silhouette emerged as the camera panned then circled the figure. Adult Shane, in the crisp red and black of the Centaurs, his helmet tucked under his arm, the name HOLLANDER-ROZANOV stark across his shoulders. He looked directly into the camera and smirked. WELCOME HOME flashed on the screen before the spot ended.

The response was a tidal wave. Sports networks replayed the video, hockey blogs dissected every detail, even mainstream news outlets picked up the story. Shane was considerably less enthusiastic about the attention.

"They're obsessed with my missing tooth," he groaned, burying his face in a couch cushion. Ilya, who had immediately set the photo as his phone background and lock screen, scrolled through comments with glee. "Is iconic. You were perfect baby Centaur."

When the full interview with Cara Thorne aired two days later, the attention intensified. Clips circulated of Shane explaining why he'd hidden his designation and Ilya speaking about the Irina Foundation. Within hours, donations began pouring in.

Thankfully, Farrah and his mom had already handled the legal and administrative groundwork, so the foundation was ready to accept contributions. She and Yuna were beginning the search for a suitable rink and putting together a team to oversee the programs they'd discussed.

Shane, meanwhile, made the mistake of reading everything people were saying about him.

After his tenth article analyzing “the reclamation of identity in the Hollander-Rozanov narrative,” Farrah gently pried the phone from his hand.

“You're done,” she informed him. “Go hold your baby. This is my job now.”

Returning to the arena for his official evaluation was an entirely different experience from the quiet morning they'd spent filming. Reporters and fans crowded the player entrance, cameras flashing as soon as Shane and Ilya stepped out of the car. Anatoly and the team's security staff kept a careful perimeter around them, although Shane insisted on stopping long enough to sign a few jerseys for some kids waiting near the doors.

Once inside, the noise and excitement fell away, leaving Shane alone with the part he'd been worrying about most.

The Centaurs' medical staff put him through a thorough series of evaluations, measuring his strength, flexibility, cardiovascular recovery, and core stability. He'd been training diligently with Ilya for weeks, and his progress was evident, but he knew his body wasn't quite where it had been before his pregnancy. The doctors were pleased with his results. They used words like *excellent progress* and *ahead of schedule*, but they didn't tell him he was ready for fully unrestricted play.

Instead, they cleared him to begin practicing with the team under a graduated workload, with regular assessments as his conditioning improved. It wasn't everything Shane wanted to hear, but it was enough to get him back on the ice.

As they left the medical suite, the silence between him and Ilya was heavy with the unspoken. Shane stared straight ahead, his jaw tight. Ilya didn't offer platitudes. He waited until they were in the empty hallway leading to the locker room.

"Are you happy?" Ilya asked, his voice neutral.

Shane let out a long breath, his shoulders slumping slightly. "Mostly."

Ilya nodded, a small, understanding gesture. "You did great, sweetheart. You're better than everyone out here. Including me. We can start slow practice and see how it feels."

Shane's first practice was a bit awkward at first. The roster was a mix of grizzled veterans and eager rookies, and apparently, none of them knew what to do with him. Conversations quieted whenever he entered the locker room, even with some of the players that he'd grown closer to. During drills, checks were pulled at the last second. When a young defenseman accidentally bumped him along the boards, the poor kid looked absolutely horrified.

"So sorry, Mr. Hollander, my bad."

Shane just nodded, his smile a bit stiff. "You can call me Shane." The kid looked awestruck and almost tripped as he skated away. His instinct when uncomfortable was to become quieter and more reserved, which only made his new teammates even more careful around him. By the end of practice, he felt like an expensive piece of glass that everyone was afraid to break.

After three days of this, Shane slumped onto the stool at the kitchen island and dropped his forehead into his hands. "They don't like me."

Ilya, who was standing at the sink washing the parts of Shane's breast pump, didn't look up. "They love you."

Shane groaned, dropping his head into his hands. "That's worse."

"Is terrible problem. Whole team thinks you are amazing."

"Ilya."

"What?"

"I just want them to treat me like a normal person. Nobody will even check me properly during drills."

Ilya finally glanced over his shoulder. "They are afraid of breaking you."

"I'm not made of glass!"

"I know this, sweetheart. You are better." Ilya smiled. "You are very stubborn, very expensive diamond."

Shane lifted his head just enough to glare at him. "See?" Ilya said cheerfully. "Very sharp, too."

Amid all this stifling politeness, Luca Haas provided a welcome distraction. The eighteen-year-old had been invited to training camp after Ottawa selected him in the draft, and his talent was immediately apparent. He was all sharp angles and nervous energy, with quick hands and an instinctive understanding of where the puck needed to go. He also wore scent patches that were far too strong, their chemical smell noticeable even through the cold air of the rink.

And he was utterly, hopelessly starstruck by Ilya.

One morning, Ilya nodded to him in the hallway outside the locker room. “Good morning, Haas.”

Luca snapped to attention, his spine straight as a rod. “Yes.”

Ilya stopped, looking genuinely confused. “I did not ask question.”

Behind him, Shane choked on a laugh and hurriedly disguised it as a cough. Luca turned beet red.

Later, Shane found him near the stick rack. “So,” he said casually. “Big Rozanov fan, huh?”

Luca's eyes widened. “No! I mean, yes, obviously. He's a great player. Everyone respects him. It's not like I'm...” He trailed off, looking increasingly miserable. “I had his poster, okay? From when he was a rookie. And some from St. Petersburg. But I had yours too!” he added quickly.

“Oh my God.” Shane was delighted.

“Please don't tell him.”

“I promise nothing.”

Shane's amusement faded as he watched Luca on the ice. He noticed it almost immediately. Luca had a perfectly good passing lane to the winger but instead of moving the puck, he held onto it and absorbed a hard check along the boards. He managed to keep possession, but the play had slowed, and the opportunity was gone.

After the drill, he skated over. “Why’d you take that hit?”

Luca blushed. “I thought I could hold on long enough to score.”

“You had a free shot to your winger,” Shane interrupted, his voice low. “You saw it. You chose to take the hit instead.”

“I’m not trying to-” Luca started, the protest automatic.

“But avoiding a hit that doesn't help the play isn't weakness. It's playing smart. We're smaller than most of the guys out here, so we have to be faster and think ahead. Letting some two-hundred-pound gorilla rearrange your spine doesn't prove Omegas belong in the NHL. Making the right play does.”

Luca looked down at his skates.

“You're good enough to be here,” Shane continued. “You don't have to get yourself killed proving it every shift.”

He gave Luca a small, encouraging tap on the shoulder with his glove before skating away.

The advice was practical, but the recognition in Shane’s eyes was personal. Luca thanked him with a shy smile. Later, while they were changing out of their gear, Shane noticed the irritated skin around the edges of Luca's scent patch. The area was red and angry-looking, and Luca kept scratching at it whenever he thought nobody was watching.

Shane waited until most of the other players had disappeared into the showers before approaching him.

“Those patches are garbage,” he said, nodding toward Luca's neck. “They're way too strong. You're wearing enough suppression to knock out a horse.”

Luca's hand flew self-consciously to the patch. "They're fine."

"They're clearly not. You should try the athletic-grade ones. They're a lot easier on your skin."

Luca hesitated. "Yeah, well. They're expensive."

Shane paused. Suddenly, a few things made sense. The cheap hotel, the careful way Luca seemed to budget everything, the fact that he was by himself in a new country, and he'd bet he had sent money back home.

"I've got extras," Shane said. "I'll bring you a box tomorrow. Here, take a couple of these for now. Each one lasts twenty-four hours."

"You don't have to do that."

"I know."

"Seriously, I can buy my own."

"Luca." Shane waited until the younger player looked at him. "I'm not offering because I think you're broke. I'm offering because somebody should've done this shit for me."

Luca stared at him for a moment before a reluctant smile appeared.

"Thanks, Shane."

“Don't mention it. And stop scratching your neck.”

It was the start of their friendship. Luca began to ask questions, clamping quiet whenever Ilya was close by, which was often but once Shane said something, he tried to give his mate and the rookie some space. Tentatively at first, then with more frequency he started talking and asking questions. Not just about Omega-specific concerns, but about the mundane realities of an NHL life: agents, finances, media, the weight of expectation. Shane found himself answering with a candor he'd never allowed himself in Montreal. He was trying to build the mentorship he had desperately needed and never found.

The tension in the wider team, however, remained mostly unbroken. They were all still too careful, too polite. Until Ilya decided to put a stop to it.

It was during a casual warm-up skate. Shane was talking with Boody near the benches. Ilya glided over, his expression innocuous. Shane glanced at him. “What?”

Without a word, Ilya leaned in and dragged his tongue in one long, wet stripe from Shane's jawline up to his temple.

The entire rink froze. The chatter died. Skates stopped scraping.

Shane recoiled, wiping his face with his glove. “ILYA! What the actual fuck?”

Ilya beamed, utterly pleased with himself. “Good morning, husband.”

A whole team, along with all three coaches present were stunned silent, and then someone on the bench snorted. That was all it took. Laughter erupted across the rink, loud enough to echo off the rafters. One of the veteran defensemen shook his head, calling out, “Jesus, Hollander, control your Alpha!”

Shane, still furiously wiping his face with his glove, shouted back, “I've been trying for years! He's defective!”

“You married me, seems like a you problem.” Ilya pointed out, shrugging.

The laughter only got louder. Shane glared at his husband, who looked entirely too pleased with himself, and seriously considered checking him into the boards or tripping him with his stick.

The spell was broken. Whatever reverence the team had been treating Shane with dissolved into the familiar, affectionate chaos of a hockey team. During the next drill, a rookie defenseman checked him firmly and cleanly into the boards. No apology.

When someone chirped him about his backhand, Shane gave as good as he got, his teasing sharp and familiar.

For the first time since arriving in Ottawa, he felt like one of the guys.

In the days that followed, Shane felt the difference everywhere. The Centaurs were nothing like the Voyageurs. In Montreal, he’d spent years feeling like the centerpiece of a carefully constructed exhibit, admired and celebrated but always expected to remain exactly where he’d been placed. He’d liked his teammates there, loved winning championships with them, had made a few genuine friendships, but he’d never been able to relax completely. Every conversation, every shift in his scent, every moment of physical closeness had required some degree of calculation.

Ottawa was different, Ottawa was messy and loud, full of impromptu dinners, invitations to each other’s houses, and arguments over whose turn it was to host the next team party. Ilya insisted that the rookies would be the ones to host the next team party, much to their collective horror. Shane could arrive at practice exhausted because Yurina had kept him up with teething pain, complain about stiff hips to the trainer and receive PT, without anyone making assumptions, or kiss his husband in the hallway without checking who might be watching.

He didn’t have to be perfect here. He could just be Shane. It was a strange feeling, almost unsettling at first, but he was beginning to understand how much he’d needed it.

That newfound comfort extended, almost inevitably, to Luca. When Shane discovered that the rookie was still living week to week in a bleak extended-stay hotel, he immediately started thinking about their empty guest suite over the garage. “We’ve got plenty of space,” Shane told him after practice one afternoon. “Why don’t you stay with us until you get settled?”

Luca stared at him. “What?”

“Our guest room. You can move in.”

“I can’t live with you and Rozanov!”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re you,” Luca spluttered, “and he’s *him*!”

Shane fought back a smile. “Okay, first of all, he’s not nearly as intimidating as you think he is.”

Luca gave him a look that suggested he strongly disagreed.

“And second, it’s pretty normal for rookies to stay with the captain or another veteran while they’re getting acclimated. You’ve got enough to worry about without living in some crappy hotel.”

“But I don’t want to impose.”

“You’re not imposing. I’ll talk to Ilya tonight, but I’m pretty sure he’ll agree.”

Luca looked simultaneously relieved and terrified.

Shane clapped him on the shoulder. “We'll figure it out. And I promise he doesn't bite.”

Luca's expression went even more horrified.

Shane paused, remembering exactly who he was married to.

“Okay, that's probably not the best promise I could've made.”

The next morning at practice, Ilya sought out Luca, his expression unusually grave.

“Haas. I hear you have excellent taste in roommates.”

Luca's head whipped toward Shane before darting back to Ilya. “I... what?”

“Relax, kid.” Ilya threw an arm around his shoulders, grinning. “We take you under our wings like little chicklet. Soon you become third-best player in league.”

“Third?” Luca repeated faintly.

“Of course. Shane is first, I am second. You have to earn your place.”

Shane, leaning against the boards nearby, was laughing too hard to form words.

Ilya gave Luca an encouraging squeeze before steering him toward Troy and Wyatt, apparently deciding that the best way to make the rookie comfortable was to embarrass him in front of as many teammates as possible.

Luca moved in with two suitcases and his equipment bag, looking vaguely terrified of touching anything. He was painfully polite at first, insisting on cleaning up after every meal and asking permission before taking so much as a bottle of water from the fridge. Shane repeatedly assured him that he lived there now and didn't need to behave like a hotel guest.

Yurina, meanwhile, adored him. She seemed fascinated by his face and would break into delighted little smiles whenever he appeared. Luca, who could barely manage a coherent sentence around Ilya had no trouble carrying entire conversations with a three month old baby.

Shane stocked the guest bathroom with the good scent patches and premium suppressants. Luca started joining them for meals instead of retreating to his rooms. He lingered after dinner to watch game film, asking quiet questions about lines and positioning, and occasionally helped entertain Yurina while Shane and Ilya prepared dinner.

And, without realizing it, he began to follow Shane around the house.

Ilya observed this one morning with a smile of interest. Shane walked into the kitchen, Yurina on his hip. Luca trailed behind him. Shane went to the refrigerator for milk. Luca followed, peering over his shoulder. Shane moved to the counter to warm the bottle. Luca shifted to lean beside him.

Ilya lowered his newspaper, keeping his pen tucked between his fingers. He was halfway through the morning crossword and had no intention of abandoning it. He had a standing competition with David over who could finish first, and after losing three days in a row, Ilya was determined that he'd be the first to finish the crossword today.

He watched Shane move around the kitchen with Yurina balanced on his hip. Luca followed him to the fridge, peering over his shoulder as Shane searched for the milk. When Shane moved to the counter to warm Yurina's bottle, Luca drifted after him, settling beside him with a banana he'd apparently forgotten to eat.

Ilya saw it all and spoke up. "You adopted him."

Shane glanced over. "What?"

Ilya pointed at Luca. "Like baby duckling."

Luca froze, a banana halfway peeled. "I'm eighteen."

Ilya nodded solemnly. "Fine, then like very old baby duck."

"I haven't adopted anyone," Shane protested.

"You feed him," Ilya began, counting on his fingers. "You buy his Omega things. You give hockey advice. You bring him home. He follows you everywhere."

"I don't follow him," Luca insisted.

They all looked at the two feet separating Luca from Shane, at his trajectory that had mirrored Shane's exactly.

"Okay," Luca muttered, his ears turning pink. "Fuck both of you."

Ilya's smile was triumphant. "See? He is comfortable already. Like baby duck."

One afternoon, Shane found Ilya and Luca alone in the home gym, Ilya demonstrating a particular stick-handling drill on the section of the room with the synthetic ice floor. Luca was watching with focused intensity, not hearing Shane enter the room. Afterward, as Shane passed by the doorway, he heard Luca say, his voice uncharacteristically hesitant, "I just... you always played like you weren't afraid of anyone. I liked that."

There was a pause. Ilya's reply, when it came, was stripped of all ego, quiet and direct. "You don't need to play like me. You play like Haas. That is why we brought you here."

The silence that followed was thick with meaning. Shane didn't need to see Luca's face to know the impact those words had.

"Okay," Luca said, the word small and firm.

Another beat. "But you can keep poster," Ilya added, his tone perfectly serious.

A strangled, embarrassed laugh was Luca's only reply.

Shane's continued its slow recovery. He was stronger every day, his stamina building, but he didn't feel the obsessive pressure to push himself beyond his limits. After one particularly grueling practice, he stayed on the ice, sending puck after puck against the far boards. the repetitive thud was almost meditative, calming his racing thoughts.

He didn't hear Ilya join him. He just felt a presence, and then a puck slid to his feet. He looked up. Ilya was there, gliding backward, his stick tapping the ice. No words. An invitation.

Shane fed him a pass. It was a half-second late, arriving behind Ilya's stride. They reset. Another pass. Better timing, but the weight was off, forcing Ilya to adjust his reception. Again. Smoother. Again.

Then something clicked. It wasn't a conscious thought. Shane spotted a narrow passing lane opening along the boards, one that would disappear in another heartbeat. He shifted his weight, drawing Ilya's attention toward the space. Ilya read the movement immediately, recognizing the play Shane was setting up before Shane had even committed to it. He accelerated into the opening, and Shane sent the puck ahead of him, not to where he was, but to where he would be. Tape to tape. Ilya caught it in full stride and snapped a shot into the top corner of the practice net.

They both stopped, breathing hard in the empty arena. The echo of the shot died away, leaving a ringing silence.

For years, For years, they'd studied each other across opposing lines, learning to anticipate every movement, every hesitation, every opportunity. Now, for the first time, all that knowledge was working toward the same goal.

Ilya turned slowly, a grin spreading across his face. "Oh."

Shane felt an answering smile break through his exhaustion. "Yeah."

Ilya was already skating backward, resetting for another pass, his eyes bright with excitement.

"Again." Shane followed.

Ilya slowly turned, a grin spreading across his face that was pure, undiluted discovery. "Oh."

Shane felt an answering smile break through his fatigue, a surge of exhilaration cutting through the frustration. The potential of it, vast and thrilling, stretched out before them.

“Yeah.”

Ilya’s grin widened. He skated backward, already resetting the play, his eyes alight with the beginning of a thousand possibilities. “Again.”

Shane followed.

The arena was electric. Two hours before the puck drop, the sold out crowd was already roaring, a sea of red and black filling the stands. Outside, the streets had been packed for hours with fans wearing jerseys that bore the newly famous hyphenated name. Inside the Centaurs’ locker room, the anticipation was just as intense, a mixture of adrenaline, excitement and nerves. Only two years earlier, Ottawa had been near the bottom of the standings. Last season, they’d made a serious playoff run. Now, with a stronger roster and expectations higher than ever, everyone could feel the possibility of something extraordinary.

Shane sat at his stall, his equipment laid out in the exact order he intended to put it on. He was already dressed in his base layers, going through the familiar routine of taping his socks and checking his skate blades, but his mind kept drifting. His fingers traced the raised stitching on the red jersey hanging before him- HOLLANDER-ROZANOV. Number twenty four. It still felt surreal. Around him, his teammates joked and helped each other with their gear, their nervous excitement filling the room. Beside him, Ilya bobbed his head along with the Bad Bunny song playing, a calm smile on his face while he was lacing his skates.

Shane glanced over just as Ilya took off his wedding ring, kissed the band before threading it through the chain that held mother’s cross on, kissing that too. Shane smiled to himself. He’d never seen Ilya do that before. There was something unexpectedly tender about watching him bring those two pieces of his life together before their first game as teammates.

His phone vibrated on the shelf. He picked it up. A message from his mom in the group chat that they had with the Fischers. The photograph showed the family’s private box, the ice a gleaming sheet far below. In Yuna’s arms, Yurina was swamped in a miniature Centaurs jersey, HOLLANDER-ROZANOV printed in tiny letters across the back. She wore enormous

protective headphones, her face in the middle of a sweet, drooly smile. David stood beside them, beaming, already pointing his granddaughter out to someone off-camera. The message read: *Your biggest fan is ready. We love you. Go have fun.*

Shane stared at the image, his throat tightening. He thought of Ruth and Walter, watching from their living room in Pennsylvania, of the text from Walter telling them to enjoy their first game on the same team, and Ruth's reminder to eat. He was surrounded, utterly and completely, in a way he had never allowed himself to be. He slipped the phone away and reached for the thick chain around his neck, drawing out the wedding band that hung there, safe beneath his gear. Shane curled his fingers around the cool metal, holding the proof of it. Married. A father. Playing beside Ilya. Out in the open, *seen*. A year ago, this constellation of realities would have seemed not just impossible, but a terrifying paradox. Now, it was simply his life.

Across the room, a different kind of tension was humming. Eighteen-year-old Luca Haas looked like he was trying to remember how to breathe. He sat ramrod straight at his stall, his knuckles white where they gripped his knee, his gaze locked on his skates. Shane saw it, the pale sheen of panic on the kid's face, and began to rise. But Ilya was already moving.

He didn't loom. He simply sat on the bench next to Luca, his movements casual. "You look like you will throw up."

Luca swallowed, a hard, audible click. "I think I might."

Ilya considered this for a few seconds. "Okay. If you need to, bathroom is there." He pointed. "But try not to do it on my skates. Very expensive." A startled, choked laugh escaped Luca. The sound seemed to surprise him as much as Ilya's comment.

Ilya's expression softened, the stern captain's mask dissolving into something more personal. "You earned this, Haas. Nobody gave it to you. Not because you are Omega. Not for publicity. Not because me and Shane are incubating you like our little duckling. You are here because you are good enough. You know what I expect from you tonight?"

Luca shook his head, mute.

“You’re playing for a packed stadium on your first game in the NHL. You’re going out there and doing your best. ”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it. You make mistake, you fix it. You fall, you get up. You see good play, you make it. You do not have to prove entire world wrong in one game.” Ilya reached out and squeezed the back of Luca’s neck, a brief, firm, reassuring pressure that was almost paternal. “You belong here. Remember this. Or else I get mama Yuna on you.”

He stood and walked away, leaving Luca grinning, the rigid terror loosening into something more like manageable nerves. Shane watched, a warm ache settling in his chest. He remembered the Ilya who could silence a room with a glance, whose very presence was a threat. This man, who noticed a rookie’s panic and met it with steadying humor and absolute faith, was someone he had helped build, and who had built him up in return. The love he felt was so vast it was dizzying.

The final preparations coalesced around them. The coaches gave their last, terse reminders. The equipment managers darted for final checks. The thunderous playlist Dykstra had curated at Ilya’s insistence finally faded, dropping the room into a sudden, expectant quiet.

Then Ilya stood.

He didn’t shout. He didn’t need to. He moved to the center of the room, a figure of formidable calm in full gear, the captain’s ‘C’ stark over his heart. Shane had seen Ilya in every possible light- vicious in victory, shattered in defeat, tender in the dark, laughing with his daughter. But he had never seen this. He had never been on the inside of Ilya’s leadership like this.

Ilya’s gaze swept the room, meeting the eyes of grizzled veterans, of eager rookies, and finally, landing on Shane. He held it for a heartbeat before beginning, his voice cutting the silence with its familiar, grounding cadence.

“Alright! Everybody listen the fuck up!”

Ilya waited until the room went quiet, the music off. He looked around at the men sitting before him, then pointed toward the ceiling. “You hear that? Twenty thousand people out there. Twenty thousand people who believe we can do something special this year. They have been waiting all summer. Buying jerseys, making signs, talking about us like we already have our names engraved on fucking Cup.” A few players laughed. “Everybody has opinion about us. Too old. Too young. Too many big personalities.” He grinned. “That last one is probably true. I am very difficult man.” The room laughed louder. “But I tell you something. I don't give a fuck what they think.”

His grin disappeared.

“Because nobody outside this room knows what we have. They see names, statistics. They see who scored most goals, who won championships, who fucked up in playoffs. They make predictions like they know us.” Ilya thumped the crest over his heart hard.

“They don't know us. We know us.” He looked around the room. “Some of you have been here for years. You remember when nobody believed in Ottawa. When people looked at schedule, saw Centaurs, and thought, *Good. Easy two points.*” A few of the veterans nodded.

“I remember. I fucking hated it.” His voice hardened.

“Last year, we showed them something. We fought. We made playoffs. We made teams nervous. But we didn't finish the job.” He paused. “And I don't know about you, but I will be very fucking pissed if we have to watch somebody else lift our Cup.”

Sticks began tapping against the floor. Ilya pointed toward the younger players.

“And now we have new blood. Rookies. New teammates. People who came here because they want to win. Some of you are probably so nervous you will throw up before first period.”

His eyes flickered toward Luca. “Please use bathroom. We have very expensive carpet.”

Laughter broke through the tension, and even Luca grinned.

“But listen to me. I don't care if this is your first NHL game or your hundredth. I don't care if you are Alpha, Beta, Omega. I don't care what they said about you when you were sixteen. Too small. Too slow. Too different. Not good enough.”

He struck the crest again. “You are here. You earned this jersey. Nobody gets to take that away from you.”

The room quieted.

“And when we go out there, I don't want twenty men trying to be heroes. I want one fucking team.” He pointed toward the benches. “You miss a pass? We get puck back. You get knocked down? Somebody picks you up. You have a bad shift? Get your shit together for the next line to go out and makes them regret it. Nobody gets left behind. Nobody gets to fight alone.”

He glanced at Shane. “And if Shane makes mistake, which is very unlikely because apparently I married most annoying perfectionist in history...”

Shane flipped him off. The room howled.

“...then I fix it. And when I make mistake, which is also very unlikely because I am magnificent...”

Someone shouted, “BULLSHIT!”

Ilya laughed. “Then you fix it! This is how we win!”

He stepped farther into the circle, his voice rising.

“I have played against some of you. I have played with most of you. I have watched you bleed for this team. I know what you can do. And I am telling you right now, looking every single one of you in the fucking eye, we have everything we need to win the Stanley Cup in this room.” The sticks struck the floor harder, building the rhythm that seemed to match the crowds.

“But talent means nothing if we don't fight for each other. Big names mean nothing. Money means nothing. All those fucking articles about us mean nothing!” He pointed toward the tunnel.

“Out there, nobody gives us anything. We take every inch. Every loose puck. Every rebound. Every chance. We make them work for every fucking second they spend on our ice!”

Ilya's expression sharpened into the fierce, almost wicked grin Shane knew so well.

“And I want you to think about something. Somewhere up there is little kid wearing our jersey. Maybe he is six years old. Maybe he has missing tooth and very bad haircut.” Shane's head snapped up as laughter rippled through the room. “Maybe everybody tells him he is dreaming too big. That he will never get here. That people like him don't belong.” Ilya's voice became fierce. “I want that kid to watch us tonight and know they are fucking wrong.” The locker room erupted. “I want every kid watching to know that if you work, if you fight, if you refuse to let anybody tell you what you can become, there is a place for you here!” He waited for the shouting to subside. “And I want every team in this league to learn something about the Ottawa fucking Centaurs.” He took another step forward. “Last year, they learned to respect us.” His voice dropped. “This year, they're going to learn to fucking fear us.”

The sticks thundered against the floor. “No more almost! No more next year! No more watching somebody else celebrate!” He roared over the noise. “THIS IS OUR ICE! THIS IS OUR HOUSE! AND THAT FUCKING CUP IS COMING HOME TO OTTAWA!”

The room erupted. Players surged to their feet, shouting and slamming their sticks against the floor. Ilya raised his fist.

“NOW LET'S GO FUCKING GET IT!”

The answering roar was deafening. Shane jumped to his feet with the rest of them, laughing as his teammates crowded toward the tunnel. His heart was pounding, adrenaline rushing through him, and for the first time in a long time, he was vibrating with the energy and thrill of a full arena going to watch them play.

Through the chaos, Shane remained seated for a second longer, captivated.

Ilya caught his eye through the excitedly bouncing bodies and made his way over, his brows raised. “What?” he asked, his voice close to Shane’s ear.

Shane shook his head, focusing intently on his glove. “Nothing.”

Ilya studied his flushed face, the grin returning, wider and more knowing. “You like speech?”

“It was fine.”

“Fine?”

“Don’t start.”

Ilya leaned in, his breath warm against Shane’s skin. “You are blushing, husband.”

Shane shoved him firmly toward the tunnel, a laugh finally breaking through. “Let’s go play fucking hockey.”

Ilya’s laughter joined his, bright and free, before he turned, leading the surging tide of red and black toward the noise. The team formed a loose line, a river of anticipation. Shane fell into step beside him, their shoulders brushing, the chains around their necks settling with a comforting weight, their rings resting over their hearts. Ahead, Luca took a deep, visible breath and stepped into the tunnel. The roar swallowed him, then reached for them, a physical force.

Ilya turned his head, his eyes finding Shane's in the strobe-lit gloom of the passageway.
"Ready?"

Shane took one last, deep breath, the scent of ice, of adrenaline, of home filling his lungs. He looked at the name across Ilya's shoulders, then felt the identical one on his own back.
"Yeah."

Ilya's smile was all promise, all shared trouble. "Good. Let's go make trouble."

And together, for the first time in their long and winding history, Shane and Ilya Hollander-Rozanov skated onto the NHL ice, not as rivals, but as teammates, the thunder of a believing world crashing over them.

The roar that engulfed them as they skated onto the ice was deafening, vibrating through their chests as spotlight swept across the gleaming surface. The red of their jerseys flashed beneath the lights, the matching HOLLANDER-ROZANOV names clearly visible across their shoulders. For one extraordinary moment, Shane felt almost weightless, caught between the excitement of the crowd and the realization that he was finally here, playing alongside Ilya. The puck dropped, and everything else disappeared.

The Toronto Guardians were an elite team, a conference powerhouse that had beaten them twice last year out of three games. Like much of the hockey world, they expected Shane and Ilya to need time to adjust to playing together, to a new team in general.

They were wrong.

It was less like two players on the same line for the first time and more like a single consciousness operating in two bodies. From the first shift, the chemistry was telepathic.

Shane would cut toward the boards, drawing a defender, and Ilya would already be curling into the vacated spot, his stick coming down perfectly as Shane's no-look pass arrived tape-to-tape. They communicated in glances, in subtle shifts of weight, in taps on the ice which they shouldn't have heard over the noise of the crowd and the other skaters on the ice, in the unspoken language built from years of obsessively watching each other. They executed a give-and-go in the offensive zone that was so seamless, the opposing defensemen collided with each other in confusion. The play didn't result in a goal, but it sent a jolt through the arena and a clear, unsettling message to the bench across the ice.

Midway through the first, it happened. Ilya won a battle along the half-wall, shielded the puck with his body, and instead of firing a predictable shot, he slid a blind, backhand saucer pass through a forest of legs. It landed perfectly on the blade of Shane's stick as he broke toward the net. Shane didn't break stride. He pulled the puck to his forehand and snapped it with a sound like a rifle crack. The net bulged. The goal horn blared.

For a second, Shane just stared at the puck in the net, the reality of it, his first goal for Ottawa, assisted by Ilya, washing over him. Then he was being crushed from behind, Ilya's arms wrapping around him, his helmet knocking against Shane's as he shouted something lost in the din, his breath hot and joyful against Shane's ear. The bench emptied to mob them, the celebration a blur of red jerseys and grinning faces.

The second period was even better. Shane and Ilya seemed to know exactly what the other was thinking, moving together so naturally that the opposing players struggled to keep up. Whenever Toronto tried to attack, one of them was there to steal the puck or get in the way. And when they had possession, they were nearly impossible to stop.

Halfway through the period, Ilya stole the puck and raced toward Toronto's goal, Shane skating beside him. One of Toronto's defenders hurried to block Ilya, leaving Shane with a clear path. Ilya passed the puck to Troy, who passed it to Shane without even looking, and Shane caught it perfectly, sending it flying past the goalie and into the net.

His second goal of the night. The arena trembled. Shane threw his arms up in celebration as Ilya and the others crashed into him, laughing and shouting, Ilya caught his gaze and he just winked as they all separated.

Ilya got his own, later in the period, a wicked wrist shot from the circle after Shane drew both defenders toward him with a drive to the net. He celebrated with his customary theatrical

flair, skating past the opposing bench with a grin that was all teeth, before being swarmed by his teammates.

The game was physical, chirpy, the opponents growing increasingly frustrated. Early in the third, a hulking defenseman lined Shane up for a heavy, late hit along the boards. Shane saw it coming, braced, and absorbed most of it, but the impact was vicious and borderline. Before the whistle even finished blowing, Ilya had crossed the ice and delivered a punishing, clean check that separated the man from his senses and earned Ilya a two-minute minor for interference. As he skated to the penalty box, he met Shane's gaze across the ice. Shane shook his head, a mixture of exasperation and fondness. Ilya just grinned through the glass, unrepentant after confirming that his mate was ok.

It was in the final minutes that the night reached its crescendo. With the outcome no longer in doubt, the crowd was on its feet, chanting Shane's name. He carried the puck over the blue line, danced around a tired defender, and fired a shot that the goalie kicked out with his pad. The rebound bounced crazily. Ilya, crashing the net, somehow corralled it and, instead of shooting, tapped it gently back to Shane, who had circled into the slot. An empty net gaped before him. He didn't miss.

Hat trick. The sound was apocalyptic. A torrent of hats, beanies, trilbies, baseball caps, even a few misguided winter tuques, rained onto the ice in a fluttering, colorful storm. Shane stood there, stick raised, breathing hard, the noise washing over him in waves. The six-year-old boy in the photograph had just scored a hat trick for the team that had made him fall in love with this sport. Ilya reached him first, grabbing him in a hug that lifted his skates off the ice, shouting something that was half-Russian, half-nonsense, and entirely exultant into the cage of his helmet.

The final horn sounded on a 6-1 victory. Ilya had two goals, Shane had three, and Luka Haas, playing with a poised confidence that belied his nerves, had notched two beautiful assists, earning a proud, gloved tap on the head from both Shane and Ilya first before the rest of the team piled onto the kid. As the team gathered at center ice to salute the roaring crowd, Shane felt Ilya's shoulder pressed firmly against his own, a solid, triumphant line.

The locker room was chaos, a jubilant cacophony of thumping music, shouting, and the clatter of equipment. Shane, half-undressed and still buzzing, was toweling his hair when Yuna and David found their way in, beaming.

“Oh, sweetheart,” Yuna said, pulling him into a hug that smelled of her sweet perfume and pride. “You were magnificent.”

David clapped him on the back, his eyes suspiciously bright. “Hell of a way to introduce yourself.”

They explained their plan quickly: they would take Yurina home, handle her bedtime, and mind her for the night. Shane should go celebrate with his team. He hesitated, the automatic pull of paternal responsibility tightening in his chest. “I don’t know, Mom. She’s been away from all evening already for the first time...”

Yuna cupped his face, her expression soft but firm. “Shane. Look at me. You are allowed to have fun. You and Ilya are wonderful parents, but one night celebrating a milestone like this does not change that. It’s healthy.”

“Besides,” David added, a playful glint in his eye, “we’ve been looking for an excuse to steal her for a full night of spoiling. You’d be doing us a favor.”

Shane smiled reluctantly. He’d have to check with Ilya, of course, but judging by the way his husband was currently carrying Yurina around the locker room, proudly showing her off to anyone who would look, he suspected Ilya would need some convincing too. Still, watching their daughter surround by people who adored her, Shane couldn’t help thinking about how lucky they were. A year ago, he couldn’t have imagined any of this.

Shane’s protest died on his lips as his attention was snagged by the television mounted on the wall. It showed Ilya’s post-game press conference. His husband was shirtless, hair damp, wearing only the bottom half of his uniform and an effortless, magnetic grin as he bantered with reporters. He was charming, cocky, and utterly at ease, his laughter deep and genuine as he deflected a question about the penalty with a witty remark. Shane watched, a helpless smile spreading across his own face.

Yuna followed his gaze and gave him a knowing look. “What?” Shane mumbled, tearing his eyes away.

“Nothing, sweetheart,” she said, her tone lightly teasing. David, mercifully, was suddenly very interested in a piece of tape on the floor.

The team’s tradition, Shane learned, was to descend upon a particular local bar called Monks after a win. It was a familiar, unpretentious place with good food, loud music, and a staff that welcomed them. The players were adamant that both Hollander-Rozanovs attend.

“He listens to you,” Bood pleaded, clapping Shane on the shoulder.

“He’s literally obsessed with you,” another teammate added, not incorrectly. “He’ll go wherever if you tell him to.”

“We just want to see the captain in the wild!”

When Ilya returned, smelling of soap and clean skin, Shane casually mentioned the plan. Ilya looked at him, his blue eyes searching. “You want to go?”

Shane nodded, the last of his hesitation melting under the warmth of the victory and the prospect of uncomplicated joy. “Yeah. I think I do. Mom and Dad have Yurina for the night.”

Ilya’s answer was immediate. “Then we go.”

The cheer that went up from the surrounding players was nearly as loud as the one that had greeted Shane’s third goal.

Monks was packed with Centaurs players and support staff, the tables pushed together to accommodate their growing celebration. Music blared over the speakers, drinks were passed around, and plates of food disappeared almost as quickly as they arrived. Shane found himself laughing at jokes he would ordinarily have rolled his eyes at, his shoulder pressed comfortably against Ilya's as teammates crowded around to congratulate each other.

In Montreal, he'd rarely allowing himself to relax at team outings. Even when he attended, he was constantly aware of his scent, his behavior, and the possibility that someone might notice something he couldn't explain away. Tonight, none of that mattered. Everyone knew who he was, and nobody seemed particularly interested in making a big deal out of it. For once, Shane didn't feel the need to watch himself quite so carefully. He could just enjoy the evening.

Teammates kept arriving with fresh drinks to toast his hat trick. Shane, whose tolerance was practically nonexistent after months of pregnancy and his overall strict diet, accepted them with grateful smiles. He felt a warm looseness begin to seep into his limbs, softening the edges of the world. Next to him, Ilya sipped his first and only beer, his eyes tracking Shane with open affection. When Shane's glass was magically refilled for the fourth time, Ilya quietly finished his beer and switched to water. He didn't comment, didn't intervene. He just settled back and let his mate have fun, making sure a basket of food found its way in front of Shane a few times.

And Shane... unfolded. The rigorous self-discipline that usually sheathed him evaporated. He was laughingly touchy, throwing an arm around Luca's shoulders, hugging Bood after a particularly funny story. He became earnestly, disarmingly complimentary.

"Luca," he said, leaning toward the rookie with grave intensity. "You were so good. I'm so proud of you. You're such a good... baby duck."

Luca groaned, burying his face in his hands. "I'm eighteen."

"That's basically a baby," Shane insisted, nodding sagely before his expression crumpled into fondness. "Our baby duck."

Ilya, watching, choked on his water, his shoulders shaking with silent laughter.

The peak came later. Ilya, deep in a debate about defensive zone coverage with Holmberg, glanced up to find that Shane had somehow ascended onto a table, flanked by Bood and a gleefully complicit Luca. The three of them were belting out ‘Sweet Caroline’, with a passionate disregard for volume or if they were on key. Shane had one arm slung around each of their necks, swaying with total abandon, his face alight with unfiltered joy as the entire bar roared the “BA! BA! BA!” back at them.

Ilya stared, his breath catching. He was laughing so hard that he had tears running down his face as he saw that his sweet, mellow, boring mate was on a table, shit-faced and singing terribly, surrounded by people who loved him. The laugh that escaped Ilya was pure, unadulterated delight. He fumbled for his phone, capturing a few precious seconds of the glorious, ridiculous scene and sending it off in the family group chat.

Shane spotted him, pointing dramatically. “ILYA!” he bellowed, drawing the room’s attention. “THAT’S MY HUSBAND!”

The ensuing cheer was deafening. Ilya raised his water glass in a wry toast. “Yes, sweetheart. I know.”

When Harris arrived, he took in the scene, the singing, the laughing, the legendary unsocial Shane Hollander-Rozanov currently attempting to teach Luca a complicated dance move, and lit up like a child on Christmas. With permissions gleefully granted, he started a casual, cheerful livestream for the team’s fans, panning across the celebration. When Shane weaved over, grinning broadly, Harris turned the camera on him. Shane immediately attached himself to Ilya like a koala.

“Hi, baby,” he mumbled, nuzzling into Ilya’s neck.

“Hello, malysh,” Ilya said, his voice softening as he steadied his husband.

“*Baby?*” Shane had called him *baby*, right therein front of everyone. It was such a small thign, but Ilya couldn’t remember a time when Shane had used the endearment. He smiled helplessly, well that sent a ripple of pleasure up and down Ilya’s spine.

Then Shane kissed him, slow and thoroughly unconcerned with their audience, earning a chorus of whistles and cheers from their teammates. Ilya laughed against his lips, holding him close. When Shane finally broke away, his eyes were hazy with love and alcohol. “You know what I’m gonna do to you when we get home?” he began, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial, but unfortunately not quiet, whisper. “I’m gonna-”

Ilya clapped a hand over his mouth, his own laughter bursting out. “Nope- not the place, malysh. This is public, sweetheart.”

Harris, wheezing with laughter, swung the camera away. “Oh my God. I’m moving the camera! We’re going to Troy now, folks!”

As the livestream focused on Troy’s attempts to remember the words to ‘Don’t Stop Believin’’, Ilya kept his arm around Shane, who was now peacefully leaning against him, humming contentedly. Ilya looked out at the room, at his teammates, his friends, this family they were building within the team, and felt happy, extremely proud and like he was building something amazing with his mate right next to him moving forward.

Shane tilted his head back to look up at him, his smile soft and sated. “Good night, baby?” Ilya murmured, brushing a strand of hair from his forehead.

Shane shook his head, his eyes closing as he settled more heavily against Ilya’s side. “Best night.”

Ilya pressed a kiss to his temple, breathing in the scent of him, sweat, beer, happiness, and home. He looked around once more at the beautiful, chaotic evidence of their victory, on and off the ice. “Yes,” he agreed, his voice barely a whisper in the din. “I think so too.”

The celebration at Monk's showed no signs of slowing. Shane, however, was beginning to have a rather complicated relationship with gravity. After the third near-collapse- this time involving an enthusiastic attempt to hug Luca that ended with his feet tangling together, Ilya decided they'd reached the end of the evening. He caught Shane around the waist just before his husband could introduce himself to the floor.

Shane laughed, wrapping himself around Ilya's torso, planting a sloppy kiss on his jaw. "Whoops."

"Okay, malysh," Ilya said, brushing a stray lock of hair from Shane's forehead. "Time to go home."

"Why?" Shane straightened with exaggerated false dignity, took one determined step, and immediately tipped sideways into Ilya's chest.

"Yes. Very convincing." Ilya raised an eyebrow. "Especially when you are looking at me crosseyed."

Ilya raised an eyebrow.

"Okay," Shane conceded, his breath tickling Ilya's neck. "Maybe a little help. Carry me, husband!" He became dead weight and laughed again.

Extricating them from the bar became rather difficult. Shane needed to bid farewell to every single person, which included hugging Bood twice, telling Luca he was destined for superstardom, thanking the bartender profusely for the "excellent fries," and waving with great enthusiasm at a group of fans by the door who cheered his name. The teammates watched, their faces lit with pure delight.

"I'll send you the photos," Luca promised Ilya, grinning. Ilya had cut off his drinks after two but he seemed fine. "The table singing ones are... special."

“Please. Video too if you have,” Ilya said laughing, half carrying Shane toward the exit.
“Send everything.”

Once he had Shane securely buckled into the passenger seat, Ilya let out a long, fond breath. Shane immediately reached for his left hand, capturing it between both of his own. He studied Ilya’s wedding ring intensely.

“You’re married,” Shane announced, his tone one of grave discovery.

“Very observant,” Ilya said, starting the car.

“To me.”

Ilya glanced over, a smirk playing on his lips. “Of course, yes.”

Shane gasped, genuinely scandalized. “Of course? I could have said no!”

Ilya laughed, leaning across to press a quick kiss to his forehead. “I am joking. I am very happily married and thankful that you said yes..”

Satisfied, Shane settled back, his affection blooming like a sunflower turning toward the light. “You’re so handsome,” he murmured, his fingers tracing the lines of Ilya’s knuckles.
“And I love you so much.”

The drive home was one long, rambling conversation, although Shane was doing almost all the talking. He jumped from topic to topic with dizzying speed- Luca’ NHL debut, the deafening sound of the arena, the pride in David’s eyes. The perfect weight of his stick when he took his third shot. Ilya listened with a smile. He had never seen Shane like this, words and feelings flowing without a filter. It was a beautiful, hilarious and gave Ilya a view of Shane’s current feelings.

As they neared their neighborhood, Shane's affection grew more tactile, more suggestive. He leaned over to nuzzle Ilya's shoulder, his fingers walking up the tense muscle of his arm. "You're gorgeous," he sighed, his breath warm against Ilya's neck. Then his hand drifted lower, aiming for Ilya's thigh with clear intent.

Ilya caught his wrist gently but firmly. "Thank you, sweetheart. But please sit properly. Trying to drive home."

"Why not?" Shane pouted, his eyes wide and imploring.

"Because I am driving, for one thing."

"But you're so pretty."

"Thank you. But I am handsome. You're the pretty one. And your handsome husband must still obey traffic laws to get you home safe." Shane giggled, a delightful, tipsy sound, but tried again. Ilya intercepted his hand once more, lacing their fingers together and resting their joined hands on his own leg, a clear boundary. A familiar heat stirred low in Ilya's stomach, a longing he'd disciplined for months. They hadn't been together, truly together, since before Shane left. Between recovery, trauma, exhaustion, and the all-consuming focus on getting him ready for the hockey season and family, their intimacy had been relegated to kisses and cuddles, a slow rebuilding of trust. He missed the weight of Shane beneath him, the shared gasps, the sweaty, desperate closeness. And Shane, flushed and pliant and whispering pretty things, was a potent temptation.

But the man who had once taken what he wanted now measured his desires against a greater principle. Shane was radiantly, profoundly drunk. Ilya wanted him fully present, eager, and able to remember every touch, every sigh. Loving him meant respecting him, and as hard as it was, especially when his own body was urging him to do otherwise, he'd never again take advantage.

"Malysh, listen to me," Ilya said, his voice gentle but firm. "You are very drunk."

“So?”

“So tonight we go home, I put you in bed, and you sleep. When you are sober, you can tell me everything you want. I will be very enthusiastic listener.”

Shane considered this, his brow furrowing in adorable concentration. Then a brilliant, beatific smile spread across his face. “You’re such a good husband.”

“Yes. I am magnificent. We established this before game.”

“Love you.”

“Love you too. Now please stop trying to molest your driver.”

Shane threw his head back and laughed, the sound filling the car, and Ilya knew, without a doubt, that he’d made the right choice.

Upon arriving home, Shane insisted on walking. He managed three proud, if somewhat serpentine, steps up the front path before his trajectory veered toward the hydrangeas. Ilya solved the problem efficiently, scooping him into his arms.

Shane squealed, wrapping his arms around Ilya’s neck. “You’re carrying me!”

“Very good, sweetheart. You are learning many things tonight.” Shane commenced covering his face in a series of enthusiastic kisses as Ilya navigated the doorway and stairs. He was a giggling, affectionate, determinedly seductive bundle.

“Your shoulders are so big,” Shane marveled, kneading the muscle. “And you smell amazing. Best husband. Most handsome husband in whole NHL.”

“Only NHL?” Ilya teased, nudging their bedroom door open with his hip.

“Universe.”

At one point, Shane nestled closer. “Gonna buy you a present.”

“What present?”

“Can’t tell you.”

“Why?”

“Surprise.” Shane’s eyes sparkled with drunken glee. “It’s gonna be sexy.”

“Of course it is,” Ilya said, depositing him carefully onto the rumpled duvet. He was thoroughly, utterly charmed.

After ensuring Shane wouldn’t topple over, Ilya pulled out his phone. A quick text to Yuna-

Ilya- Made it home. He had best night. Getting him to bed now. Thank you.*

The reply was almost immediate.

Mama Yuna- She’s sleeping like an angel. Don’t you dare think about picking her up early. Sleep in. We have this.

Papa- Tell him congrats again. Make him drink water.

A warm feeling spread through Ilya's chest.

Ilya- Will do. Thank you, Ma. Goodnight.

Ilya smiled at the messages. He loved how naturally they included him, how easily they'd become his family. Even a simple reminder from David to make Shane drink water made him feel cared for.

Unfortunately, he now face the most challenging part of his evening- the 'Drunk Shane Bedtime Routine'. Getting Shane out of his shirt proved unexpectedly difficult. Ilya managed to free one arm, but the other became tangled in the fabric when Shane decided to 'help'. Within seconds, the shirt was twisted around his head, and Shane was wriggling so much that he only made things worse.

"Stop for a second, Kotik," Ilya pleaded, trying to work the shirt loose.

"Hat trick!" Shane declared, as if this explained everything.

"Yes. you were amazing. Best player in whole world. Now please let me get your shirt off."

"Ohhhh," he said, suddenly interested. "You gonna take my clothes off?" He immediately raised his arms for Ilya.

Ilya closed his eyes for a second. "Bozhe moi. Is going to be very long night."

In the bathroom, brushing teeth had a wide grin on Ilya's face. He needed to get Shane to let go like this more often. Shane kept cracking up at their reflection, minty foam dripping down his chin. When Ilya tried to guide his hand, Shane turned and aimed his own toothbrush at Ilya's mouth, then tried to kiss him instead. Ilya dodged, laughing. "Woah woah, come one sweetheart, lets finish up and get you to bed."

“Why off to bed? Are you finally going to fuck me? I want a snickers bar.” He started to try to run out of the room but Ilya caught him and tossed him over his shoulder and went back to the counter.

Skincare was next. Shane insisted on his routine but was too unfocused to remember the order. Ilya, who had memorized everything Shane liked to do, squinted at the bottles. “This one... then the blue one?”

“Serum first,” Shane slurred, then grabbed the night cream. “No, wait.”

Getting him into pajamas was a battle of wills. Every time Ilya tried to guide Shane’s arms into the sleeves of his soft sleep shirt, Shane’s hands would wander to the hem of Ilya’s own shirt, attempting to pull it up. “Take it off.”

“Not good idea.”

“But I like you naked.”

“Excellent information. I will remember when you can stand without assistance.” Shane also declared a passionate objection to pants. Ilya was unmoved. “Pants are happening.”

“You’re so bossy.”

“Da, but I think you might like it.”

Through it all, Shane kept laughing, kept kissing whatever part of Ilya was nearest, his cheek, his collarbone, his shoulder, and kept murmuring “love you” like a mantra. Ilya’s own laughter was a constant undercurrent. He felt no frustration, only a deep, cherishing amusement.

Finally, victory. Shane was washed, clothed, and tucked under the covers. Ilya made him drink some water and placed a second water bottle on the nightstand and a wastebasket within reach, plugged in his phone.

He went to pull away to walk around to his side of the bed but stopped when Shane clung to his waist.

Ilya shook his head, a helpless, overwhelming fondness again swelling in his chest. He gently eased him off and crossed the room and gathered Shane into his arms again as he climbed into bed. Shane sighed contentedly, nuzzling into his neck.

Once they were both settled, Shane curled immediately into Ilya's side, his earlier giggly-ness softening into drowsy contentment. Then, quietly, a note of uncertainty entered his voice. "Are you mad?"

Ilya stroked his hair. "Why would I be mad?"

"Cause I got really drunk."

"You did."

"And I kissed you on camera."

"Also true." Ilya waited.

Shane hesitated, his fingers fiddled with Ilya's chain. "Was that bad?"

Ilya tilted Shane's chin up, meeting his sleepy gaze. "No sweetheart. You did nothing wrong. You were happy, you were celebrating with friends, and you kissed your very handsome husband. Is terrible crime, I know." He smiled and gave him a quick peck on the lips. "I loved seeing you like that." He brushed a thumb over Shane's freckles.

The tension melted from Shane's shoulders. He smiled and settled closer against Ilya's chest. "I really was happy." He murmured.

Ilya lay awake, savoring the weight and warmth of his husband. He had imagined this night, their first decisive victory as teammates, countless times over the past month. He'd pictured fierce, triumphant sex, a reclaiming of that physical language they'd been forced to neglect.

Instead, he'd gotten something infinitely more precious- Shane having *fun*, singing off-key on a table, hugging people, laughing until he cried, trusting Ilya enough to let go completely. Their daughter was safe and loved with her grandparents. They had won the season opener, together. Shane had scored a hat trick for the team he'd adored as a child. And for what seemed like the first time in his adult life, he had allowed himself to let go, with no fear of the consequences.

Ilya looked down at the sleeping face pressed against his chest, the familiar features softened in sleep. Shane made a soft, sleepy noise and tightened his arm around Ilya's waist.

"Love you, malysh." Ilya kissed his hair and closed his eyes.

Shane woke with a pounding headache, a mount that felt like sandpaper, and the distinct impression that he'd made several terrible decisions the night before. He groaned and pried one eye open.

Beside him, Ilya was propped against the headboard, looking disgustingly alert and well-rested, the faintest smile playing on his lips as he scrolled through his phone. The scent of fresh coffee and toast drifted through the bedroom.

"Kill me." Shane croaked.

“No,” Ilya replied cheerfully. “Very inconvenient. We just got married, and you’re too pretty to die.”

Shane close his eye again. “I hate you.”

“Of course, malysh.” Ilya laughed and pressed a cool glass of water into his hand. “Drink. Slowly.”

Shane struggled upright and took a grateful sip. On the nightstand, he saw a plate with dry toast and a banana. “You’re a saint,” Shane mumbled.

“I know. And very handsome, lets not forget that one.”

A cold dread trickled through the hangover haze. “What’s on the phone?”

“Many things.” Ilya’s tone was pure, unadulterated delight. He turned the screen. It showed a shaky, loud video. There, atop a table at Monk’s, flanked by a roaring Bood and a grinning Luca, was Shane Hollander-Rozanov, belting out the chorus of Sweet Caroline with passionate abandon. His hair was a mess, his jersey was untucked, and his smile was blindingly, stupidly wide.

Shane stared, then slowly let his forehead thud back onto his pillow. “Oh my God.”

“You were very popular,” Ilya informed him, scrolling to another clip. This one was of Shane throwing an arm around a blushing Luca and declaring, loudly, “My baby duck! Look at him! So good!”

“I didn’t.”

“You did. Then you tried to explain to Holmberg why he should also be a duck. It made no sense.”

Shane pulled the pillow over his head. The muffled sound of his own voice, slurring “ILYA! THAT’S MY HUSBAND!” emanated from the phone. He remembered that part. Vividly. He also remembered the solid warmth of Ilya’s body as he’d leaned against him, and the dizzying, golden freedom of letting go.

“Please stop talking,” came his plea from beneath the pillow.

“You told me I have best shoulders in universe,” Ilya continued, merciless and amused.

A pause. Shane lowered the pillow just enough to reveal one eye. “I stand by that.”

Ilya’s laughter was a warm, rich sound. He set the phone aside, leaned down, and kissed Shane’s temple, his lips gentle against the pounding headache. “You were happy. It was good to see.”

The teasing quieted, leaving a comfortable silence filled only with Shane’s slow sips of water. As the fog of sleep and alcohol receded, other memories surfaced in fragments- the dark interior of the car, the streetlights washing over Ilya’s profile, his own hand wandering, the firm but gentle tug on his wrist.

A different kind of heat, one of embarrassment, joined the hangover’s discomfort. He put the glass down. “Last night... in the car. Did I... make you uncomfortable?”

Ilya’s expression softened. He shook his head. “No. You were... determined. But no uncomfortable.” He picked up Shane’s hand, lacing their fingers together. “I was not going to let anything happen while you were drunk, sweetheart. That is not how I want us.”

Shane nodded, his mind was a bit slow, but if he didn’t move at all, he could process the information. This careful protection, this respect for his boundaries even when Shane himself

was blurring them, was proof of how much things had changed between them. “I know,” Shane said softly. “Thank you.”

He took a breath, the next admission feeling more significant. “I wasn’t making it up, you know.”

Ilya looked at him, his blue eyes patient and open. “Making what up?”

“Wanting you.”

The words hung in the sunlit room, simple and direct. Ilya’s thumb stopped its stroking motion on Shane’s knuckles.

“I’ve been thinking about it. About us. Like that, for a while.” Shane admitted. “It’s been months of us working on ourselves. Healing and reestablishing our relationship, Yurina. And I needed that time. I needed to just be without... pressure.” He glanced up, meeting Ilya’s gaze. “But lately, I notice you again. The way you look after practice, all sweaty and focused. The way you smile at me when you’re holding her. The way you reach for me after.” His voice dropped to a whisper. “I miss you.”

“I am right here, sweetheart,” Ilya said, his own voice rough.

“You know what I mean.”

Ilya did. He brought Shane’s hand to his lips, pressing a kiss to his palm. “Of course I miss it,” he admitted. “I am very handsome man with very beautiful husband. Is difficult situation.”

A weak, grateful laugh escaped Shane. Leave it to Ilya to undercut the tension with his ego.

But then Ilya's expression grew more serious, the humor fading into something more vulnerable. "But I don't want you thinking you have to do anything because I am waiting. We have time, malysh. All the time you need." It was the same patient reassurance he'd offered in the cottage, in the dark, when fear was a shared knot between them.

Shane gently squeezed his hand, interrupting the gentle assurance. "I know. That's why I'm telling you."

The distinction was important. He wasn't asking permission or reacting to perceived pressure. He was stating a desire, one that he had been thinking for a while.

Ilya absorbed this, his eyes searching Shane's face. He saw the lingering nervousness there, the uncertainty that had nothing to do with hangovers and everything to do with a body that had changed, a sense of self that was still reforming. "We can go slow," Ilya said, his voice a low promise. "We start with kissing. Maybe touching? We see how you feel. No expectations."

"You make it sound like you don't want to," Shane whispered, the now familiar self doubt coming forward.

Ilya bent his head and kissed him tenderly, moving his husband's hand over his crotch. "That is not the problem, sweetheart. Not at all. But I'm not rushing you. Maybe we have your parents watch the princess for a night again? We can go on a nice date?" Ilya's lips trailed down Shane's neck, smiling when he felt the shivers.

Shane grabbed Ilya's head to keep him right where he was when he felt Ilya pulling away. Shane shifted closer. The hangover was a dull backdrop, but the want was a clear, present note. He leaned up and kissed Ilya, not a quick peck, but a slow, deliberate meeting of lips, trying to convey that he was good with what they were doing. Ilya returned it, his hand coming up to cradle Shane's jaw, his touch infinitely tender, letting Shane lead.

When they parted, Shane was smiling, a real, easy smile. "I think we can start with that."

“Good,” Ilya murmured, and leaned in to kiss him again. This time, Ilya smiled against his mouth.

But the real world, in the form of a punishing throb behind his left eye, reasserted itself. Shane broke the kiss with a soft groan, dropping his forehead against Ilya’s shoulder. “Okay. Maybe not today.”

Ilya chuckled, his arms wrapping around him. “Good. Because you need a proper shower and to do what is called pump and dump for the day I think.”

“I hate you.”

“No, you don’t. You announced to entire bar that you love me.”

Shane laughed despite the pain, the sound vibrating through both of them. They settled back against the pillows, Shane curled into Ilya’s side, his head a less-pounding weight on his husband’s chest.

“I really do want you, you know,” Shane said quietly, into the warm skin beneath his cheek.

Ilya’s hand came up to stroke his hair, the motion slow and soothing. “I know, sweetheart.”

“Just thought you should hear it when I’m sober.”

Ilya pressed a kiss to his forehead, his lips lingering. “Much better,” he whispered. “Now I can remind you later.”

Shane groaned, but it was filled with affection.

“Many times,” Ilya promised, his voice a warm rumble of amusement and love.

The season was going better than anyone had expected. Ottawa had won the last three games, and the team was settling into a rhythm that made even their toughest opponents nervous. But tonight was different. Tonight the Centaurs were facing Montreal, and for the first time in his professional career, Shane would be playing against the team he'd spent years representing.

The locker room was unusually quiet. Instead of their usual music, ESPN played on the TV, the commentators discussing the upcoming game and the rivalry everyone had been waiting for.

“The Centaurs come into tonight's matchup with a 7-2-1 record, while the struggling Voyageurs sit at 3-6-1. Montreal has had difficulty finding its offensive rhythm since Shane Hollander-Rozanov's departure, and tonight they'll have to face the very player they once depended on..”

This wasn't just another game; it was Shane's reckoning with his former team. Shane himself was the picture of focused routine- methodically taping his stick, checking blade edges, adjusting his gear, but Ilya was watching from his own stall, saw the subtle signs. The way Shane checked his phone twice, then put it away without looking. The extra breath he took before tying his skates. He was nervous, and trying very hard not to be. The way he fiddled with the marker for a few minutes before scrawling the usual names on the tape. One name on each side like always. Yuna, David, Ilya, Yurina. He watched as he relaxed a bit after that was done, going on the floor to stretch a bit.

Before the team headed out, Ilya stood. The room quieted. “Alright,” he began, his voice cutting through the TV sound before someone turned it off. “We all know what tonight is. Montreal lost best player they had, and now they get to watch him play for us. Some of them will be very unhappy about this.”

Bood snorted from nearby. “You mean more unhappy than usual?”

“Much more,” Ilya confirmed, his gaze sweeping the room. “So watch for late hits. Watch the boards. Do not let them get free shots. And if they start stupid shit, do not give them what they want. We play our game. We do not take wasteful penalties because they are having temper tantrum.”

Ilya turned to Shane, his expression suddenly serious. “They’ll try to take Shane out. And for every dirty hit he takes, you each owe me \$1000 dollars.”

“Not allowed Rozy!” Wiebe called out from his spot next to his office.

“Fine, then one hour of bag skates for each hit then.”

Several players groaned. The tension easing a fraction. Shane shook his head. “I practiced against these guys for a decade. I know their habits. I can handle myself.”

“I know you can, Solnyshko.” Ilya’s expression softened briefly before he looked back at the team. “But we look after each other here. All of us. No stupid penalties, no fighting unless absolutely necessary. We play our game, and we make them regret coming to Ottawa.”

That earned an enthusiastic round of cheers and the tension in the room began to ease.

When the room cleared for final preparations, Ilya moved to Shane’s stall, kneeling to check his own skates as a pretext. “You good?” he asked, his voice low.

Shane nodded, finishing with his wrist guards. “It’ll be strange, seeing that jersey across from me. But yeah. I’m good. Excited, even.”

Ilya leaned in, capturing his lips in a brief, hard kiss before the helmets went on and shielded them from view. “Ready to make old team regret everything?”

Shane’s eyes gleamed. “Absolutely.”

The fans roaring their approval as Shane skated out for warmups in the red and black. The buzz wasn’t just about a rivalry; it was about narrative, about poetic justice, and the crowd was ready for the show. They saw plenty of Shane’s old jerseys in the stands and that warmed his heart a bit.

During the skate, Shane spotted familiar faces. Hayden glided over first, his demeanor relaxed. “You looked better in our jersey, Hollander.”

“It’s Hollander-Rozanov, Hayd. Don’t make me sic Ilya on you.” Shane fired back, the old camaraderie instantly familiar.

JJ joined them, bumping gloves. “How’s the little one?”

“Growing like a weed. Demanding. Perfect.” Shane’s smile was genuine. “Come over for dinner before you go back,

But not all glances were friendly. Across the ice, a cluster of former teammates watched him with cold, flat expressions. One, a grinding forward who’d always resented Shane’s ice time, didn’t bother to lower his voice. “Guess some priorities changed, huh? Omega’s will only chasing a knot, all the way to a new city, never mind loyalty. Something should be done about it.”

Shane heard it. He saw Ilya moving closer and went to stop him, the picture of unruffled calm. The deliberate indifference was, he knew, more infuriating than any retort. Once he reached Ilya, he motioned Troy over and they calmed him down.

The symbolic weight of the opening faceoff wasn't lost on anyone. There was Shane Hollander-Rozanov, centering the top line for Ottawa. And across from him, wearing the 'C' for Montreal, was Hayden Pike, his best friend, the crowd volume swelled.

They settled into position, knees bent, sticks poised. "You know I'm not going easy on you," Hayden murmured, a smirk playing on his lips.

"Wouldn't want you to," Shane replied.

"Try not to cry when we win."

"Try winning a game first." Shane said with a smile and wink.

Hayden's laugh was cut short as the official's hand moved. The puck dropped. Shane won it cleanly, a swift tap back to his defenseman, and the game was alive.

From the moment the game began, Shane could tell Montreal had come prepared for him. They knew his favorite moves, the angles he preferred when shooting, and the little tricks he used to get past defenders. After playing alongside him for so many years, he could practically predict what he was going to do.

What they hadn't prepared for was Ilya. Whenever Montreal crowded around Shane, Ilya was there, slipping into an open space and waiting for the puck. Shane barely needed to look before sending it his way. They moved together so naturally that Montreal's players struggled to keep up, constantly finding themselves a step behind.

It was almost funny. Montreal knew Shane Hollander better than practically anyone in the league, but they had absolutely no idea what to do with Shane Hollander-Rozanov playing beside his husband.

And Shane was enjoying every second of it.

The Voyageur's frustration became obvious as the game went on. By the halfway point, the Centaurs were winning 3-0, and the Voyageurs were getting desperate. One player slammed

Shane into the boards long after he'd passed the puck. Another shoved him after the referee had stopped play.

Shane refused to give them the satisfaction of reacting. He pulled himself free, ignored the insults and skated away. He yelled at Ilya, Luca and Bood to not retaliate.

If anything, Montreal's behavior was making the game easier. They were so focused on hurting him that they kept forgetting to actually play hockey, leaving Shane and his teammates plenty of chances to score.

Ilya, naturally, couldn't resist making things worse. When one Montreal player tried to intimidate Shane, Ilya skated past him with a cocky smile. "Careful," he called out. "You are embarrassing yourself."

The player snarled something Shane couldn't make out.

"You're making it worse," Shane complained when they met at the bench.

"Yes, of course." Ilya agreed, reaching for his water bottle. "But is funny."

Ottawa's players adjusted seamlessly. The defensemen closed ranks, providing safer outlets. The forwards backed each other, ensuring Shane was never isolated. Ilya, from his wing, kept a running assessment. When a Montreal player tried to crowd Shane after a stoppage, Ilya glided past. "Careful," he said, his tone almost cheerful. "You are embarrassing yourself."

The player snarled something unintelligible.

Ilya just laughed and skated away. Shane caught up to him on the bench. "You're making it worse."

"Yes," Ilya agreed, taking a water bottle. "But is funny."

Not everyone on Voyageurs team approved of what was happening. Hayden and JJ continued playing hard but fairly, refusing to participate in the increasingly aggressive behavior of some of their teammates. A few others followed their example.

After one particularly nasty hit against Shane, Hayden confronted the perpetrator in the corner, his voice carrying enough for the nearby benches to hear. “Knock that shit off!”

Later, during a freeze in play, JJ sidled up to Shane. “You good?”

“Yeah,” Shane said, rolling his shoulder. “They’re getting predictable.”

“They’re getting stupid,” JJ corrected, and skated away.

By the third period, Ottawa’s superior cohesion and firepower had built a commanding 5-2 lead. Shane had a goal and two assists. Ilya had a goal and an assist of his own. Luca, playing with growing confidence, had notched a beautiful primary assist that made both his mentors beam with pride. The Montreal bench was seething, slumped shoulders, glares, the occasional slammed stick. The game was slipping away, and with it, their last shred of dignity.

Then, with just over four minutes left in the game, it happened.

Ilya had the puck near the boards, trying to get past a Montreal player who was determined to stop him. The man caught Ilya's stick with his own, forcing him to lose control of the puck. The referee blew his whistle, stopping the game and calling a penalty.

It should have ended there. Instead, the same Montreal player Hayden had confronted earlier came charging toward Ilya. Before Ilya could turn around, the man slammed his shoulder into his upper back, driving him face-first into the glass. The sound of the impact made Shane's stomach drop. Ilya crumpled, sliding down the boards until he lay motionless on the ice.

The arena erupted in outrage. Referees blew their whistles, players shouted, and several of Ottawa's men immediately rushed toward the scene. Shane barely heard any of it. He'd been less than fifteen feet away. He'd seen the man coming, seen what he was about to do, and hadn't been close enough to stop him. For one horrible moment, Ilya didn't move. Shane couldn't breathe.

Then Ilya planted a gloved hand against the ice and slowly pushed himself onto one knee. He shook his head, looking dazed, while the medical staff hurried toward him. Ilya waved them away, although he still hadn't managed to stand.

Relief hit Shane so hard his knees almost buckled. And then came the anger. He turned toward the man responsible. *Gagnon*. The bastard was arguing with Hayden and one of the referees, waving his arms around as though he were the one who'd been wronged.

Shane stared at him, his heart pounding.

He'd hurt Ilya.

And Shane was going to make him regret it.

Shane didn't think. He didn't hesitate. He just moved, skating straight towards Gagnon with a fury that drowned out everything else. He slammed into the larger man, knocking him off balance and sending them both crashing onto the ice. Gagnon scrambled to his knees, looking stunned while another Montreal player rushed forward and shoved Shane away

"The fuck, Hollander?"

Shane barely heard him. He was already pulling off his gloves, letting them fall to the ice as he turned back toward Gagnon.

For one stunned moment, the arena seemed to go silent. Shane Hollander didn't fight. He argued with referees, occasionally shoved an opponent, and delivered a clean check when he

needed to, but he never had been the sort of player to drop his gloves. For years, commentators had praised his composure, his ability to walk away from insults and cheap shot and let his performance speak for itself.

Not this time, not when someone had hurt Ilya.

Gagnon had barely manage to stand when Shane grabbed the front of his jersey and punched him hard across the jaw. The larger man stumbled backward before swinging in return, catching Shane along the side of his face.

Shane hardly felt it. All he could see was Ilya crashing into the boards. All he could remember was the terrible moment when his husband hadn't moved.

He swung again.

Within seconds after, players from both teams were rushing toward them. Hayden, Luca and Wyatt struggled to pull Shane away, but he kept trying to get back to Gagnon, shouting furiously over the noise of the other fights that had broken out.

In the center of the chaos, sitting on the empty bench while the medics tried to remove his gear and check his injury, Ilya had gotten to his feet, his shoulder and ribs screaming in protest. The world was a blur of noise and motion. He looked toward the epicenter of the fight, expecting to see Bood or Troy trading blows with Montreal.

Then Ilya saw Shane. For a long, disbelieving second, he simply stared. *His Shane*. His sweet, particular mate, who alphabetized the spice rack, who politely asked referees about calls. He folded his clothes before climbing into bed naked so Ilya could unravel him in the most delicious ways. Who had spent years lecturing him about impulse control and unnecessary penalties was currently trying to beat the living shit out of someone.

Ilya blinked. An entirely inappropriate surge of pride and *hunger* flared in his chest, instantly followed by a wave of alarm. His husband was going to get hurt. Or suspended. Possibly both.

Ilya tried to shove his way through the tangled bodies, using his size to separate teammates. He pulled Troy off some random Voyageur and told him to go help him get to Shane. “SHANE! MALYSH! ENOUGH!” he roared, grabbing Shane around the chest and hauling him backward as best he could with Luca on the other side.

Shane struggled against the grip, still trying to lunge forward. “HE FUCKING HIT YOU!”

“YES, SWEETHEART! I NOTICED!” Ilya shouted back, wrestling him away.

“THAT FUCKING ASSHOLE!”

“DA! NOW PLEASE STOP!”

The direct order said in that tone made Shane immediately stop, he felt something trickle down his lip and swiped at it with the back of his hand pulling back and seeing some blood. He should have felt embarrassed at being ordered like this in front of everyone but he didn't care. Ilya was holding himself stiffly with an arm curled under his right side so he moved to support him and with Troy's help, they got him back to the bench and with the medics. Ilya tried to get Shane tended to first but the team doctor took Ilya out of the game and they went to the medical room.

Ilya sat on the examination table while the team doctor carefully assessed his injuries. His ribs ached, his shoulder throbbed, and he was thoroughly irritated by the questions he kept being asked about dizziness, nausea, and whether he remembered the hit. The medical staff had made it clear that he wasn't returning to the ice that night, no matter how loudly he protested.

Shane sat beside him, holding an ice pack against his swollen lip. His knuckles were scraped and beginning to bruise, but he'd been checked over and cleared of anything more serious.

When the doctor stepped away to review Ilya's X-rays, Ilya reached for Shane's face, gently turning it toward the light. His thumb brushed a dried smear of blood from Shane's cheek.

“He hit you.”

“I’m fine,” Shane insisted. “That bastard went after you when the play was already stopped.”

“Yes, I was there,” Ilya replied dryly.

“He could’ve seriously hurt you.”

The anger in Shane’s voice faltered, leaving something far more vulnerable behind. Ilya recognized it immediately. He remembered the fear he’d felt when Shane disappeared, the helplessness of not knowing whether the person he loved was safe. Shane had watched him fall and, for a few terrible seconds, believed something awful might have happened.

Ilya’s expression softened. He took Shane’s injured hand, carefully examining the reddened knuckles.

“And you could have hurt yourself, malysh.”

“I don’t care.”

“Well, I care. Very much.”

A TV with a live feed of the rink showed officials were finally restoring order, pulling players apart, directing them toward respective benches. The head referee was having a heated discussion with the linesmen, pointing at different players, then at both benches. Game misconducts were coming. Possibly more.

On the television mounted in the medical room, the replay showed everything in painful detail. Gagnon’s late hit, Ilya crashing into the glass, and Shane throwing himself into the fight without a moment’s hesitation. The commentators were practically shouting over one

another, struggling to reconcile the famously composed Shane Hollander with the furious man on the screen.

A member of the coaching staff appeared in the doorway a few minutes later to tell them what the officials had decided. Shane had received a game misconduct and wouldn't be returning to the ice. Gagnon had also been ejected, and the league would review the incident.

Shane barely reacted. He was far more interested in the doctor returning with Ilya's X-ray results.

Ilya, meanwhile, kept glancing at the television, looking equal parts worried and inappropriately impressed.

“My husband,” he murmured, shaking his head. “Very scary little man.”

Shane turned toward him. “I heard that.”

“Good. Maybe next time you remember you have very delicate hands.”

“Delicate?”

“Da. weak backhand. But is good enough to hold his husband.”

Shane rolled his eyes, but he didn't let go of Ilya's hand.

In the weeks following the Montreal game, the media attention gradually died down. The league's disciplinary review had resulted in a fine for Shane and a two-game suspension for the Gagnon, and eventually the headlines gave way to the usual coverage. At home, and in the quiet moments stolen between practices and parenthood, their life was fully settling and moving forward better than either could have hoped for.

Their physical relationship physical relationship was changing, too. It happened gradually, in lingering kisses against the refrigerator and wandering hands beneath shirts while they cuddled on the couch after Yurina had fallen asleep. Sometimes they kissed until they were breathless, laughing when a noise from the baby monitor startled them apart. Other times, exhaustion caught up with them before anything could happen. And occasionally, Shane simply wasn't ready to go further.

Ilya never made an issue of it. He'd kiss Shane once more, pull him close, and settle comfortably beside him. The patience hadn't always come easily to him, but he'd worked hard to become someone who could give Shane the space he needed without feeling rejected.

Shane noticed. More importantly, he appreciated it. His body was beginning to feel like his own again, and he found himself wanting things he'd been too overwhelmed to think about for months. Sometimes he'd catch Ilya watching him after practice, his gaze warm with unmistakable interest, and instead of looking away, Shane would smile back.

He missed being intimate with his husband. Not because he felt obligated to resume that part of their marriage, but because he genuinely wanted to.

One Thursday evening, Shane was folding a tiny pair of socks when Ilya appeared in the laundry room doorway.

"I am taking you on date."

Shane glanced up, a little sock still in his hand. "A date?"

"Da. With your husband. Very handsome man. You know him."

Shane laughed. “What brought this on?”

Ilya stepped into the room and picked up one of Yurina's shirts, attempting to fold it with his enormous hands. “We have been married for months, have beautiful daughter, and spend almost every day together. But when was last time I took you on proper date?”

Shane considered that. “It's been a while.”

“Exactly. I promised I would court you properly, and I have been neglecting my duties. Unacceptable.”

“Your duties?”

“As husband. Very serious position.” Ilya set the badly folded shirt aside. “So I made plans. Your parents are keeping Yurina tomorrow night, I have reservations at your favorite restaurant, and I booked hotel suite.”

Shane's eyebrows rose. “A hotel?”

“Yes.”

“We have a perfectly good house, you know.”

“Our house has baby monitors,” Ilya pointed out. “And bottles on counter. And this.” He gestured toward the mountain of laundry between them. “I want one night where we think only about each other. Hotel has big bed, excellent room service, and maybe we sleep eight hours without tiny dictator demanding attention.”

Shane burst out laughing.

“Is revolutionary concept, yes?” Ilya assured him.

Shane set the socks aside, smiling. The fact that Ilya had arranged everything, including making sure Yurina would be with her grandparents, was unexpectedly touching.

“You've thought of everything.”

“Of course. I am excellent husband.” Ilya leaned down to kiss him. “Now stop folding tiny clothes and think about what you will wear to impress me.”

Yuna arrived the next evening with a gleam in her eye and a bag full of toys. David followed, already making a beeline for Yurina, who immediately rewarded him with a delighted squeal.

“Go,” Yuna said, shooing Shane toward the stairs. “Have fun. Be young and irresponsible.”

“We’re parents,” Shane protested, even as he tried to check the toy bag she’d brought.

“And tonight, you’re also newlyweds who deserve an evening out,” Yuna said, gently turning him by the shoulders. “I raised you just fine, darling. I think we can manage one evening with our granddaughter. Now, shoo.”

Ilya, already dressed in dark, perfectly tailored trousers and a sweater that made his shoulders look even more obscenely broad, nodded solemnly at David. “We will check in a few times.”

“You will not,” David said, not looking up from where he was making Yurina giggle with a stuffed centaur. “Or we’re turning the phone off.”

Upstairs, Shane took his time. He chose a soft, charcoal-gray shirt he knew Ilya liked, one that skimmed his torso, and a pair of well-fitted trousers. He looked at himself in the mirror for a moment, taking in the body that had carried their daughter, and was scoring goals again. The faint, silvery lines across his lower abdomen were part of him, and for once, he didn't feel the need to examine them too closely. He looked good. More importantly, he felt good. He felt ready. He blushed as he packed an overnight bag, carefully tucking a small black box beneath his clothes. He'd spoken with Svetlana that morning and, encouraged by the enthusiastic suggestions, had made an impulsive purchase for Ilya's benefit. had impulsively made a purchase for Ilya's benefit. He was fairly certain his husband was going to lose his mind.

When he came downstairs, Ilya was waiting by the door. He turned, and his easy smile faded into something quieter, like he was mentally undressing Shane. His gaze traveled over Shane, slow and appreciative, and the air in the hallway seemed to still. "You are so beautiful," he said simply. Before Shane could think of an answer, Ilya produced a bouquet of lilies, gardenias, and lilacs from behind his back.

Heat rose in Shane's cheeks, a reflex that he couldn't help it seemed. "You got me flowers?"

"Of course. Is date, I am courting you... so you get flowers."

"We're already married."

"Da, and I must work harder to keep you."

Shane laughed, accepting the bouquet. He hadn't expected flowers, and he was surprised by how much he liked receiving them. He buried his nose briefly among the blossoms before asking for a minute to put them in water.

Ilya followed, watching as Shane arranged the flowers in a vase and set them in the center of their kitchen island. When Shane turned around, Ilya was already there, closing the distance between them.

The kiss was slow, savoring, Ilya's hand settling at Shane's waist while Shane curled his fingers into the soft fabric of his sweater. By the time he drew back, Shane was smiling helplessly.

"Come, husband. I am going to romance you."

The restaurant was intimate, with softly lit booths, white tablecloths, and windows overlooking the glittering Ottawa skyline. Their table was in a secluded corner, far enough from the other diners that they could talk without worrying about being overheard.

Ilya ordered a bottle of wine, and they shared arancini, feeding each other bites across the table, their fingers brushing, while discussing the ordinary chaos of their lives Luca's latest attempt to cook, which had resulted in the smoke alarm going off while Shane was out for a run the other day, the team's chemistry, which was gelling into something formidable. Yurina's new, determined attempts to crawl, which Ilya documented with dozens of videos and hundreds of pictures.

"Did you ever think that we'd get get here?" Shane asked, smiling over the rim of his wineglass, "I knew you'd be a good father. You're going to be the fun one with all the birthday plans."

"You'll be fun too." Ilya insisted. "You had better childhood than me. You know how to do these things to make memories." His expression softened. "She looks at you like you are everything. You are the heart of our family." Ilya brushed his thumb across Shane's freckles. He still held up hope that Yurina would develop them when she was a bit older.

"We are going to have the most spoiled child in human history."

"This is goal."

Later, as their main courses arrived, Shane found himself just watching Ilya in the candlelight. “Tell me about your mother?” Shane asked, leaning back in his seat.

Ilya smiled, and for the next half hour, he told Shane stories about Irina. He remembered the first she’d taken him skating, the disastrous afternoon she’d tried to teach Svetlana and him how to cook, the Russian folktales he wanted to teach their children when they were older. Shane laughed so hard at Ilya’s impression of the faces that she used to make for the different characters, that he had to put his wine down to avoid choking.

Throughout, the space between them diminished. Shane’s hand found Ilya’s thigh beneath the table. Ilya’s fingers would trace the line of Shane’s wrist between courses. The looks they exchanged grew longer, heavier with a shared understanding that the night was still young.

Ilya declined dessert, instead suggesting a walk instead. The autumn air was cool enough that Shane tucked himself closer to his husband as they wandered along past closed shops with glowing windows and people walking and enjoying the night air like they were.

Beneath a streetlamp, Ilya stopped and drew Shane toward him.

“What?” Shane asked, smiling.

“Nothing.” Ilya brushed a stray lock of hair from Shane’s forehead. “Just wanted to kiss my husband.”

“Here?”

“Da. is very good place for kissing.”

Shane laughed, but the sound disappeared when Ilya leaned down and kissed him. It was slow and thorough enough that Shane forgot all about the people passing nearby.

When they finally separated, Shane glanced around, his cheeks warm.

“People can see us.”

“Yes.”

“You don’t care?”

“Not even little bit.” Ilya kissed him again, and Shane smiled against his mouth. A year ago, he would have worried about cameras, headlines, and what people might say. Tonight he was far more interested in the handsome man holding him.

“Come on,” Shane murmured, taking Ilya’s hand again. “Before you get us arrested for public indecency.”

“Was only kissing!”

“With you, it never stays that way.”

Ilya’s laughter followed them down the sidewalk.

They eventually found an empty bench overlooking the water. Across the river, the city's lights shimmered in the dark, and somewhere behind them, a couple laughed as they passed.

Shane rested his head against Ilya's shoulder.

“I’ve missed this,” he admitted.

“Walking?”

“Being alone with you. Going somewhere without having to think about feeding schedules or practice tomorrow or whether Luca remembered to lock the back door.”

“He did not,” Ilya said.

Shane lifted his head. “Seriously?”

“I checked before we left.”

“Of course you did.”

Ilya smiled and kissed his temple. “I have missed it too. Though I do not miss Luca leaving his shoes in hallway.”

Shane laughed, then grew quiet again. He turned toward Ilya, studying the familiar face he'd loved for so many years. There was a faint scar near his eyebrow, the beginning of a smile at the corner of his mouth, and the same blue eyes that had always made Shane forget what he was going to say.

He cupped Ilya's cheek and kissed him.

Ilya responded immediately, one hand settling at Shane's waist. When Shane pulled away, he stayed close enough that their noses brushed.

“Can we go to the hotel now?” he asked.

Ilya searched his face for a moment, then smiled.

“Of course, malysh.”

Shane stood and offered him a hand.

“Good. Because I've been thinking about that enormous bed you promised me all evening.”

Ilya's grin turned wicked. “Ah. So you were listening.”

The suite was spacious and elegant, with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the glittering city. A bottle of champagne sat in a silver bucket beside a plate of perfect strawberries, dozens of flameless candles flickered on the dressers and nightstand, ivory colored rose petals were scattered on the enormous bed.

Shane laughed, a soft, delighted sound. “Jesus, Ilya. You really went all out.”

“Is our first proper date as husbands,” he said, shrugging out of his coat. “Must make good impression.”

“You already married me.”

“Still must keep you interested and court you properly. Cannot let you run away with younger, more handsome hockey player.” His tone was light, but his eyes were warm.

Shane looked him up and down. “I think you're safe.”

Before they got too comfortable, Shane called his mother, “She’s asleep, she’s perfect, go enjoy your hotel room,”

“Mom-”

“Goodnight, sweetheart. Love you both.”

The call ended.

Shane stared at his phone. Ilya leaned over his shoulder, grinning.

“Your mother is very wise woman.”

“She hung up on me.”

“She knows we are on date.”

Shane shook his head, smiling as he set his phone on the desk.

For a moment, neither of them moved. Without the familiar sounds of their house, the baby monitor, or the possibility of someone wandering downstairs for a glass of water, the room felt almost impossibly private.

Ilya crossed to the windows and held out his hand.

“Come here, malysh.”

Shane went willingly, settling into his husband's arms as they looked out over the city. Ilya kissed his temple, and Shane leaned back against his chest, feeling the steady rise and fall of his breathing.

They stayed there for a while, content simply to hold each other.

Then Shane turned in his arms and kissed him

They smiled at the phone for a second before Ilya went over to the desk and connected his phone and set it down. Shane grew slightly shy all of a sudden. No monitors, no schedules, just the two of them in a candlelit room alone.

Ilya came up behind Shane at the window, wrapping his arms around his waist, his chin hooking over Shane's shoulder. They stood like that, watching the pinpricks of light, Shane leaning back into the solid comfort of him. After a long while, Shane turned within the circle of his arms.

Shane kissed him. It gently, a familiar brush of lips that deepened when Ilya drew him closer. Shane slipped his hands beneath Ilya's shirt, smiling at the little sound of approval his husband made. He'd missed this, the warmth of Ilya's skin, the way he leaned into Shane's touch, the ease with which they could make each other forget everything else.

When they finally separated, Ilya rested his forehead against Shane's.

“Still okay, malysh?”

Shane smiled. “I'm more than okay.”

“Good.”

Ilya kissed the corner of his mouth.

Shane caught him before he could pull away. “And just so we're clear, I'll tell you if I want to stop.”

Ilya's expression softened. “I know.”

“Then stop looking so worried and kiss me.”

Ilya laughed against his mouth. “Very demanding husband.”

“You married me.”

“Best decision of my life.”

Their next kiss was interrupted by Shane laughing, but neither of them seemed particularly

They started to undress each other between kisses, not frantically, but with a reverent slowness that gave time for Shane to slow things down if he really needed to.

Ilya led him backward toward the bed, their mouths never fully parting, a stumbling tangle of arms and legs. When the backs of his knees hit the mattress, Ilya followed him down, bracing himself above him. The candlelight painted Ilya's face in gold and shadow, his expression one of awed hunger. He kissed Shane again, deep and searching, before pulling back just enough to grasp the hem of Shane's shirt. Shane lifted his arms, and the soft fabric was drawn away, followed swiftly by Ilya's own undershirt, discarded to the floor with a whisper.

Skin met skin, and they both sighed into the kiss. Ilya's hands were everywhere, relearning the landscape of Shane's torso feather-lite strokes that made Shane shiver. He traced the lines of his ribs, the dip of his waist, the faint, silvery trails across his lower abdomen, not avoiding them, but touching them as if they were sacred. His mouth followed, hot and open, down

Shane's throat, over his collarbone, sucking a mark just above his left pec that had Shane arching off the bed with a sharp gasp.

The intensity was building, a familiar heat coiling tight in Shane's gut, but alongside it rose a flutter of nerves, not fear, but a desire for this to be perfect for his husband came up in his thoughts. He placed his hands on Ilya's chest, gently pushing him back just enough to break the kiss. "Wait," he breathed.

Ilya stilled instantly, his eyes dark with concern. "Lyubimyy?"

"I just... I want a minute. Be right back." He pressed a quick, reassuring kiss to Ilya's jaw and slipped out from beneath him.

In the spacious, marble bathroom, Shane closed the door and leaned against it, his heart pounding. He couldn't believe he was actually doing this.

His overnight bag sat on the counter. He unzipped it and pulled out the small black box he'd purchased after an extremely entertaining conversation with Svetlana

His face flushed as he opened it and remembered what she'd told him- "Trust me," she said. "He'll forget how to speak English."

He opened the box and lifted out the black delicate lace briefs. They were beautiful, considerably more daring than anything he'd ever purchased for himself, and suddenly a little intimidating. *Something that will drive him wild*, Svetlana had said with a wink. *For you too, not just for him. To feel powerful in your own skin.*

He changed and turned toward the mirror. He brushed his hair out and left it loose.

For a moment, his gaze lingered on the faint marks across his abs. His body had changed since Yurina, and there were still days when those changes bothered him. But tonight, the man in the mirror looked healthy, strong and rather pleased with himself.

Shane turned slightly, examining the fit. He actually looked pretty damn good. He laughed under his breath, slipped into the hotel robe and tied the belt.

Then he took one last look at himself. “Okay,” he whispered. “Let’s do this.”

When Shane opened the door, Ilya was sitting on the edge of the bed, waiting. His posture was tense with controlled anticipation. He looked up immediately, and Shane walked toward him, stopping a few feet away.

His heart was hounding, but he managed what he hoped was a confident smile. “I got you something.” Shane let the robe slide from his shoulders. It pooled at his feet.

Ilya’s breath audibly hitched. His gaze traveled down Shane’s body, over the lace clinging to his hips, and back up, slow as a physical touch. For several seconds, Ilya said absolutely nothing.

Shane had never seen him look quite so thoroughly speechless.

Then Ilya exhaled. The expression that dawned on his face was one of utter, stunned wonder. “Bozhe moi,” he whispered as if it was to himself. “Shane...*look at you*. So beautiful.”

Shane blushed, the heat spreading down his chest. “I wanted... I wanted it to be special. Do you like it?”

Ilya stared at him. “Is this serious question?”

Shane laughed, his nervousness dissolving. “Svetlana helped me pick it out.”

“Of course she did.” Ilya dragged a hand over his face. “Remind me to get her gift.”

Ilya stood and approached him, smiling in a way that made Shane's pulse quicken. "You are beautiful," he said, taking Shane's hand. "But I hope you know you did not need to do all this for me."

"I know." Shane stepped closer. "I wanted to."

Ilya kissed his knuckles. "Then I am very lucky husband."

He didn't grab or pull. He simply reached out, his fingertips ghosting over the lace at Shane's hipbone, a touch so light it was almost not there. "You are a vision," he said, his voice rough. "Every part of you. This..." His thumb stroked the delicate edge. "This is gift I do not deserve."

"You do," Shane said, stepping closer to him, his hands coming up to Ilya's bare shoulders. "I'm ready."

That broke the last of Ilya's stillness. He kissed him, a kiss of consuming gratitude and blazing heat. He walked Shane backward until his legs met the bed and laid him down, following him, covering him without crushing him. His mouth was relentless, kissing Shane until he was gasping, his hands exploring the lace, learning its boundaries, his touch worshipful and desperate all at once.

"May I?" Ilya murmured against his stomach, his fingers hooking in the waistband.

"Yes," Shane breathed, lifting his hips.

Ilya drew the briefs down and off, and tossed them aside instead of ripping them, he'd want to see those again soon, maybe convince Shane to get them in every color. Then his hands were on Shane's skin, his mouth following a new an intentional path downward. He kissed the inside of Shane's thigh, the crease of his hip, flicked his tongue against the new silvery lines he now loved so much. When his mouth finally took Shane in, it was with a slow, encompassing heat that drew a ragged cry from his mate's throat. Ilya's focus was absolute,

his movements slow and deliberate, one hand firm on Shane's hips to ground him, the other had reached up to intertwine their fingers together. There was no rush, he took his time savoring the taste of his skin, the scent that bloomed stronger now and the sweet little purrs and groans that were coming from his husband. He worshipped Shane with his tongue, with the soft pressure of his lips, with each careful, drawn-out motion that seemed designed to unravel every last thread of Shane's control. His eyes, when they flicked up to meet Shane's were dark with an intensity, making sure his mate did not have any reservations or nerves.

"Ilya... *God...*" Shane gasped, his fingers tangling in the sheets, then in Ilya's hair.

Ilya pulled back just enough to speak, his breath warm against Shane's heated skin. "Is this good?" he asked, his voice a low, rough vibration. "Tell me, *dusha moya*. This what you want?"

"Yes," Shane managed, his head thrashing against the pillow. "Don't stop. Please."

It was all the permission Ilya needed. He returned to his task with renewed focus, he knew exactly how to blend tender suction and pressure that built the pleasure in slow, devastating waves that would have his husband undone in a few seconds. He read Shane's body perfectly, easing off when the tension became too sharp, then building it again with relentless patience. He was bringing Shane to the edge with a control that was itself a form of love, ensuring every second was felt, was *known*.

When Shane was trembling on the precipice, his back bowed, pleading wordlessly, Ilya relented. He kissed his way back up Shane's body, his own breathing harsh, his arousal pressed insistently against Shane's thigh.

He reached for the nightstand, prepared, his eyes never leaving Shane's. "Look at me," he said, as he lined himself up. Shane obeyed, drowning in the blue of his eyes, still thrumming from the aftershocks. Ilya settled between his legs, guiding himself, pressing forward with infinite care. The initial stretch was intense, a full, burning pressure after so long. Shane gasped, his nails digging into Ilya's biceps.

Ilya froze, buried to the hilt, his whole body shaking with the effort of holding still. "Okay?" he breathed, the word strained, his forehead damp against Shane's. "Tell me. Always tell me."

Shane took a shuddering breath, adjusting, the sensation shifting from overwhelming to profoundly right. The bond between them, humming brightly since Ilya's mouth had been on him, seemed to chime, clear and golden. He wrapped his legs around Ilya's waist, locking his ankles. "Jesus Christ," he whispered, his voice thick. "More than okay. You feel... you feel like home."

A ragged sound escaped Ilya. He began to move, a slow, deep rhythm that had Shane melt beneath him. Each roll of his hips drew out a delectable sound, each shared breath like a prayer. He kissed Shane's eyelids, his cheeks, the corner of his mouth. "So beautiful," he chanted between kisses. "My beautiful, strong husband. What did I ever do to deserve you?" His hand slid between them, touching Shane with perfect, knowing pressure, his thumb circling in time with his thrusts.

The dual sensations coiled Shane tight again, a brilliant, tightening spring. "Ilya," he choked out.

"I am here, malysh. I have you. Let go. I have you." Ilya's pace increased fractionally, each stroke hitting a point that made Shane see stars. His encouragements were a constant, loving murmur. "That's it. Yes. Just like that. You are everything."

The climax tore through Shane without warning, a silent, breathtaking wave that arched him off the bed, his mouth open in a soundless cry. Ilya held him through it, his own rhythm stuttering, and followed him over with a choked groan, his face buried in Shane's neck, his entire body shuddering with the force of his release.

For several minutes, neither of them spoke. Ilya drew the duvet over them and gathered Shane against his chest, pressing an occasional kiss to his temple or the top of his head.

There was only the sound of their ragged breathing and the sweet little noises as Ilya kissed up and down Shane's neck. Ilya was careful as he withdrew, collapsing beside Shane and immediately gathering him close, pulling the duvet over them. He pressed lingering kisses to Shane's shoulder, his temple, his sweat-damp hair.

Shane turned into him, boneless and replete, his head on Ilya's chest. The bond glowed with a contented, peaceful warmth. Ilya's hand stroked up and down his spine.

“Still okay?” Ilya asked softly, his lips against Shane’s forehead.

A slow, sated smile spread across Shane’s face. “Perfect,” he murmured. He tilted his head up. The love in Ilya’s eyes was so vast, so unguarded, it stole his breath anew. “Thank you. For tonight. For... all of it.”

Ilya shook his head, his own smile tender. “Thank you,” he whispered back. “For trusting me. For choosing me. Every day.” He held Shane’s gaze, the candlelight dancing in his blue eyes. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

The weeks since their date night were good ones, both at home and on the ice. The team had found their rhythm again, and although life with an infant, an eighteen-year-old rookie, and two demanding hockey careers was rarely peaceful, they wouldn’t have traded it for anything.

The Centaurs were thriving. They’d climbed near the top of the league standings, the commentators had finally stopped treating their success as a temporary boost from Ilya and Shane. Ottawa wasn’t winning simply because of Shane. The entire team had improved.

Ilya made it a point of changing up the lines, giving different players a chance to shine work together rather than relying on the same combination every night. Shane appreciated it. He’d spent years carrying the expectations of an entire franchise, and there was something wonderful about being able to focus on his own game without the added weight of the captaincy. He and Bood would trade back and forth the Alternate spot, a position that suited Shane perfectly.

His confidence grew with every game. His skating felt effortless again, his timing was sharp, and he was enjoying hockey in a way he hadn't for years. Ilya was playing some of the best hockey of his career, and Luca had blossomed under the guidance of his teammates. Troy, Wyatt, and the rest of the roster were all contributing to their success too.

They weren't just a collection of talented players anymore. They were a team, a family. and when the schedule finally gave them three consecutive days off over American Thanksgiving, Shane knew exactly where he wanted to go.

They packed an absurd amount of gear for one small baby, along with gifts of wine and imported treats for Ruth and Walter Fischer, and headed to Pennsylvania.

They were a little over an hour into the drive when Shane casually mentioned, "Sam will be there, you know. Ruth and Walter's grandson."

"I remember this name," Ilya said, his eyes tightening.

"He was really good to me, Ilya. Helped his grandparents, checked in on me, made sure I wasn't spending every day hiding in my room. He was just... a good friend when I needed one."

"Very noble," Ilya replied.

Shane recognized the particular set of his husband's jaw. "Don't."

"Don't what?"

"Whatever you're thinking. Don't."

"I am thinking nothing."

“That,” Shane said, turning in his seat to level a look at him, “is never a good sign.”

Ilya finally glanced over, a flicker of theatrical innocence in his blue eyes. “I am a perfectly charming and gracious person. You have said this yourself.”

“I’ve also called you an asshole.”

“Only when you are flirting.”

Shane laughed despite himself. “You’re going to behave.”

“Of course. I am married man. Very mature.”

Shane held his gaze for a long moment before facing forward again, a smile tugging at his lips. “I don’t believe you for a second.”

The Fischers' house looked exactly as Shane remembered it.

The same weathered porch, the same flower beds now tucked away for winter, and the familiar wreath hanging on the front door. As Ilya pulled into the driveway, Shane spotted Ruth watching from the kitchen window. “Oh, we're in trouble,” he said.

Ilya glanced over. “Why?”

“She's been waiting for us.”

Before Ilya could respond, the front door swung open. Ruth hurried down the porch steps, her cardigan fluttering behind her. “There you are! Oh, goodness, let me see that baby!”

“Hello to you too, Ruth,” Shane laughed, climbing out of the car.

“You know I love you, honey. Now where's my girl?”

Ilya carefully lifted Yurina's carrier from the back seat, grinning as Ruth immediately leaned over to admire her.

“Look at those cheeks! She's gotten so big!”

“She eats like her papa,” Ilya informed her proudly.

Walter appeared in the doorway and came down to greet them, pulling Shane into a warm hug before offering Ilya his hand. Ilya shook it, only to find himself drawn into a back-slapping embrace.

“Good to have you all here,” Walter said. “Come on inside before Ruth decides to keep that baby out in the cold all afternoon.” The house smelled of cinnamon, roasting vegetables, and something delicious baking in the oven. Shane recognized the familiar furniture and landscape paintings, but this time the rooms were filled with family, laughter, and the cheerful noise of Thanksgiving preparations.

Yuna and David arrived shortly afterward with more bags than anyone could reasonably need for a holiday weekend, and within minutes the kitchen had become a lively argument about recipes, oven temperatures, and who was responsible for peeling the potatoes.

Shane stood in the doorway for a moment, watching it all with a smile.

It was good to be back.

When Sam arrived, his smile was warm and immediate. “Eva- sorry, Shane. Hey.” They hugged, briefly since Ilya was there and pulled him back. “And this must be the famous Yurina.” He peered into the carrier with genuine delight. Shane made the introductions, emphasizing Sam’s kindness during his stay. Sam shook Ilya’s hand firmly. “Great to finally meet you. I’ve been watching you two tear up the league. It’s incredible to see.”

“Thank you,” Ilya said, his ‘captain’s’ smile impeccable, though his eyes held a faint, assessing gleam. “I hear much about your help to my husband. Very generous.”

Walter, passing by with a platter, caught Ilya’s studious expression and murmured, “He got was rejected flat out by Shane, son. Relax.”

Ilya drew himself up. “I am completely relaxed.”

The afternoon was delightfully upended by Rose’s pulling in with her own car. She had her flight canceled so when Ruth extended an invitation to her she jumped at the chance to have more of Ruth’s cooking. Within hours, she was pulling up in a rental car, looking travel-rumpled and profoundly grateful. She hugged Shane fiercely, accepted a glass of wine from Walter, and then turned to find Sam offering her a plate of appetizers.

“Rescuing stranded damsels?” she asked, a familiar arch in her brow.

“With eggs? I’d hoped I’d be better than that,” he replied, his own smile easy. “Figured you might be hungry.”

“You figured right.” She took the plate, and within minutes they were tucked in a corner of the living room, talking and laughing effortlessly as they’d known each other for years, not minutes.

Shane watched them, a grin spreading across his face. Ilya sidled up beside him, following his gaze. His earlier suspicion had evaporated, replaced by a look of approval.

“Ah,” Ilya said, as if confirming a brilliant hypothesis.

“Ah?” Shane echoed.

“He is a wonderful young man. Excellent manners. Very attentive.”

Shane stared at him. “Oh my God. You’re unbelievable.”

“What?”

“You were practically conducting a background check on him two hours ago.”

“I was gathering data,” Ilya corrected primly. “Now I have assessed. Very good boy. I approve.”

“They don’t need your approval.”

“Of course not,” Ilya said, placing a hand over his heart. “But is nice they have it.” Ruth caught Shane’s eye from across the room and winked.

Dinner was a magnificent, chaotic feast. The table groaned beneath Ruth’s golden-brown turkey, Walter’s famously silky mashed potatoes, Yuna’s brussels sprouts with pancetta, and a

half-dozen other dishes. Yurina, presiding from Walters arms, in a cream-colored dress with tiny embroidered leaves, was the uncontested queen of the proceedings. Ilya had taken dozens of pictures before anyone picked up a fork.

“She is most beautiful baby in Pennsylvania,” he declared, not for the first time.

“Of course she is, Ilya,” Shane said, spooning sweet potato onto his own plate.

Conversation flowed around the table. Walter, Ruth and David debated the proper way to roast a turkey, while Yuna, entertained everyone with stories about Shane’s childhood and even threw in some of Ilya’s more recent story of him at a photo shoot that he’d done. Rose and Sam, seated side-by-side, were locked in their own conversation, their shoulders brushing lightly.

“So, the rookie’s living with you?” Walter asked, gesturing at Shane with a serving spoon. “Your mother mentioned it.”

“Luca, yeah,” Shane said. “Just until he gets his feet under him. He’s a good kid. His family was in New York so he went to spend a few days with them.”

“You’ve adopted him,” Ruth smiled knowingly.

“I have not *adopted* him,” Shane protested. “We’re mentoring him. It’s different.”

“He follows you everywhere,” Ilya contributed. “Like baby duckling. Is scientific fact.”

When the conversation turned to what everyone was thankful for, the answers ranged from heartfelt to silly. Walter was thankful his football team was winning and now he was into hockey. Rose, with a quick glance at Sam, was thankful for last-minute canceled flights. Yuna was simply thankful for the chance to celebrate with everyone.

When it was Shane's turn, he looked around at the people who had helped him find his way here. Ruth and Walter who had welcomed him into their home, at his parents who had loved him without reservation. At Rose his fierce protector, at Sam who had offered quiet friendship. And Ilya, who held his hand beneath the table, at his daughter sleeping contentedly in her grandpa's arms. The sheer, sprawling abundance of it all settled in his heart, warm and sure.

"I'm thankful," he said, his voice clear in the comfortable hush, "for all of you. For everything you did for me when I needed help. And for being here now, so we can celebrate together instead of worrying about what's going to happen next."

Ilya's thumb stroked over his knuckles, a silent echo.

After pie and coffee, Ruth insisted on a family photograph. Organizing everyone took nearly ten minutes. Walter complaining about his knees, David kept rearranging chairs, Yuna fixing Ilya's collar. Ruth, meanwhile, made Rose and Sam sit closer together.

Ilya held Yurina against his chest, her little face peeking out above his arm. Shane sat beside him, one arm wrapped around his husband's waist, his cheek nearly touching Ilya's shoulder.

They took several, ruined by blinks and laughter, until they captured one where everyone was looking, everyone was smiling. They included a few silly ones for the kids that were gathered and Ruth told Ilya to make sure she had copies of them all so she could frame them. .

Later, after the dishes were done and the house had quieted, Shane found himself standing in the doorway of the bedroom he'd once occupied alone. The room was different now, a proper guest room, but the view of the backyard and the woods beyond was the same.

Ilya found him there, slipping his arms around Shane's waist from behind, his chin hooking over Shane's shoulder. "Okay, sweetheart?"

“Yeah,” Shane said, leaning back into him. “It’s just strange being here again. Last time, I didn’t know what was going to happen. I was so scared all the time.”

Ilya pressed a kiss to his hair. “I understand.”

Shane turned slightly in his arms. “But I am glad I came back. I’m glad we brought Yurina. I wanted Ruth and Walter to see us like this.”

“Happy?”

“Yes. so happy.”

Ilya smiled against his temple. “Me too.”

They stood like that for a while, watching the moon rise over the bare trees. “We should come back next Thanksgiving,” Ilya mused, his voice a low rumble against Shane’s back. “Maybe with another baby. Very festive tradition.”

Shane elbowed him gently. “Absolutely not. We are not having a baby every Thanksgiving.”

“Why not? Is efficient.”

“You’re insane.”

“Yes,” Ilya agreed, nuzzling his neck. “But you married me.”

Shane turned in his arms, his smile soft in the dim light. He kissed him, a slow, sweet promise of all the Thanksgivings to come. “Yeah,” he whispered against his lips. “I did.”

And together, they went back to the living room, drawn into the warm, glowing heart of the family they had built, chosen, and so miraculously found.

June arrived with the Centaurs playing the best games of their lives.

They'd fought their way through three grueling playoff rounds, surviving injuries, overtime games, and opponents who seemed determined to make every victory as difficult as possible. Now, with one win separating them from the Stanley Cup, they were back in Ottawa, playing in front of a home crowd that had been roaring since warmups.

The score was tied with less than two minutes remaining. Shane stood on the ice beside Ilya and Luca, his lungs burning and sweat running down his back beneath his equipment. Across the rink, the opposing team was scrambling to clear the puck away from their goal.

Luca intercepted it before they could. "Rozy!" He hollered.

He sent the puck toward Ilya, who caught it smoothly and immediately drew two defenders towards him. Shane recognized the opening almost before it appeared. He moved.

Ilya didn't need to look twice. He sent the puck across the ice, straight into Shane's path. Shane caught it, took one stride and shot.

For a fraction of a second, everything seemed to stop. Then the puck slipped past the goalie and struck the back of the net.

The arena exploded. Shane barely had time to raise his arms before Ilya slammed into him, wrapping him in a crushing embrace. Luca arrived a second later, shouting so loudly that

Shane couldn't understand a word. They'd taken the lead.

There was still time on the clock, though, and the final ninety seconds felt longer than the entire season. Ottawa fought for every inch of ice, blocking shots, chasing loose pucks, and refusing to let their opponents get close enough for a clean attempt on a goal.

Shane shot the puck towards Ilya right before he was pushed into the boards. The horn sounded a few seconds later. For one stunned heartbeat, Shane couldn't move.

They'd done it. They'd won the Stanley Cup. Then Ilya was there with him, grabbing him around the waist and lifting him clean off his skates.

“WE DID IT, SOLNYSHKO!”

Shane laughed, tears already blurring his vision.

Around them, gloves and sticks scattered across the ice as the Centaurs poured off the bench. Luca and Troy collided with them, followed by Bood, Wyatt and the rest of the team, until Shane could barely tell whose arms were wrapped around him.

Somewhere above the noise, the crowd began chanting their names. Shane pressed his forehead against Ilya's, laughing and crying at the same time. They were champions. Together.

Champagne sprayed in golden arcs, soaking their championship hats and jerseys as they hoisted the Stanley Cup. Ilya accepted it first, lifting the enormous silver trophy above his head with a triumphant roar. The crowd went crazy again, and Shane shouted himself hoarse as his husband skated his victory lap. Then Ilya passed it to Bood, who lifted it with a grin so enormous that Shane wondered whether his face might actually split in two. When Shane's turn came, he could hardly believe he was holding it again. His smile so wide it felt like it might never fade. They passed the gleaming silver to their teammates, to Troy who wept openly, to Luca who touched it with reverent awe, to every man who had fought for this moment. The music blared, the confetti fell, and for a while, they were simply champions, lost in the primal, joyous noise of it all.

Shane was still grinning when he spotted movement near the players' entrance. Yuna and David were making their way down, navigating the crowd. David carried Yurina against his chest, her little hands curled around the front of his jacket.

She looked precious in her mini custom-made jersey. The tiny Centaurs jersey, red and black, bore their hyphenated name across the shoulders, with Shane's 24 on one sleeve and Ilya's 81 on the other. Little leggings, soft booties, and an adorable knitted team hat completed the outfit, with the essential oversized headphones safeguarding her ears from the noise. The hat and headphones did their job, partially shielding her face from the sweeping cameras while leaving no doubt who this baby belonged to.

At eleven months, Yurina was all bright eyes, curious hands, and opinions she was increasingly determined to share with everyone. She scanned the chaotic ice, and when her gaze landed on Ilya, then Shane, she began to bounce, her little fists opening and closing in excited recognition, a stream of enthusiastic babble pouring forth.

Ilya noticed first. He was laughing, accepting a backslap from Holmberg, a bottle in his hand. His eyes drifted toward the gate, and his entire being transformed. The boisterous champion vanished, replaced by something infinitely more tender. Awe smoothed the sharp lines of his face, and his breath caught. This was his daughter. Their daughter. The little princess who was the perfect mix of both her parents. His blue eyes were the identical color of his own, her hair still blond but wavy, her lips and nose like her daddy but her papa's attitude was already forming.

"MOYA DEVOCHKA!" His shout cut through the celebration, not with its volume, but with its sheer, unvarnished love. He was moving before he'd finished speaking, skates carrying him in swift, powerful strokes toward the boards.

Shane turned at the sound, his own celebration pausing as he followed Ilya's trajectory. When he saw Yurina, his face, already alight with victory, softened into a radiance that had nothing to do with trophies. Together, they hurried over. Ilya reached the gate first, carefully stepping off the ice onto the rubber matting so David could safely transfer the squirming bundle into his arms.

Ilya lifted her, his large hands impossibly gentle, and buried his face in the soft yarn of her hat, inhaling her sweet, clean scent beneath the arena's champagne-and-sweat fog. She squealed, grabbing at his nose and cheeks with damp hands. Shane reached them a second later, his arms encircling both of them, his lips pressing to Yurina's mittened hand. He met Ilya's eyes over the top of her head, and in that look was everything.

The arena noticed.

A producer or someone from the media team, sensing the story of the season, switched the feed on the giant Jumbotron. The replays of the winning goal vanished, replaced by a live, intimate shot of the two champions wrapped around their daughter.

The crowd's reaction was a seismic wave of affection. The cheers, which had been deafening for the Cup, somehow found a new, warmer, more resonant register. It wasn't just applause; it was a collective aww, a roar of approval for the full, complete picture. Fans waved their jerseys, couples hugged.

The commentators, who had dissected their every pass all season, were momentarily speechless. "Would you look at that," one finally managed, his voice thick. "After everything... there they are."

Ilya, sensing the camera's gaze, turned carefully, angling his body so the back of Yurina's tiny jersey, with its proud, sprawling HOLLANDER-ROZANOV, was displayed to the world. He grinned, a wicked, triumphant one and winked into the closest camera.

Shane laughed, shaking his head. "You're such a show-off."

"She is Stanley Cup baby, Shane. Everyone must know."

"We have to take a picture of her in it!"

“I already book photographer last week,” Ilya declared. Shane gave up, laughter bubbling out of him, and leaned in to kiss his ridiculous, wonderful husband. The crowd’s volume swelled again, a tidal wave of good will.

Near the gate, Yuna watched, her hand pressed to her mouth. She remembered the ghost of a man who had sat at her kitchen island, hollowed out by fear, whispering about impossible choices. She saw the man he was now- whole, loved, her surprise second son as they joked, and the tears that fell were only of joy. David’s arm came around her shoulders, pulling her close, his own eyes suspiciously bright.

The celebration evolved, becoming a family affair. Ruth and Walter joined them, beaming, followed by the rest of their assembled circle. Ilya, never one for subtlety, immediately commanded a photograph with the Cup. He recruited a team photographer and demanded that all the families and staff be in it. All this carried on for over half an hour as Crowell grew more and more livid as he was made to wait for Ilya to come over to him on the mic and accept the congratulations of the league.

He and Shane knelt on the ice, the massive Stanley Cup gleaming between them. Yurina, now resting against Shane’s chest, peered at the strange, shiny object. As the flashbulbs popped, she reached one curious hand toward its brilliant surface.

Shane laughed, gently catching her wrist. “Ah-ah. No fingerprints on the Stanley Cup, baby.”

Ilya immediately protested. “Let her touch! Is family trophy.”

“She’s going to lick it.”

“Oh, then ok. Lets get it clean then we leave in nursery when its our turn to keep it!” Ilya insisted, and their teammates surrounding them burst into laughter.

After the pictures, Ilya finally got up and with Wiebe and Bood, they went over for the official congratulations from the league. Ilya smiled at Crowell’s flinch when he tightened his handshake. He couldn’t hold the laugh in when the noise of the crowd drowned out whatever bland speech he tried to give.

Eventually, the arena began to quiet. The crowds in the stands thinned, the music lowered, and the ice was left to the players, their families, and the lingering feeling of glory. Yurina, exhausted by the spectacle, had fallen asleep against Ilya's shoulder, her headphones askew, one small fist clutching a fold of his jersey. Shane stood beside them, his arm a steady band around Ilya's waist, his head leaning against his husband's bicep.

His eyes traveled the empty benches, the banners hanging from the rafters, the confetti littering the ice like fallen stars. The little boy from Kelowna who dreamed of this. The teenager who learned to hide. The man who learned to love in secret. The Omega who chose to fight. All those ghosts laid to rest by the man standing here now, a champion in every sense, his family safe in his arms.

Ilya felt the shift in his stillness. "Hey, Hollander."

Shane looked up. "What?"

Ilya grinned, the same mischievous, challenging smile that had once been a weapon and was now a promise. "Want to play hockey some with me?"

Shane's laugh was soft, a private sound in the vast space. He looked at their sleeping daughter, then back at the man he loved, the partner who had fought his way through his own darkness to stand here, gentle and sure. "Yeah, Rozanov. I do."

Ilya's smile widened, his blue eyes blazing with a future only he could already see. "Good. Because I think we can win few more of these."

"A few?"

"Maybe twenty," Ilya stated, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "Sounds like good number."

“You’re insane.”

“Maybe,” Ilya conceded, shifting Yurina slightly higher on his shoulder. “But you love me.”

Shane leaned in, his lips brushing Ilya’s in a kiss that tasted of champagne and home. “Yeah,” he whispered. “I really do.”

Yurina stirred between them, letting out a sleepy, disgruntled murmur at the movement. Ilya glanced down instantly, his voice dropping to a whisper. “Ah, sorry, printsessa. Papa is being romantic.”

From the gate, Yuna called softly, a reminder of the real world waiting. “Time to get this one to bed, I think.”

Ilya looked at Shane, all the bravado softening into a question. “Ready to go out, lyubimyy?”

Shane took one last, long look at the ice, the sacred sheet where they had finally, gloriously, won everything. Then he turned his gaze forward, to his husband’s face, to his daughter’s peaceful sleep, to his family waiting in the tunnel.

He smiled, the last of the arena lights catching in his eyes. “Yeah,” he said, his hand settling on Ilya’s back, a steady, guiding touch. “No drinking though.”

Ilya threw his head back and laughed. “Whatever you say sweetheart, let’s go have some fun.”

Chapter End Notes

Grand finale will be up in a bit!

Chapter 52: Chapter 52

Chapter Summary

And we are at the last chapter 🥺😭❤️

This started off as a fun little way to spend a weekend and it ballooned to this. I'm so thankful to Lisa, Tony, Anna and B- y'all are amazing and I adore y'all.

Thank you to everyone that read this, commented and left kudos- y'all are insane and I love it ❤️❤️❤️❤️

Chapter Notes

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

EPILOGUE EIGHTEEN YEARS LATER

The morning of their joint retirement ceremony began with the sort of chaos Shane had come to expect whenever the entire family needed to be somewhere at a specific time. The kitchen was full of breakfast dishes, abandoned clothes, and six children who had apparently forgotten every instruction they'd been given the night before. Shane stood at the island with his tablet in one hand and a spatula in the other, trying to keep track of who had eaten, who was dressed, and which disaster needed his attention first.

At forty-three, he still approached the family's schedule obsessively. With so many kids in different activities, brand deals, the Irina Foundation with the hockey camp, it was mandatory. His dark hair had a few silver strands at the temples, and twenty-four NHL seasons, along with six pregnancies, had left him with a collection of aches he tried not to complain about. None of that had made him any more patient with people who couldn't find their shoes or having to hear bickering siblings.

"Mikhail, the black tie. Not the one with the cameras. Nikolai, your suit is in our closet. Aleksandr, if you get syrup on that shirt, you're wearing it anyway. Sakura, the green dress is clean. Dmitri, no skates." He was able to rattle off orders in quick succession without looking up.

“But they're my good skates,” seven-year-old Dmitri protested. He was in suit pants and a Centaurs jersey, taking practice shots with a rolled-up sock. “They're still skates. And stop shooting things at the wall.”

Nine-year-old Sakura looked up from her plate of pancakes. “Can you wash the pink dress with pockets?”

“We're leaving in two hours, sweetheart.”

“It could be fast.”

“You need to eat your breakfast. If you wear the green, you'll be matching with Jade and Ruby.”

“Oh! Good idea, daddy!”

Ilya was supposed to be helping. Instead, he was quietly fastening a diamond-and-turquoise necklace around Yurina's neck while their oldest daughter smiled at him in the conspiratorial way she'd inherited from him. Eighteen already. Shane could still remember the weight of her asleep against his chest, and now she was preparing to leave for Columbia in the fall.

“Beautiful, printsessa,” Ilya told her, kissing her cheek before turning toward their almost seventeen-year-old son. “Nikolai. Stand up straight. Scouts might be watching tonight.”

“It's your retirement, Papa. Not my draft combine.”

“Every moment is draft combine.”

“That's not how it works.”

“Worked for me.”

Mikhail, fourteen and rarely separated from one of his cameras, aimed it at them. “The great Ilya Rozanov prepares for retirement by harassing his children. Excellent opening shot. This will get me an CSA or Oscar.”

“Put that away, Misha.” Ilya checked his bare wrist. “And where is my watch?”

Twelve-year-old Aleksandr, who had been suspiciously quiet, produced it from his pocket with a flourish. “You should take better care of your things.”

Ilya stared at him. “You are lucky you are cute.”

“He gets that from me,” Shane said.

“Everything good in this house comes from you, malysh.” Ilya leaned over the island and kissed him.

“Flattery isn't helping. Please get everyone into the cars.”

“Everyone!” Ilya shouted. “Listen to your father. Especially the thief.”

“Alleged thief!” Aleksandr corrected.

Somehow, they got moving. The younger children were dispatched to finish dressing, Nikolai was put in charge of finding Dmitri's actual shoes, and Shane went upstairs to change. He was struggling with a cufflink when Yurina appeared in the doorway.

“Daddy? Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.” He looked up, immediately setting the cufflink aside. They had always tried to make time for the children, even when the house was busy enough to make a conversation feel like a scheduled appointment. Yurina came over and fastened it for him, then adjusted his tie although it didn't need adjusting.

“Would you be mad if I was dating someone?”

Shane looked at her reflection. He'd noticed a familiar scent on her weeks ago and had suspected something, but he'd wanted her to come to him herself. “Are you?”

“Maybe.”

“Is he good to you?”

She smiled. “Yeah. Really good.”

“Then I'm not mad.”

“It's Arthur.”

Shane blinked. “Arthur Pike?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh.” He turned to face her. “Well, that's a surprise.”

“Dad.”

“No, it's a good surprise. I like Arthur. He's part of the family.” Their godson was only seven months younger than Yurina, and the two had practically grown up together. “How long?”

“A few months.”

“A few months? Does Hayden know?”

“And Aunt Jackie.”

“Of course they do.” Shane rubbed his forehead. “Your papa doesn't know.”

“Not yet.”

“Ri.”

“I know. He's going to make it weird.”

“Your papa makes everything weird when it comes to you and Aleksandr.”

“Exactly. Could you tell him?”

“Absolutely not. This is your responsibility.”

She wrapped her arms around his waist and rested her chin on his shoulder. “Daddy, please? It's not fair. Nikolai and Noah are practically mating when they have their ‘hockey practice’ and Papa doesn't say anything to him. Uncle Scott lets treats all his kids fairly.” Shane looked at her in the mirror. She'd been using that expression on him since she was five, and it

was embarrassing how well it still worked. “Fine. But you're talking to him afterward. And I do realize that your papa is a bit overprotective of you and Alex, but he doesn't mean to be.”

“Love you, Dad. And I know, its just hard sometimes when Alex and I are the ones that have to have the extra rules.”

“Yeah, I know sweetheart, but he tries really hard to give you kids equal opportunities. We love you. Now, go find your brothers. I’ll deal with your papa.”

She kissed his cheek and escaped before he could change his mind.

Ilya arrived a few minutes later, fastening the watch Aleksandr had finally returned.
“Lapochka, have you seen my-”

“Yurina's dating Arthur Pike.”

Ilya stopped. “Arthur.”

“Yep.”

“Pike.”

“That's the one.”

He took out his phone.

“Ilya, no.”

“I am calling Hayden.”

“We have to leave in twenty minutes.”

“Will be short conversation.”

Hayden answered almost immediately. Shane could hear his cheerful greeting before Ilya announced, “Your thief of a son is dating my daughter.”

There was a pause. Then Hayden laughed. “Oh, you finally found out?”

“Finally?”

“Yeah, they've been together a while. Cute, right?”

“Why do you know before me?”

“Because Arthur told us. We're his parents, Rozy.”

Ilya hung up. Shane had to sit on the bed because he was laughing too hard to stand.

“You hung up on him?”

“I taught that boy to skate,” Ilya said, looking personally betrayed. “Bought him first hockey stick. He ate food in my house.”

“He's a good kid.”

“And now he is kissing my daughter.”

Shane pulled him close. “Baby, she's eighteen. We knew this was coming.”

“Not until she finishes school. Maybe not until she's forty.”

“Ilya, come on now. We met at 17. Nikolai is practically bonded with Noah. Arthur is a wonderful kid.”

From the hall, Yurina called, “Is Papa okay?”

“No!” Ilya shouted. “You have broken his heart!”

She appeared in the doorway, trying not to laugh. Ilya held out his hand, and she came over. His expression changed as soon as he looked at her.

“You're happy, rybka?”

“Really happy, Papa.”

He sighed and pulled her into a hug. “Then okay. Arthur is good boy.” After a moment he added, “Still going to kill Hayden.”

“Papa!”

“Little bit.”

By the time they reached the cars, Ilya had called Hayden twice more. On the drive to the arena he spent several minutes studying old photographs of Arthur on his phone, as though he might identify the exact moment the boy had become a threat. Shane let him complain until he finally admitted, grudgingly, that Arthur was smart, polite, and from a good family.

“Do not tell Hayden I said that.”

“I wouldn't dream of it.”

Ilya locked his phone and rested a hand on Shane's thigh. For a while he watched the road in silence. In the back seat, Sakura was explaining something to Dmitri with great authority while Mikhail filmed Aleksandr asleep with his mouth open. Nikolai had headphones on, wisely staying out of it. Yurina had elected to ride with Yuna and David.

“She's going to college,” Ilya said eventually. “Then she'll get apartment. Job. Maybe she forgets us.”

Shane glanced at him. “She isn't going to forget us.”

“Maybe I go with her.”

“You're not moving into her dorm.”

“Could be resident advisor.”

“You lost an argument with Sakura over the window seat.”

“Because I'm right!” Sakura called from behind them.

Ilya sighed, but he was smiling when he squeezed Shane's thigh. "I know. Is good thing. She should have her own life."

"Yeah," Shane said softly. "She should."

They drove the rest of the way with Ilya's hand in his.

The private lounge at the arena was already crowded when they arrived. Shane had barely stepped inside before Luca caught him in a hug and lifted him an inch off the floor.

"Look who finally decided to retire!"

"Put me down, you idiot."

Luca laughed and obeyed. At thirty-six, he was about to become the next captain of the Centaurs, and Shane couldn't have imagined anyone better suited to the job. He still remembered the nervous eighteen-year-old who'd stayed at their house and eaten everything in the refrigerator.

"Where's Olga?" Shane asked.

"Home with the baby. Rough morning. She says congratulations, and that you two had better actually take some time off."

“Tell her we will,” Shane said.

“Liar,” Luca replied affectionately.

Bood appeared with drinks and promptly spilled one on Ilya's sleeve while hugging him. Troy arrived just in time to witness the damage, and within seconds they were arguing as though they were back in the locker room. Wiebe shouted from across the lounge that Ilya still owed him fifty dollars, and Ilya shouted back that the referee had been blind. Holmberg came over to shake their hands, looking amused and unsurprised by any of it. Years had passed, most of them had retired, and they were all a little grayer. None of that seemed to matter once they were together.

Shane was still laughing when Yuna appeared beside him. “Are you all seriously arguing about that game again?”

“Hi, Mom.”

She kissed his cheek and straightened his tie. David followed, pulling him into a hug.

“Big night, kid. You doing okay?”

“Yeah. I think so. Just a lot of people.”

David gave him another squeeze. “You've handled worse.”

“That's what everyone keeps telling me.”

Across the room, Shane spotted Ruth steering Walter's wheelchair through the doorway. They were already bickering about whether Walter had tried to get ahead of her in the hallway. Shane went straight over, laughing, and bent to hug him.

“Well, look at you,” Walter said, squeezing him hard. “All dressed up.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Better if people would stop treating me like I’m at death’s door..”

“He tried to get out of the car without his walker,” Ruth informed him.

“I was just testing-”

“You were testing my patience.”

Ilya came over to kiss Ruth's cheek and crouch beside Walter. The two men immediately began comparing bad knees, while Ruth told them both to stop encouraging each other. Walter looked thinner than the last time Shane had seen him, and the lines around his eyes were deeper. Shane tried not to let his worry show, but Ruth caught his expression and squeezed his hand.

“He's doing well,” she said quietly.

“I know.”

Walter’s ‘mini’ stroke was a major deciding factor of them retiring. They’d been too far to see him in the hospital and Ruth had made frantic calls when it happened but it was during a game. They’d rushed to their side as soon as they could but it was a wake up call.

“Then stop looking at him like that and find me those children. I brought presents.”

“Ruth, you didn't have to.”

“Don't start, Shane Hollander.”

Sakura arrived at exactly the right moment, climbed onto Walter's lap, and demanded to know what he'd brought. He pretended not to understand until Dmitri came racing over to help her explain. Shane stepped back and watched them for a moment, grateful Walter was here to see this night.

Rose found him next, throwing an arm around his waist and kissing his cheek. She'd come with Sam and their boys, who seemed to have grown another foot since the last time Shane had seen them. Rose informed him that she'd expected the league to drag him off the ice on a stretcher before he willingly retired. Shane told her he'd considered making them do exactly that. Ilya joined them, greeted Sam warmly, and immediately reminded Rose that she'd once kissed Shane when they were younger.

“Are you ever going to let that go?” Rose asked.

“No. Was very traumatic for me.”

“For you?” Shane said.

Ilya kissed his cheek. “I suffered, malysh.”

Troy returned with Harris and their twelve-year-old daughters, Hannah and Kensly, who promptly disappeared toward the other children. Harris launched into a pitch for a documentary about Shane and Ilya's careers, something Troy said he'd been doing for six months. Shane told him they were retiring, not dying. Harris replied that this was exactly why he needed the footage now. When Troy mentioned Yurina leaving for college, Ilya muttered that she had a boyfriend too, and Harris's interest sharpened so quickly that Shane pointed a warning finger at him.

“Not today.”

“I didn't say anything.”

“You were going to.”

“Fine,” Harris said. “Later.”

Svetlana's voice cut through the conversation before Shane saw her. She was heavily pregnant, unimpressed with the entire evening, and complaining that Marly had made her walk too far from the car. Ilya greeted her by suggesting they stop having children. She smacked his arm, then let him hug her anyway.

“You look beautiful,” Shane told her when she came to kiss his cheek.

“That's because you love me. My ankles are the size of your head.”

Marly laughed. Their children were already joining the growing crowd of teenagers and preteens, which meant someone would probably need to check on them before the evening was over. Svetlana noticed Ilya watching and reminded him that he'd taught one of her sons to swear in Russian at four years old.

“He asked,” Ilya said.

“He called his teacher a bastard.”

“Very good pronunciation.”

She smacked him again, but when he pulled her into another hug, she held on for a moment. “I'm proud of you,” she said quietly. “Both of you.”

Ilya's teasing expression softened. "Spasibo, Sveta."

"Don't get sentimental. It's unsettling."

Shane was still smiling when a familiar voice said, "Rozanov."

Anatoly stood a few feet away in an immaculate suit, more gray at his temples but wearing the same expression of patient disapproval Shane remembered. He had just set Dmitri back on his feet after apparently carrying him upside down through the lounge. The boy ran off laughing, and Ilya immediately embraced his old friend.

"Anatoly! You came."

"Your messages suggested I didn't have a choice."

"Was true."

"Your husband has been threatening to call me every hour," Anatoly told Shane, shaking his hand warmly. "Ekaterina wanted to come as well. I believe Yurina found her before we even got inside."

For years, Anatoly had been the person Ilya called when something had gone terribly wrong. Shane remembered those days with a complicated gratitude. It was a relief to see him here for a celebration instead.

"How are you?" Shane asked.

"Peaceful. Mostly." Anatoly glanced toward the children, where Aleksandr was trying to convince Dmitri to crawl beneath a table. "Although I see neither of you has achieved that."

“We have six children,” Ilya said.

“Yes, a recipe for disaster.”

Shane laughed. Yurina spotted Anatoly then and ran over to hug him, proudly asking whether he'd heard about Columbia. He assured her that Ilya had informed him repeatedly. Watching her go, he shook his head.

“Eighteen. I remember when she was a baby.”

“Now she has a boyfriend,” Ilya said mournfully. “Arthur Pike.”

Anatoly raised an eyebrow. “The boy you helped raise?”

“Traitor.”

“Please tell me you haven't asked anyone to investigate him.” Ilya hesitated.

“Ilya.”

“Was only idea.”

Anatoly looked at Shane. “You have my sympathy.”

“I've had a lot of practice.”

Anatoly's expression warmed. “I'm glad things turned out well for you both.”

Shane smiled. “Me too.”

The Pikes arrived soon afterward, Hayden looking far too pleased with himself and Jackie openly amused. Arthur stood beside them, clearly aware that he was walking into trouble. Yurina spotted him immediately and went to take his hand. Ilya made a wounded noise.

“Rozy,” Hayden said cheerfully.

“Pike.”

“Good to see you too.”

Jackie kissed Shane's cheek. “Congratulations, sweetheart. Ignore these two.”

“That's the plan.”

Arthur cleared his throat. “Hi, Uncle Ilya.”

Ilya looked at him for a long moment. “Come here.”

Arthur stepped forward, nervous but determined. Shane watched Ilya's expression change as he looked from Arthur to Yurina. For all the dramatics, Ilya loved that boy. He'd known him since infancy, had helped him learn to skate, and trusted the people who'd raised him.

“You make her happy?” Ilya asked.

“I try to. I love her, Uncle Ilya.”

Yurina squeezed Arthur's hand. Ilya exhaled, then pulled him into a firm hug.

“Good. You keep doing that.”

Arthur laughed with relief. “I will.”

“Still watching you,” Ilya warned as he let go.

“I know.”

“And most people in this room will kill you if you hurt her. A few can make it so they never find your body.”

Hayden leaned toward Shane. “So, should we start planning the wedding?”

“Hayden,” Jackie said.

“What? Just asking.”

Ilya pointed at him. “You are why I cannot have nice things.”

Shane laughed, took his husband's hand, and steered him away before the argument could start again. Behind them, Yurina and Arthur were smiling at each other, and that was enough to settle the last of Shane's worry.

A Centaurs staff member arrived to collect them before anyone could cause further trouble. She explained the order of the ceremony, then looked directly at Ilya and asked him not to

improvise. Ilya protested until she reminded him of the championship parade when he'd stolen the mayor's microphone. Shane laughed and apologized on his behalf.

They followed her down the corridor, past photographs of generations of Centaurs players. Shane stopped in front of one from his first season in Ottawa: the two of them after a game, helmets off, grinning at each other like idiots.

“Look,” Ilya said. “Very handsome.”

“You haven't changed at all.”

“Exactly.”

“Except the gray hair. And the shoulder. And the reading glasses.”

“Reading glasses are for very small writing.”

Shane laughed, but his smile faded as he looked at the photograph again. “You nervous?”

“A little,” Ilya admitted.

That surprised him. Ilya reached for his hand.

“Last time,” he said simply.

“Yeah.”

They stood there for another moment before continuing toward the ice together.

The arena lights dimmed as they reached the entrance. Beyond the curtain, the crowd was already chanting. Shane had played in front of these fans for eighteen seasons and had heard them celebrate ten championships. He'd never felt quite like this before. There were no jerseys on their backs, no sticks in their hands, no game waiting to be won. Just two chairs at center ice and twenty thousand people who had come to say goodbye.

Ilya waved as they stepped out, because of course he did. Shane laughed and waved too, a bit more reserved. Their family sat near the ice, Dmitri bouncing in his seat, Sakura waving both arms, and Yurina holding up her phone. Shane caught sight of his parents and the friends who had helped them through so many different lives. It made his throat tighten before the ceremony had even begun.

The tribute video started with two boys. Teenage Shane, celebrating a junior goal with his hair sticking out from his helmet, and a younger Ilya laughing with his Russian teammates. Their NHL debuts followed, Montreal and Boston, then the rivalry years- shoving matches, interviews, Olympic highlights, and enough insults to make the audience roar with laughter. Shane sank lower in his chair when an old clip showed him glaring at Ilya after a cross-check.

“You broke my stick, asshole.” he whispered.

“Was cheap stick,” Ilya replied.

Then the screen changed to Shane in an Ottawa jersey, standing beside Ilya at their first press conference. There was their first goal as teammates, their first Stanley Cup together, and baby Yurina reaching for the trophy while Shane knelt beside it. Their daughter hid her face when the camera found her in the audience. The footage moved through the years- Nikolai learning to skate during family night at the rink, Mikhail asleep against Shane's chest, Aleksandr in a

jersey far too big for him, Sakura proudly showing a missing tooth during another Cup win, Dmitri waving a foam finger. There were ten championships in Ottawa, and there was the Irina Foundation, with children learning to skate and young omega athletes finding opportunities Shane once hadn't believed would exist.

The final clip was from a recent practice. Shane and Ilya sat side by side on the bench, helmets off. Ilya said something, Shane laughed, and Ilya reached over to pat his back. It was nothing remarkable, just the two of them being themselves. Somehow, it was what had the crowd getting louder.

The screen went black. THANK YOU appeared above the ice, and the arena rose to its feet.

Shane blinked hard. Ilya found his hand and held it while they watched Luca and Troy carry their framed jerseys to center ice. Luca hugged Shane and called him Dad, earning a laugh and a whispered, "You did good, kid." Troy embraced Ilya and told him it was about time he retired. Then the two enormous banners began their slow rise toward the rafters HOLLANDER-ROZANOV, number 24, and HOLLANDER-ROZANOV, number 81.

Shane watched until they stopped moving. Ilya leaned close to his ear.

"Mine is little higher."

Shane turned. "They're exactly the same height."

"Maybe."

And somehow, laughing at his husband beneath their names, Shane finally believed it was real.

Ilya went to the microphone first. "I'm not much for serious conversations. I like to joke, I like to make people feel comfortable. This team did that for me. We became a family. We still are, except now i'm one of the bosses instead of being a player. Thank you to the Centaurs,

from the ownership to all the coaches, staff, media team, you all made me feel at home and we created something magical.”

Then he set his notes aside.

“My children,” he said, looking toward the front row. “Yurina, Nikolai, Mikhail, Aleksandr, Sakura, Dmitri. I know I am the crazy father, but raising you all has been the joy of my life. Each one of you are my miracles, are why your dad and I wake up in the mornings.” Sakura nodded so enthusiastically that the camera caught her, and the arena laughed.

“Especially you,” Ilya told her, smiling. “But I love you. More than hockey, more than any Cup. Thank you for coming to games, even when you were bored, and for putting up with two fathers who were gone too much. You are best thing we ever did.”

He looked toward Shane. For once, he seemed to have trouble finding the next words.

“And Shane. I wrote very long speech about you. You would hate it, and then you would complain all the way home.”

“Probably,” Shane mouthed, smiling through the tears in his eyes.

“So I say only this. Thank you for coming up to me when we were kids so long ago. You gave me our family. Through all the ups and downs, my one purpose was always you. To get one smile or look from you, to stand across from you on a face-off, to look down the line and see you focused on the puck. You are the love of my life and we have so much more to look forward to.

The crowd quieted. Ilya kept his eyes on him for another moment, then glanced up at the banners.

“My mother would have loved this,” he said. “She would tell me my hair looks terrible. Then she would be very proud.” He took a breath. “David and Yuna, you took me in and became

my parents. You were there for me when I didn't deserve it and I will never forget that. David- Dad, thank you for the quiet mornings, for your love and unconditional support. Mama Yuna, thank you for filling most of the whole that i had in my heart for so long. And for making me your favorite son." that got a laugh and the camera caught Shane's eye roll. "Walter and Ruth, thank you for being our core, our friends, our example for Shane and I. We both owe you and love you and now we will get to crash into your lives more then ever."

"Thank you, Ottawa. For everything."

Shane leaned up to give him a kiss when he stepped away from the podium. "You made me cry, asshole."

"Was very good speech."

"You didn't read the one we wrote."

"Mine was better."

Shane laughed and took his place at the microphone. He'd given hundreds of interviews and plenty of speeches over the years, but this felt different. He thanked the fans first, joking that eighteen seasons was a long time to tolerate two men who argued as much as they did. He thanked Montreal for giving him the beginning he'd dreamed of as a child and Ottawa for welcoming him when his life had changed in ways he couldn't have predicted. He thanked the coaches, staff, teammates, and everyone at the Irina Foundation who'd helped turn an idea into something real.

He looked toward his parents. "Mom, Dad. Thank you for the early mornings, the long drives, and for never telling me I was crazy when I said I wanted to play in the NHL." Yuna was crying, and Shane smiled at her. He thanked Ruth and Walter for being there when he'd needed somewhere safe to land, then looked toward the rest of their family and friends. So many people had carried them through years that hadn't always been easy. He couldn't name them all without forgetting someone, but he hoped they knew.

“And our kids,” he said, finding six familiar faces. “I know we've missed things. We've tried really hard not to, but sometimes things got in the way. Thank you for loving us anyway. You made coming home the best part of every season. The love we have for you all is endless, and I can't be more excited to get to be at every accomplishment, game, award, movie night with you all going forward. We love you all so, so much.”

He paused and looked at Ilya, who was watching him with an expression Shane knew better than his own reflection.

“I spent a long time thinking hockey was the only thing I was allowed to want,” Shane said. “Then I met this guy. He was loud, obnoxious, and he was all consuming, and I couldn't stand him.”

Ilya grinned. The audience laughed and cheered.

“Turns out I was wrong about a lot of things.” Shane swallowed. “I got to spend most of my career playing beside the person I love. I know how lucky that makes me. So thank you, Ottawa, for giving us a place to do that. Ilya, I'm not the best with words, and sometimes I have trouble expressing myself, but I love you. Thank you for loving me back and making this extraordinary life with me.”

When he returned to his seat, Ilya stood and kissed him without caring that the cameras were watching. Shane laughed against his mouth as the crowd cheered.

Their children were invited onto the ice for the final photographs. Yurina hugged both of them so tightly Shane nearly lost his balance. Nikolai tried to look composed until Ilya pulled him into a hug, Mikhail was still filming, Aleksandr wanted to know whether the banners meant they could get free tickets forever, and Sakura and Dmitri argued about who got to stand closest to Papa. Shane looked at the ridiculous, beautiful group around him and thought of how impossible this would have seemed when he'd been young and frightened of wanting too much.

They posed for the cameras, waved to the crowd, and finally made their way back toward the tunnel. There were more hugs waiting, more congratulations, and probably another argument with Hayden. But for a moment, Shane and Ilya lingered behind the others, looking back at the emptying rink.

They decided to take a walk when they got home. The kids were getting settled for the night, some of their family would spend the night so they could watch the little kids.

Ilya laughed and reached for his hand. They walked slowly, fingers linked, talking about the children. Yurina would be leaving for Columbia, Nikolai had his own hockey future to figure out, Mikhail would probably make a documentary before he finished high school, and the younger three were growing faster than either father could keep up with. There was so much ahead of them that retirement wasn't going to be quiet, whatever Ilya claimed.

“Still can't believe Yurina has boyfriend,” Ilya muttered.

“She's happy.”

“I know.”

“And Arthur loves her.”

“I know that too.” Ilya squeezed his hand. “Doesn't mean I have to like Hayden being smug.”

“No one's asking you to do the impossible.”

They made their way to the gardens. Shane looked up at the sky, the stars in the inky sky giving them the perfect view. He'd spent his whole life chasing the next game, the next season, the next chance to prove he belonged. He was going to miss that. He might even

grieve it for a while. But when he looked at Ilya beside him, he knew he wouldn't be doing it alone.

“Hey, Hollander,” Ilya said.

Shane turned. The grin on Ilya's face was so familiar that for a second he could see the younger man he'd fallen in love with, all sharp edges and impossible confidence.

“Do you think you'll love me for the rest of your life?”

Shane smiled. “Yeah, Rozanov. I do.”

Ilya dragged them down onto the grass, not caring about their suits or Shane's protests. “We did good, malysh,” Ilya said softly.

Shane rested his forehead against his. “Yeah. We did.”

They stayed there for a while, until the chilly night air finally drove them back inside. Ilya mentioned that retirement might be a good time to get another dog. Shane reminded him that they already had Anya. Ilya claimed that was hardly enough for a house their size, and Shane told him they'd discuss it when he wasn't emotionally compromised by the ceremony.

“Good,” Ilya said. “So tomorrow.”

Shane groaned, and Ilya laughed all the way down the path home.

Shane woke at eight seventeen the next morning. For a moment, he lay still, waiting for the familiar jolt of panic that he'd overslept a workout. Then he remembered. No practice. No team meeting. No flight to catch. His career was over, and the world had somehow kept turning.

Ilya was still beside him, sprawled across the bed with one arm thrown over Shane's waist. Shane watched him for a moment before brushing the hair away from his forehead.

"You're staring," Ilya mumbled without opening his eyes.

"I'm allowed."

Ilya smiled and pulled him closer. "What time?"

"Eight seventeen."

"Beautiful. Retirement is excellent."

They might have stayed there longer if the sound of shouting downstairs hadn't reminded them that they still had six children. By the time they reached the kitchen, Nikolai was trying to make breakfast, Mikhail was filming the resulting mess, and Aleksandr was loudly insisting that the pancake batter had been perfectly fine before anyone touched it. Sakura was making a list of possible activities for the day, and Dmitri had somehow convinced himself they were going back to the arena.

"Daddy, can we go skating again?" he asked as Shane entered.

"Not today, buddy."

“Why not?”

“Because your fathers are retired,” Ilya announced grandly, stealing a piece of toast from Nikolai's plate. “We do nothing now. I think we should have a family pajama day.”

Nikolai took the toast back. “You can start by not eating my breakfast.”

Yurina appeared with her phone in her hand, smiling at a message. Ilya noticed immediately but, to Shane's surprise, said nothing. He simply kissed the top of her head when she passed. She leaned into him for a second before joining her brothers at the counter.

Shane poured himself coffee and watched them all. The kitchen was noisy, someone had spilled juice, and there was a strong possibility that Aleksandr was hiding something under his chair. It was ordinary. It was wonderful. After years of airports, hotels, early practices, and carefully arranged schedules, he could finally stay for all of it.

“Daddy?” Sakura asked. “Papa says we might get a puppy.”

Shane slowly turned toward his husband.

Ilya looked entirely innocent. “I said might.”

“We have to think about it baby.”

Dmitri was already shouting possible names, and Aleksandr announced that Stanley Cup Hollander-Rozanov would be an excellent choice. Mikhail began filming again. Nikolai told them no dog deserved that name, which only made everyone argue louder.

Ilya slipped an arm around Shane's waist and kissed his cheek. “You are smiling.”

“I'm considering making you sleep in the garage.”

“Very romantic.”

Shane turned to look at him. He'd fallen in love with a boy he was supposed to hate and spent years afraid of what that love might cost. He could never have imagined this kitchen, these children, the quiet certainty of being loved so completely that he no longer thought to question it.

Ilya brushed his thumb across Shane's cheek. “Happy, malysh?”

Shane looked past him at the children, then back into the face he'd loved for most of his adult life.

“Yeah,” he said. “I am.”

“Good.”

Then Ilya kissed him again, because apparently all those years still weren't enough.

And Shane, who had once been so afraid of wanting him, kissed him back without a second thought.

Chapter End Notes

Well, y'all. We made it.

So, from the bottom of my heart, thank you for loving my version of Shane and Ilya. Thank you for giving them a chance, and thank you for staying until the end. 🥹❤️

This may be the end of their story here, but I might have a few more universes waiting for them. 🙄😈 maybe one that will be posted before the end of the weekend lol.

All my love, and thank you for everything. ❤️🍷💕

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