

Shane Hollander Doesn't Do Cheat Days

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/83764621) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/83764621>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Heated Rivalry (TV) , Game Changers Heated Rivalry - All Media Types , Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid
Relationship:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Shane Hollander , Ilya Rozanov
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Olympics , Alternate Universe - Chefs , Alternate Universe , Hockey Player Shane Hollander , Chef Ilya Rozanov , Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov in Love , Sexual Tension , Food Metaphors , Opposites Attract , Hand Feeding , Teasing , Flirting , Top Ilya Rozanov , Bottom Shane Hollander , Italy , Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympics , Anxiety , Angst with a Happy Ending , Implied/Referenced Suicide , Ilya Rozanov Misses Irina Rozanova , Praise Kink , Hurt/Comfort , Mutual Pining , Ilya Rozanov Needs A Hug , Shane Hollander Has an Eating Disorder , Older Characters , Masturbation , Oral Sex , Sex , Implied/Referenced Sex , Idiots in Love , Autistic Shane Hollander , Ilya Rozanov is Obsessed With Shane Hollander , Soft Ilya Rozanov , Fast Burn , If you consider 35 being older (I hope not I am 35) , Happily Ever After , Ilya Rozanov Loves Shane Hollander , Shane Hollander Loves Ilya Rozanov , Shane Hollander is Whipped For Ilya Rozanov , Ilya Rozanov Takes Care of Shane Hollander
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2026-04-26 Completed: 2026-08-19 Words: 46,967 Chapters: 5/5

Shane Hollander Doesn't Do Cheat Days

by [MmeBovary91](#)

Summary

Shane Hollander doesn't do cheat days.

Not with his training. Not with his diet. Not with his life.

Then a ridiculously attractive Russian-Italian chef in Milano force-feeds him the best ravioli he's ever had and calls him a good boy and things spiral from there.

Between Olympic pressure, impossible expectations, and a connection neither of them is ready to name, Shane finds himself unraveling in ways he doesn't understand.

Chapter 1: Rivalries and Raviolis

Chapter Notes

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

February 5th, 2026

Shane Hollander was selected first overall by the Montreal Metros in the 2008 MLH Entry Draft and won rookie of the year after scoring the most points ever (132) by a rookie.

Shane Hollander made his Olympic debut at Vancouver in 2010 at the age of 19 as the youngest member of Team Canada's men's hockey team among an unprecedented media frenzy. There were articles about him everywhere. Not only the youngest, but also the first Asian-Canadian player to make the country's Olympic team. Then he was called again for the 2014 Sochi Olympics, before the MLH decided that players in the League were not allowed to take time off the regular season to join the national team.

Milano – Cortina 2026 was the first time that MLH players were allowed to interrupt the regular season to take part in the Olympics again, so the media frenzy was back with a vengeance. An element that fed into the madness was certainly the fact that Shane was universally considered the hottest player in the MLH (both People and Cosmopolitan had had plenty to write about him ever since he'd turned eighteen, which he had found borderline creepy) and there were as many fan pages about his goals as there were about his freckles and, to his dismay, his abs.

He didn't look at media much, personally. His mother and manager Yuna had always managed his official accounts. He had a personal Instagram page with exactly three posts that was private and basically unknown to anyone but a few close friends, and he had decided not to follow any official hockey pages with it because he specifically did not want to know what people were saying about him. If there was ever anything important in the public discourse about him his mother would tell him anyway. Not that he had ever needed to deal with a media crisis, his image was pretty immaculate.

Structure and predictability were the pillars of his life. He woke up at 5:45 every morning. Ate the same breakfast every morning. Ran the same amount of miles on every odd day or worked out at the gym for exactly 60 minutes on every even day of the week. He played hockey, read about hockey, talked about hockey, dreamed about hockey sometimes. Usually weird nightmares where the puck got stuck to the ice and he kept hitting it until his stick broke and everybody laughed at him. On the few days off from the League he would show up for sponsorship events organized by one of the brands that paid him for sponsorship deals, or he would participate in the social media events organized by his team, sign hockey pucks for hospital kids, take pictures with shelter puppies that needed a home. He did not mind that he barely had any free days throughout the years because he did not like the idea of "free". Free felt empty, free felt scary.

Shane Hollander only ate dietitian-approved, boring, protein-packed, healthy meals, which mostly meant a combination of Greek yogurt, steamed salmon, grilled chicken, broccoli, brown rice or quinoa. Dressing always on the side. A journalist had asked him, in the press conference after his last MHL game before the Olympics break, what Italian foods he was most excited to try in Milan

and he had blanked completely. He must have looked lost because the journalist had felt compelled to come to his rescue.

“Good old pizza, maybe?”

“Yeah... Sure,” he had said, though he did not remember the last time he had eaten a slice of pizza. His 9th birthday probably.

But now he was getting off a plane in *Milano* (he’d rehearsed the correct Italian pronunciation, based on YouTube videos more times than he cared to admit, together with how to say words like *grazie*, *buongiorno*, *sì*, *no*) and his life was going to look all different. He knew his mother had packed his favorite workout outfits in his luggage, two of his many white cotton pajamas because he was not sure he could fall asleep wearing anything else, and the noise cancelling headphones that he had learned to use when noisy, overstimulating environments could not be avoided.

But the food was going to be different, his roommate was going to be some almost unknown guy from a different MLH team, his free time was going to be too much, and too... *different*. People expected him to have fun, to explore, to indulge in Aperol spritz and pasta, to take a train to Lake Como and fall in love with a dark-haired Italian girl for a day. His teammate Hayden, who hadn’t made the Olympic roster once, had said as much at least ten times. “Did you know that Milano once had waterways like Venice? They were mostly filled and covered in the 1930s, but there are still two, called Navigli. That’s pretty cool, right? Are you going to see them?”

Shane was convinced he had bought a Lonely Planet guide of Italy or something, based on how many random facts a guy who had never left North America suddenly seemed to know. He had not asked whether he had bought it before the Olympic team was announced in the hope to use it himself, or after, to live vicariously through Shane.

But Shane had no interest in aperitivo or food traditions, Canada had enough lakes to last him a lifetime, and girls... well, girls were definitely not in his comfort zone.

He had tried dating a few over the last few years, but it had always been awkward.

He knew he was supposed to find them sexy, but he just couldn’t force himself to get excited at the idea of touching a girl.

Not long after his MLH draft announcement the number of girls interested in him had definitely spiked, and the offers had gotten bold. He remembered, clear as day, the night after his first official MLH match, when he was out at a club with his team and a girl had basically dragged him to the bathroom stall after a 5-minute conversation to give him head. Being at a club was a nightmare enough for him. He hated that the music was so loud, the floor so sticky, and unknown shoulders kept bumping into his personal space without warning. The bathroom had a foul smell, the toilet hadn’t even been flushed properly. He felt nauseous as the girl stuck her tongue in his mouth and unzipped his pants to grope his flaccid, uncooperative cock. He had blabbed that he was sorry, that he had had too much to drink (*lies*) and then closed his eyes and tried to think of something that would make his body react the way he was supposed to and no matter how hard he tried to focus on something appropriate, the only image popping up behind his eyelids was that barely clothed male model in the Calvin Klein campaign that had been plastered everywhere on the city walls.

He hadn’t lingered too long on that. He was not allowed to be anything but a good old heterosexual manly man if he wanted to make it out of the MLH locker rooms with his career in one piece.

When the Canada Hockey team landed in Milano Linate it was late morning and there were a handful of journalists waiting with their microphones and their cameras to get a glimpse of the hockey stars out of their natural element and in the real world.

Shane answered a few questions with the usual practiced tone.

Yes, he was honored and excited to have been chosen for the Olympics once again, especially as team Captain.

Yes, he had heard that his teammates had voted him “most valuable player” on the team in a recent CNN interview, he was honored and humbled.

Yes, he was grateful the MLH had paused the regular season to give them a chance to fly out there.

Which player was the most likely to spend the most time in the penalty box? Well, he hoped the game was going to have as little of that as possible.

When he finally got to his room in the Olympic village he felt exhausted, but he knew he could not fall asleep at midday, or his body would never adapt to this time zone. A nap was out of the question.

He took his clothes out of the suitcase, lined them carefully in the two little drawers his room provided. Took out his pajamas and placed a pair on his pillow, which he found a bit lacking in terms of consistency, but overall acceptable. The clothes weren't folded in a perfect square, so he folded them again.

He texted his mom to reassure her that he had made it to his room safely, then he was about to sit down and start reading a book when his coach knocked on the door to let everyone know the team was going to have dinner at a Michelin starred restaurant in Milan that night, reservations had been made for 7 pm.

Shane grimaced. He had hoped he'd be given the chance to gulp down two protein bars and a bottle of water, take a shower and go to sleep, instead it seemed he'd have to get dressed, guesstimate the macros of whatever fancy options the restaurant was offering, chitchat with his team and go to sleep much later than he had hoped.

He sighed, nodded, then started practicing the fake smile he was going to wear all afternoon.

His roommate, Jack, a young defenseman that usually played in the Pittsburgh team, was a lot more enthusiastic than him.

“Hey, do you want to go check out the Duomo square before dinner? A bunch of us are getting a cab, the restaurant is only 10 minutes from there.”

Shane offered him the first of many fake smiles.

“Sure, why not?”

At 3 pm Shane started to think that maybe being in *Milano* (yes, he kept pronouncing it obnoxiously accurately) was not all that bad.

Sure, the Duomo square was hectic, there were people taking selfies everywhere, and the pigeons were weirdly unafraid of humans, but the overall view was undeniably spectacular.

The Duomo was faintly illuminated by the pinkish sunset light, its pointy shapes stretching towards the sky beyond what Shane could see without stretching his neck.

He was fascinated by the many shapes adorning the façade, snakes, and bodies, and leaves, and outstretched arms standing still for centuries as the world around them buzzed and changed. He was even more pleased by the inside of the church itself, so dark, and quiet, and smelling of incense and cleanliness.

His teammates opted out of visiting the church and made their way to the Terrazza Aperol, which sounded like a nightmare to Shane. Why would he wait in line to drink an overpriced diet soda (he was certainly not going to have an Aperol Spritz, way too much sugar), sitting on uncomfortable plastic chairs while being slapped by the February wind on a small terrace crowded with way more people than fire safety law should have allowed, for the pleasure to overlook the same square in which he had been standing?

Nope.

“I think I’ll have a look at the inside of the Church, then maybe walk for a while, I’ll catch up with you guys later, text me when you are done.”

Nobody had seemed surprised. He was happy to be left alone. Would they secretly vote him least likely to make friends? Maybe. Did he care? Probably not as much as he should have.

Shane explored the interiors of the Duomo like he had all the time in the world, which he basically had because his dinner reservation was hours away. He slowed down his steps in front of the statue of a saint he did not recognize, some old, bald man wearing a cape.

He was fascinated by the way in which the artist had detailed every muscle fiber, tendon, and vein in the body, like he was looking at raw flesh instead of a full body. He realized with a shiver that the man was in fact not wearing a cape around his shoulders, he was wearing his own skin, draped over his flayed body, which was why the supposed fabric actually had feet.

San Bartolomeo, a little tag explained, a martyr that had been skinned and beheaded by unfaithful people while he was spreading the gospel.

Shane had never been religious, but he was fascinated by stories of the bible for their brutality the same way he was fascinated by Greek mythology or ancient fables. The horrors of these stories were a welcome distraction from the horrors of the real world.

He bit his nail, as he often did, and wondered what it felt like to be skinned alive. If it started with the same tingle he’d get when he pulled too much at the little cuticles around his nails. If it was just

like that, you pull at the stubborn piece of reddened skin too much and – whoosh – your whole skin comes off in one satisfying swoop.

He kept walking, slowly, breathing in the cold air and the humming sounds of people in prayer around him.

Ave Maria, piena di grazia, il Signore è con Te... Santa Maria, Madre di Dio, prega per noi peccatori, adesso e nell'ora della nostra morte... Ave Maria, piena di grazia...

An old lady dressed in black was lighting a candle in front of an altar where a Madonna was sculpted in marble, reciting words in Italian that Shane did not need to understand to know she was praying.

Again, he was not religious, but he had always envied those who grew up believing there was someone out there looking out for the good of the world, believing there was order in the chaos, a purpose for everything.

He closed his eyes and tried to focus on the words of the praying woman, but he kept getting confused because there was another voice reciting what sounded like the same prayer no more than a few steps away, in front of the next little altar covered in candles and melted wax, and the two voices were annoyingly out of sync.

Shane took a step, like he was drawn to the other voice more, for some reason. It was a man's voice. A low rumble of words, weirdly soothing, like a velvet glove caressing his ears.

...Madre di Dio, prega per noi peccatori, adesso e nell'ora della nostra morte... Madre... mamma...

The prayer stopped, suddenly, and Shane opened his eyes just in time to watch a tall, blonde man quickly step away from the altar and head for the door. It was too dark for him to make out any other detail, but he felt oddly drawn to follow that stranger. A ridiculous thought.

He stopped and looked at the painting behind the candles, instead. Sant'Agata, according to yet another useful tag. She was looking up at angels in the sky, one hand in front of her bloody chest, pointed towards the blessings of heaven, and the other one resting on a plate where her severed breasts lay bare, like discarded cuts of meat. She was the protector of abused women, breast cancer victims, and wet nurses, Shane read.

Suddenly the air felt a little too cold, a little too stuffy. He needed to get out.

When Shane got out of the church it was dark outside.

February days were apparently short in Italy too. For some dumb reason he had pictured Italy like a land of eternal sunshine and summer, which, in some ways it was, compared to Canada if that was as cold and dark as it got in Winter.

In the darkness of the square his eyes were drawn to the well-lit little ice rink that had been set up just in front of the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele. The Olympics rings that decorated the fencing were a clear indicator that this set up was a temporary thing meant to attract the attention of city goers and remind them that the Olympics were indeed about to start, but Shane did not mind that it looked so touristy. He was feeling so odd and out of place that the ice was calling to him like a motherly embrace.

He made his way through the crowd towards the ice rink entrance and one of the volunteers minding the line noticed he was wearing an athlete's jacket.

"Hey man," the volunteer shouted, gesturing towards him "do you play for Canada? What sport?"

Shane was taken aback a little. Canadians were so serious about their hockey that he could not stop at a gas station without someone asking him for a selfie, so the fact that his fleece was the only thing giving away his athlete status was very new. He suddenly felt the tingle of anonymity like a shiver along his body.

"Yeah, hockey team"

"Cool, we have some hockey gear, do you want to shoot a few pucks with the kids?"

Shane was not particularly eager to do that. He was hoping to blend back into the crowd and not be recognized for a while longer, but he was media trained enough that he knew the answer could only be "Of course, I'd love to"

And so that was how Shane Hollander, Montreal Metros captain, 4 times Stanley Cup winner, two times Conn Smythe, Art Ross, and Hart Memorial trophy winner, and current MLH highest scorer, ended up throwing very slow pucks towards Italian children in the middle of Piazza Duomo while wearing very uncomfortable blue plastic rental skates that were probably not his size.

People took a few pictures, so he had to remember to smile. Ten minutes went by before he felt like he had a right to leave, except, someone stopped him in his tracks as he was about to undo his skates on the bench.

"You want to play against someone your size?"

Shane looked up from his skates.

He saw a man, that he estimated was not quite his size, but rather a few centimeters taller than him and with much wider shoulders, wearing a dark wool hat over blonde curls and a matching dark wool coat. His skin was more golden than it had any right to be in the dead of winter, but he was probably Italian, judging from the accent, so that surely helped him in that department.

His voice was strangely both familiar and excitingly new.

"I beg your pardon?" was the only thing Shane managed to say in reply.

"Oh, I don't need to pardon you, you will have to pardon me. You will not be so nice when I beat you."

Shane suddenly realized this Italian stranger was challenging him to play hockey and he could not hold back a little, cocky laughing sound.

"Oh, that's not happening"

The man just smiled and shrugged.

Yep, this challenge thing was definitely happening now.

Shane got back on his skates and grabbed a puck. There were other people on the ice rink, kids and adults. This was ridiculous, he could not be challenged to play in such conditions.

He had to figure out a way to separate a part of the ice from innocent bystanders before simulating some sort of face off.

“I can hear you thinking” was all the stranger had to say to him before he skated past him really fast bumping against his shoulder and Shane was lost in the overwhelming feeling that he was too close, close enough to feel his warmth and linger in his smell for a second too long before he realized the guy had stolen the puck from under him.

“Fuck” he muttered, before jolting to skate behind him, but it was too little too late, the ice rink was so small that the other guy had already reached the net at the end and shot a perfect goal. Shane was actually annoyed.

“Well, that’s not fair, we hadn’t even started, I wasn’t...”

“Blah, blah, blah... *mamma mia*, do you ever relax? It’s just a stupid game”

Shane frowned.

“No it isn’t. It’s an Olympics sport”

The handsome stranger replied by laughing quietly and shaking his head. He was already taking off his skates.

“And I didn’t catch your name” Shane added – equally annoyed and intrigued.

“Ah, that is because I didn’t give it to you. This was fun, I’ve got to go, though. Good night, Shane Hollander”

And just like that, he was off the ice and into the crowd. Shane just stood there, uneasy and unsure of what had just happened.

“What the fuck” he muttered to himself. This day was not going the way he had expected when it had started.

At exactly 6:55 pm Shane was arriving at the restaurant that his coach had booked and a waiter was escorting him to his team’s table.

He had googled the place beforehand and found out that they only did a tasting menu that changed weekly, nothing à la carte, so it would be pretty fucking hard for Shane to know what he was eating beforehand, which annoyed him deeply.

He had also read that the whole place was vegan, which on the one hand maybe meant healthier than if the team had picked a KFC for the night, but also where was he going to get his protein?

Once everyone made their way to the table (the Aperol spritz guys were the last ones to arrive, visibly tipsy and looking very cold), the waiter explained the menu for the night, starting with a first course of artichoke ravioli in a vegan brown butter sauce, and asked for any allergies.

After a gluten free request and a shellfish allergy that got a condescending “we are a vegan restaurant, don’t worry, no fish here”, Shane tried slowly raising his hand.

“Yes, sir?”

The waiter smiled politely but coldly.

“Uhm... I am on a macrobiotic diet, I kind of don’t eat a lot of things, but it’s hard to explain, so... uhm... maybe if you could just ask the chef to put like the butter sauce thing on the side, maybe...”

The look he got in response was as cold as death.

“I will ask the chef, I cannot guarantee, ok?”

Shane nodded sheepishly. He hated being a nuisance, which was why he’d rather just shove protein bars into his mouth until he hit the necessary amount of calories for the day and get back to business without being a pain in the ass for the restaurant industry.

Ten minutes later the first course arrived, and Shane’s raviolis looked gorgeous, except they were drowning in an oily sauce that probably had 2,000 calories per spoonful. He sighed and raised his hand. The waiter was immediately at his side.

“Yes?”

“Uhm... could you ask the chef for sauce on the side, maybe? Would that be possible...? I am so sorry”

The young man swiped the plate from under him and headed back to the kitchen, only to be back 30 seconds later with the same plate.

“Unfortunately the chef says it is indeed not possible, but he’d like to let you know why himself if you’d like to follow me to the kitchen.”

Shane’s face turned red.

“I... I did not mean to offend... I...”

His roommate, who was sitting next to him, and already half-done stuffing ravioli in his mouth gave him a big shove on his back.

“Oh come on Hollander, stop being so perfect and have a cheat day. You’ll get us all expelled from Italy if you don’t appreciate these people’s food. Go and tell the chef you’d like some extra fucking butter and get back here.”

Shane was mortified but he was too polite to do anything but follow the waiter towards the back of the restaurant.

“Wait here,” the young man said, once he had led Shane to a small, quite room on the side of an empty bar area, “Chef Rozanov will be here with you shortly.”

Rozanov. That did not sound Italian.

Shane barely had time to finish that thought before the kitchen doors swung open and a tall blonde man in his late thirties wearing a white chef uniform stepped outside, swinging a kitchen towel on his shoulder.

He was carrying a small saucepan and a deadly smile, which was all too familiar to Shane, considering this was the man that had just scored a goal against him in the tiny ice rink a few hours before.

“You?” was the very elaborate and smug response that his brain managed to put together. Not his greatest comeback.

“*Ah, io, esatto.* You recognize me, yes? When the waiter told me some hockey player guy wanted the ravioli without the sauce I also recognized you immediately, you know.”

He was now standing very close to Shane, leaning on one elbow that was resting on the empty bar counter next to the saucepan. Shane finally had the time to appreciate how tall and muscular he was. The fabric of his shirt sleeves was struggling to contain his biceps, covered in tattoos and bulging veins as he put his weight on his elbow and stared Shane dead in the eyes.

“I am sorry” was all Shane had to say, regretting it immediately because his Canadian politeness had taken over his body before he remembered that this Rozanov guy was actually being insufferable.

“I beg your pardon. I am sorry. You apologize a lot, Hollander. It’s not a good look. And neither is asking a chef to change his recipe. Would I ask you to play hockey slowly because I want time to see where you go because it is more convenient for me? No. You want butter on the side? I’ll put it on the side if you promise you’ll pour it on the ravioli before you eat them, will you though?”

“That was not the plan” Shane admitted.

“No, I thought not. That is why I sent you the plate as I intend it to be eaten. You see, the artichoke is cooked at exactly 90 degrees for two hours to keep all the sweetness in, and the vegan butter is browned just enough to get those nutty, roasted flavors and then cooled down completely for perfect thickness, and once you put that together, hot and cold, smokey and sweet, it’s a fucking orgasm in your mouth. But if you only eat the artichoke you won’t get that, will you, now, Hollander? Your taste buds will only react to the cynarin in the artichoke leaves, all you’ll taste will be the sweetness and you will think that Ilya Rozanov cannot cook for shit, and we don’t want that, do we?”

“I suppose we don’t”

Shane was half fascinated, half terrified about the reaction his body was having to these words. His mind went back to the skinned San Bartolomeo in the Duomo. He thought now he had a bit more of an idea of what it felt like to have somebody peel away a layer of you and leave you raw and exposed. Plus, his head was stuck on the way Rozanov had grinned while saying “a fucking orgasm in your mouth” so he barely registered that the man had stuck a fork in the saucepan and gotten a buttery ravioli out of it.

“Here”

He lifted it towards Shane's mouth with the same unforgiving boldness with which he had caught him by surprise on the ice rink.

Shane's mouth wasn't moving. His brain wasn't really working either. He was just standing there awkwardly, hands in his own pockets. Eyes to the ground. The room suddenly felt smaller, and like a lot of air had been sucked out of it. Why did this feel so personal, so intimate?

"I am sorry... I did not think... I am... I just.."

"Oh my God, Hollander, you are so boring, shut up" and with that Rozanov, grabbed his chin with his left hand and lifted his face. Shane's eyes were forced to get off the floor and found themselves staring up at the man's blue eyes. Rozanov's fingers pushed gently on his cheeks, and his lips parted. It felt slightly obscene, the way the chef caressed his lower lip with his thumb and Shane thought for a second that he was about to stick it into his mouth, and he realized with instantaneous horror that he would not have minded if he had – actually something warm and obscene coiled low in his stomach at the thought of sucking on it. Except that wasn't Rozanov's plan apparently, because he took advantage of that moment of stupor to sneak the ravioli past Shane's parted lips instead.

For a second Shane was completely stunned. The first thing he felt was the cold buttery sauce meeting the roof of his mouth with a chilling sensation; it tasted smokey, rich, earthy, like the crust on the marshmallows he'd roasted on open fires as a kid outside his parents' cottage, fingers sticking to the gooey insides as he slid the treat off a black, burned out stick. Then there was the contrast with the steaming ravioli once he bit into it, in both texture and temperature. The rich inside was hot, smooth, slightly bitter at first, but then it left a mildly sugary finish on his tongue. Just as Rozanov had said, the sauce began to surge through the sweetness of the artichoke and balanced it out again. Thick and oily, it had coated his mouth and it wasn't going away, staying in the form of a wave of flavor that had a faint yet full aroma impossible to ignore. Overall, it was a taste that Shane could hardly describe, if he had been forced to, he would probably say it tasted like the sound of skate edges sliding on the crisp new ice of a Canadian lake in November, when the reassuring *swoosh* of the blade and the damning creaking of the still thin ice can sound just the same, success or doom mixed together at every step in the most thrilling way. Which made no sense, obviously, but that was the only image in his brain right now. All he could think of. Well, that and Rozanov's fingers still on his face, pressing lightly into his burning flesh. His cheeks felt unbearably hot.

Shane stared down intently at the chef's mouth, stretched into a satisfied, cocky grin, and he let out a long sigh, feeling his breath rich and buttery.

"There," Rozanov said lazily as Shane swallowed down the last morsel of food, "Good boy."

Then he let go of Shane's face and patted him on the shoulder.

"Now you will go and eat the rest of your dinner, *si? Bene. Buon appetito*"

And with a wink he disappeared back into the kitchen.

Shane ate most of his meal in silence that night. He forgot to count calories. He could only think that his ears felt like they were about to combust. That his face felt different where it had been touched. He kept looking over his shoulder to see if Rozanov would get out of the kitchen, but he never did. He probably also checked whether he was still wearing his own skin or had left it on the floor like a used towel.

He kept replaying the interaction in his mind, wondering what had happened. Was this normal? Was this an Italian thing? People often talked about cultural shocks when travelling to Italy, about how the Italians were very serious about their food and you better not try to order a cappuccino in the afternoon, but he had never heard of chefs force feeding their food to clients who refused to try it while holding their face.

His teammates meanwhile were loud and sociable, shouting to each other from across the long table, commenting on everything and everyone around them, eating everything that was put in front of them greedily. They swallowed down the food after all taking the same soulless pictures of the dish from above that would end up in their Instagram feeds with hashtags like #italianstyle or #foodporn or something like that. It didn't look like they cared about how it tasted. At some point the waiters put down a dish that they described as "glazed tempeh, pickled apricot and fire roasted mushrooms served on spicy mustard sauce" and as soon as they had left, someone made a joke about going to McDonald's after this for "*real food*". Shane felt oddly offended, for no good reason.

The whole journey back to the Olympic village felt like a blur. His roommate and a couple of other guys had decided to stay for one last drink and maybe a cheeseburger before heading to bed, so Shane was alone when he got out of his clothes and into the shower.

Ilya Rozanov's face was printed behind his eyelids. His cocky, crooked smile when he had teased him, both on the ice and at the restaurant. His unruly golden curls that looked so soft, like the perfect consistency to run your fingers through. The golden chain that was barely visible around his neck, dipping under his shirt.

Shane wasn't sure when he had stopped lathering his body with soap and started touching his hardening cock, but he definitely had. He leaned his forehead against the shower tiles and moved his right hand faster, pleasure pooling quickly in his gut. He reached for his balls with the other hand, squeezing and pulling lightly.

He thought of Rozanov's hands. He moved his own hand towards his ass, barely playing with it, fingers circling his hole.

It was a timid movement, unlike that of the hand that had grabbed his chin like he had a right to, that had caressed his cheeks oh so possessively. And his mouth had been so close. So, incredibly close.

Good boy.

The memory of those words apparently was enough to make Shane come. He only had to give himself a couple more strokes and then he spilled all over the shower walls with a moan. He hoped the sound of the water running had drowned out any incriminating noises in case his next-door neighbors were in their room.

He suddenly felt exhausted. Overwhelmed. And deeply, painfully ashamed. The rush was gone and he would have to live with the thought that he had spent his first evening at the Olympics jerking

off to the thought of a strange Italian man named Ilya Rozanov.



Chapter End Notes

August 19th note: Hello! If this fic is showing up as "updated" for you just know I did not add a secret chapter, I just updated a few things in the story I published last spring. I went back to it with a fresh set of eyes after a few months and realized I had started writing with food as a metaphor in mind and then sort of lost track of the metaphor along the way because I got caught up in a bunch of other things. So I went back this week and added more passages to this point, changed a few details, tried to make some minor improvements. No big changes to the plot overall, but I think I like this fic a lot more now and hopefully you readers will too! I will now disappear and leave you to my original end notes just below:

So, I don't think I ever wrote an AU in my life and up until a few months ago I rarely read them. Until I found some truly great ones on AO3 and realized how fun this can be. My favorite part is slipping in lines from the original work in completely different contexts, like "Hollander, you are so boring" before force feeding him the ravioli.

Why a chef in Italy, you ask? Well, I am Italian, I have lived in Milan for over a decade, the Olympics were just there, I wanted Ilya to speak Italian, plus the restrictive eating vs the joy of indulgent food... I thought there was something here I could work with. You'll let me know if you agree.

Next chapter will be from Ilya's POV so you'll get a bit more background story as to why he has a Russian name, what his life looks like, how he came to be a chef in Milan. There will also be a lot more Italian obviously.

I have written down the wireframe of what I want the story to look like. It should be 4 chapter, maybe 5 if they turn out to be too long. I guess we'll see! I put a "mature" rating even though this first chapter is basically PG-13 because there will be some intimate scenes in later chapters.

Comments and kudos are greatly appreciated.

And here is a translation for all the Italian words:

- grazie, buongiorno, sì, no --> thank you, good morning, yes, no
- Ave Maria, piena di grazia, il Signore è con Te... Santa Maria, Madre di Dio, prega per noi peccatori, adesso e nell'ora della nostra morte... Ave Maria, piena di grazia... --> Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee... Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death... Hail Mary, full of grace...
- ...Madre di Dio, prega per noi peccatori, adesso e nell'ora della nostra morte... Madre... mamma... --> Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death... mother... mom...
- Mamma mia --> literally means mother, but it's a general expression of annoyance like "oh gosh"
- Ah, io, esatto. --> Ah, me, exactly
- Sì? Bene. Buon appetito --> Yes? Good. Enjoy your meal.

Chapter 2: Bait

Chapter Notes

This fic uses a work skin to simulate text messages and Google searches. You may turn it off by clicking 'Hide Creator's Style', but it will affect the formatting slightly.

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

February 5th, 2026

Ilya Rozanov won the Michelin Guide Young Chef Award at just 21, a milestone that set him on a path through some of the world's most respected kitchens across Italy.

At 23, he received the *Food & Wine Italy* award for the best chef under 35 – becoming the youngest chef to ever receive the title and earning a chance to work with Alexis Gauthier on his new restaurant opening in Milan, before he was swept away by Rasmus Kofoed in Copenhagen for a short while, to then get back to Italy for a Kirk Haworth project in Milan again.

Within the culinary community Ilya Rozanov, at 35, was a bit of a star. He was not TV famous, he abhorred the idea of selling his craft short for 15 minutes of fame, the way several of his colleagues were doing on reality TV shows and YouTube channels.

He appreciated the reverence of the few more than the love of the masses.

He enjoyed keeping all his focus on his kitchen, not spreading it thin on photoshoots, and social media likes, and TV appearances, and fluff articles on Food & Wine. But he was a well-known name for anyone who was used to fine dining and if you wanted a table at the restaurant where he was head chef in Milan you would normally have to book at least 3 months in advance.

Or be a super star. Possibly an Olympic sport star.

Ilya had already snoozed his phone 3 times that morning when he saw a message from his friend Svetlana, who managed the bookings for the various establishments that made up his place of work – the restaurant, the bar, the night club.

←  Whatsapp chat with: Sveta  

Received Message: Il mondo è meraviglioso. Non indovinerai mai a chi ho appena riservato un tavolo per questa sera

The world is a wonderful place. You could never guess who booked a table for tonight.

Ilya groaned. Last minute reservation meant VIP, meant annoying, it meant either stuck up rich people with more money than taste buds, or famous, pretentious self-proclaimed influencers and TV stars that had pulled strings to be able to take a selfie in the hardest to book place in Milan.

←  Whatsapp chat with: Sveta  

Received Message: Il mondo è meraviglioso. Non indovinerai mai a chi ho appena riservato un tavolo per questa sera

Sent Message: Stasera? E che cazzo, non eravamo già al completo?

Received Message: Sì, ma c'è sempre un posto per un gran bel pezzo d'uomo. O per 25.



Sent Message: 25?! Mi prendi per il culo. Chi cazzo ha prenotato, una squadra di calcio con tutti gli avversari?!

Received Message: No, di Hockey. L'intera squadra del Canada. Incluso quel bonazzo di Shane Hollander, sexiest man alive nel... 2015 credo, ma lui invecchia come il vino, quindi...



I: Tonight? What the fuck, weren't we fully booked already?

S: Yes, but there is always room for a good-looking stud. Or 25.

I: 25?! Are you fucking kidding me. Who the fuck booked a table – a whole football team plus their opponents?!

S: No, a hockey team. The whole Canada hockey team. Which includes that delicious man Shane Hollander, sexiest man alive in... 2015 I think, though he ages like fine wine, so...

Ilya was mumbling an endless stream of curses. The fourth alarm went off, he turned it off, swore out loud once more, sent an emoji of a raised middle finger to Svetlana, then threw the phone as far away from him as possible across the bed and stuck his head under the pillow, also pulling up his comforter over it for good measure.

He wasn't going to fall asleep again, not with the thought of having to prepare 25 extra servings for the night. Did he even have enough artichokes in the fridge? He'd have to text his sous-chef to make sure, or send him straight to the farmer's market before all the good artichokes were gone. That dickhead would buy the 2-day-old withered ones if Ilya wasn't looking.

Fuck it, he'd go to the market himself.

Fuck, what a nuisance.

His mind was also spinning in another direction, though.

The hockey team. Had it been any other sport, Ilya would have been purely annoyed.

But he liked hockey.

He loathed football stars, who thought they were the shit in Italy, and he'd never played football himself despite it being the obvious choice for any Italian kid. Scratched knees and a semi-deflated black and white football lodged under the armpit were the staple of most of his friend's childhood. But he was not like most of his friends.

His mother was Italian, but his father was Russian, and when he was little he used to spend his winters in Russia and his summers in Italy, which was how he had learned to play hockey. The bite of the cold, the feeling of freedom as he slid away on thin blades, the connection he felt with his hockey stick as an extension of his arm were something that a dried out grass patch and a ball waiting to be kicked away had never given him. But it had all ended when he was 10 and his family had had to move to a small seaside town in Italy permanently. Good luck playing ice hockey there.

Ilya lazily outstretched a hand and felt around for his phone. Once he had it, he snuck it under the comforter and pulled up a Google tab.



Shane Hollander

- Shane Hollander **Olympics 2026**
- Shane Hollander **Montreal Metros**
- Shane Hollander **net worth**
- Shane Hollander **best goals**
- Shane Hollander **injury**
- **is** Shane Hollander **single**
- **did** Shane Hollander **date Rose Landry**

Google Search
I'm Feeling Lucky

The first picture that popped up was a headshot of the Canadian team's captain, next to a preview of his Wikipedia page. Just below there were a number of articles about his recent wins, his team, and his interviews about the upcoming Olympics.

Ilya scoffed, like Shane Hollander was being pretentious on purpose, with his perfect little page and everything.

Ilya did not need to click on any page to know who Shane Hollander was, really. As a part-time MLH hockey fan who had watched his good share of late-night matches (the time difference was grueling, truly), he knew perfectly well who he was. 35 years old, half Canadian, half Japanese. Split between two nations, just like him. Clearly with stronger ties to one over the other. Just like him. The Metros had been a shit team before drafting him, but they had been a consistent playoff contender or winner ever since, which was why he was basically worshipped in that town.

He clicked on the “images” tab, without thinking. His screen was flooded by pictures of the man, from his latest wins to his early career days, all with a fair sprinkle of off-the-ice photos, as Hollander had been a sponsor for pretty much anything a man could be a sponsor for, it seemed. Ilya clicked on a perfume ad that had him strut around shirtless and in skimpy white underwear. Then he found him in a shirtless post-game interview and zoomed in on Hollander’s flushed face, damp hair stuck to his forehead, a vein pulsing on his neck, freckles all glistening with little droplets of sweat.

He could see Svetlana’s point, he supposed.

At 9 am Ilya was done with his shopping at the Farmer’s market, so he stopped by the restaurant to drop things off, let the staff know about the extra table for the night, and give instructions for prepping.

His day continued almost as he had originally planned, even though he arrived at the gym in San Babila later than expected and ended up having a late lunch at that horrible excuse for a restaurant that was the gym “healthy bar.” He felt a little insulted when his rice bowl with veggies and hummus was heated up in a microwave. Lukewarm hummus should have been considered a hate crime. He ate it nonetheless, in the spirit of efficiency.

All around him there were mostly wealthy men hitting the gym on their lunch break from the multitude of consulting firms, private equity groups, and other offices that operated in the center of Milan. They all looked the same to Ilya, at this point.

AirPods glued to their ears as they listened to their 2 pm call with the CFO on mute with the same attention they would have given background music.

He’d probably slept with a couple of them, they looked familiar.

He didn’t mind picking up people at the gym, men or women. It was a simple task when he was wearing a sweaty tank top and an easy smile and it was a low-stake location. He could bump into them again and pretend not to see them without anyone going crazy about it.

He’d never do that at work, for example.

Svetlana was an exception, they had fucked a few times, but he’d known her for years, they were friends before they worked together, they had met when she was still in college and had eaten at

Ilya's restaurant, insisting to compliment the chef personally. They had bonded over the shared trauma of a distant Russian father figure, slept together, then quickly understood they worked best as friends with benefits, occasionally at least, when Svetlana wasn't falling in love with some random hunk that inevitably broke her heart.

At around 3:30 pm Ilya had showered, changed, and was walking to the restaurant to finish dinner prepping. There were a lot of people in the Duomo area, the Olympic frenzy adding to the normal buzz of a busy Thursday afternoon in Milan.

He was sort of late to work, and yet...

When he walked past the Duomo entrance reserved for non-tourists that wanted to go inside to pray, he had the strangest feeling, like something was pulling him inside.

Ilya was not very religious, not like his mother had been at least. Growing up with an Italian Catholic mother he had learned his prayers, and gotten baptized and all that jazz, but he did not go to church often and never during mass. He wore his mother's necklace all the time, though. A little cross and a round golden plate with an image of Saint Agatha on it hanging on his torso day and night.

Without thinking about it too much, he gave into the feeling and entered the church.

The inside was cold and humid, full of tourists walking with their nose up in the air. He went straight for the Sant'Agata's altar, which he knew far too well. It was the only place where he ever felt like he could talk to his mother, for some reason, so he'd visited a few times. Not often, though, because the idea of talking to his mother scared him more than the idea of not doing so.

"Ciao, mamma..." he whispered, as he lit a candle and slipped a coin in the donation box.

Hi, mom.

He hadn't said those words to a living mother in 25 years, not since that night when...

He did not want to remember.

And yet Saint Agatha's bloodied chest was staring right back at him in all its horror, so how could he *not* remember that night?

He felt dizzy, and like the church was too small, or maybe too big. Yes, far too big, big enough to lose oneself in it and never get out.

He closed his eyes, went down on his knees and started mumbling a prayer, the words slipping out flat and meaningless, like an old litany he had forgotten to forget.

"Ave Maria, piena di grazia..."

His mind was racing towards a night he did not want to remember, so he tried to think of something else. Of the very few childhood memories he had of Russia, of the days on the ice, before his father had decided to bet on the wrong horse in the political race and had become a pariah as quickly as he had ascended the military ranks before the elections. Their house in Moscow belonged to the government. Their summer house, their *dacia*, belonged to the government. Their car belonged to the government. Soon everything was gone.

“...prega per noi peccatori...”

All they had left was a tiny house in a small Italian town by the sea that had belonged to his mother’s parents, inherited and then forgotten. The pale blue walls of the façade all crumbly with old paint eaten away by the salt in the air and by the stubborn pull of a Virginia creeper growing relentlessly and wild. It had become his permanent home for years. First with his parents and his brother Alexei, then only his parents when his older brother had managed to get back to Russia, then only with his dad, when...

“...adesso e nell'ora della nostra morte... Madre... mamma...”

Ilya’s eyes shot open. A sudden rush of adrenaline had lured him away from the mental image of his mother. A strange feeling of being observed, or like... somebody was about to touch him? He did not need to do this to himself. Why was he even there? He got up as quickly as he could and rushed towards the door.

Once he was outside he took a deep breath and pushed the palms of his hands into his eyes.

His phone buzzed with a notification from his bank app.

Funds withdrawn: -2.500€

That had to be his brother again.

He typed angrily into the WhatsApp chat with his dickhead good-for-nothing brother.

←  Whatsapp chat with: Alexei   

Sent Message: A cosa ti servono 2.500€ adesso?

Why do you need 2.500€ now?

He watched the three little dots flutter around for a few seconds before the answer appeared.

←  Whatsapp chat with: Alexei   

Sent Message: A cosa ti servono 2.500€ adesso?

Received Message: Лекарства для папы

Medications for dad.

Like he didn’t know that the cost of caring for him was far below that amount, considering he had already paid 3.000€ that month for the facility in Moscow where he was looked after. Like he didn’t know the rest was all going up his brother’s nostrils in smoke and cocaine.

←  Whatsapp chat with: Alexei   

Sent Message: Voglio vedere le ricevute

Received Message: 🙄

ты меня оскорбляешь. Ты не доверяешь своему брату? какие квитанции? ты знаешь что русские предпочитают наличные

I: I want to see the receipts.

A: 🙄 You insult me. Don't you trust your own brother? What receipts? You know that Russians want to be paid in cash

He absolutely did not trust his brother.

He'd rather put his life in the hands of that random tourist taking a selfie with a pigeon in front of him before he trusted his brother with anything.

But this conversation was not going anywhere.

Ilya's father had gone back to Russia when his mind had started to falter, when the memories had become hazy and the Italian words learned in adulthood too hard to catch, flies going around helplessly in his messed-up mind, never quite landing in the correct order in sentences.

The political mishaps that had kept him away were old enough that he had been allowed to reenter as a senile broken man seeking shelter in a care facility for dementia patients without anyone complaining.

Ilya liked to think it had been the best option for him all things considered, but the fact that his brother was in Russia and the one managing his care certainly made things a lot more stressful.

They didn't text in the same language because Ilya was more comfortable in Italian and Alexei in Russian, but that also mirrored a million other ways in which they simply did not speak the same language.

Care for Ilya was making his father that risotto that mom used to serve on Easter Sunday, and watch his smile go soft as he took in the flavor and maybe, *maybe*, unearthed a little memory for just a second.

Care for Alexei was getting more money, always more money, more than Ilya could have imagined making in the restaurant world.

It did not matter to his brother that he might have wanted to save some to open his own place one day, Alexei had no sense of future plans, his language was all about what he needed today. And today he always needed more, more, more...

Ilya put his phone away.

There was no use fighting.

His head felt heavy, a pulsating throb was blossoming just behind his eyelids, which was inconvenient when he hadn't even started working and there were hours to be spent inside a very noisy, very hot kitchen ahead of him.

He figured if he was going to be late, he could at least have a little fun, so he headed towards the little ice rink in the middle of the Duomo square to wait in line for a pair of rental skates like he had done a few times since they had set it up a week earlier.

He was texting his sous-chef with instructions on how to get things started in his absence when he heard a familiar voice.

“Yeah, hockey team”

He’d heard that voice only a few hours ago, while lying in bed watching hockey game interviews, and it had stuck to some part of his brain like a hand print, the thought that he’d be sitting in his restaurant the same night entering the crevices of his mind like a creeping vine.

Shane Hollander was being his usual self, all media-trained smiles and photo ops, throwing pucks at kids and looking wonderfully miserable. He probably hoped the ice could swallow him whole, based on the dead expression in his eyes. It didn’t look like there were newspapers around, so was this a spontaneous thing rather than a PR stunt? If so, he was truly too perfect to be true.

Ilya knew at that point what would make his day better. He knew he could not resist the temptation to see if he could get under Hollander’s skin and honestly he had no intention of even trying to resist.

Ilya was at peace in his very chaotic kitchen. The screaming and the clattering of pans and the continuous ding of the bell announcing another plate was ready for his inspection was music to his ears.

He put a swirl of basil infused oil on the edge of the little pool of vegan butter where his home-made ravioli laid, hiding a soft interior of artichokes and cashew cream.

Like most of his signature dishes, it was a play on something his mother used to make for him as a child. He remembered the feeling of pushing his little fingers through the pasta dough, his feet resting on a stool because he was too short to reach the table, his face covered in flour and kisses from his mother.

They had so much fun in the kitchen when Ilya’s father was not around.

It was their sacred time together. It was like she had been trying to pour her love out of herself and bottle it up in jars of tomato sauce and jams that would outlive her when the life ran out.

It was a few minutes past 7 pm when Ilya let the memories of his mother slip away once again and lifted his eyes from the perfectly plated dish in front of him, one last sweeping motion to make sure there was not even a trace of oil on the ceramic, to see his least favorite sight in the world. A very scared server trying to catch his attention.

“Chef Rozanov, lo so che ti rompe il cazzo quando te lo chiedono, ma c’è uno dei giocatori delle Olimpiadi lì che vorrebbe sapere se può avere i ravioli col burro a parte...”

Chef Rozanov, I know it fucking bugs you when they ask, but there is one of those Olympics guys out there wondering if he could ask for butter on the side for the ravioli

“Hollander”

The name escaped his gritted teeth like a curse.

The server shrugged, unable to confirm, a kid caught unprepared for a test he did not know he was supposed to have studied for.

But Ilya knew without having to ask. First, because he’d read a Men’s Health article about his performance-enhancing diet (which sounded like a fancy name for a life-damning, depressing way to eat), plus because it would just fit the character oh so well.

The server was shifting nervously on his feet. He knew the chef had thrown forks at people for less.

“Digli che si fotta. Senza burro. Ma pensa un po’. Anzi, portagli il piatto come deve essere servito e digli che se non gli va bene glielo spiego io di persona perché se lo deve far andare bene.”

You can tell him to go get fucked. The audacity. Actually, just bring him the dish the way it is supposed to be eaten and tell him that if he wants to know why that is, I can explain that in person.

He punctuated the sentences with a few very angry taps of the spoon on the kitchen counter, which sent some butter sauce flying everywhere. He wiped the dish again. Calmer now. He waited.

A few minutes later the waiter let him know that he’d brought Hollander to the back of the house, in the empty bar area near the kitchen and that he was all his (the last part sounded gloomy, sort of “but please don’t kill that poor man before the Olympics”).

Ilya felt a tingle of excitement as he wiped his hands clean, rolled up his sleeves, grabbed a saucepan with a couple leftover ravioli and walked outside the kitchen doors. Hollander was awkwardly standing near the bar stools, a newborn deer not having learned how to use his legs. His hands were fumbling his sleeves, and his eyes went wide when he took in the sight of Ilya.

“You?” was all he said, clearly recognizing him from their brief on-ice interaction. Ilya felt his chest swell with pride. He’d made a little impression. Surely not because of his hockey skills, but an impression nonetheless.

He decided to try his luck and be a bit of a dick. He put an elbow on the bar counter and shifted all of his weight on it, feeling his biceps bulge and pull at the cotton of his shirt, tattoos on full display.

There was no indication whatsoever in anything he had read on the internet that could make him think that Shane Hollander would be interested in his biceps. He’d read about his very few known girlfriends, only one of which was some kind of movie star, and that he mostly kept his private life private.

But then their paths had crossed in the Duomo square and Ilya could swear he’d seen the man stare at him the same way he’d usually see people stare in clubs before they offered him a drink. Or a blowjob.

And now, as he made Shane Hollander squirm under his eyes, he had to fight both the instinct to touch him, and the inexplicable certainty that if he were to kiss him right now Hollander would

absolutely let him.

He did not kiss him, but he did touch him. Tried his luck, once again, and saw how far he could push the polite Canadian hockey star. Would he let him bully into appreciating fine dining? Apparently, he would. He took the ravioli that Ilya stuffed into his open mouth with reverential silence.

A filthy thought crossed Ilya's mind as the littlest streak of butter went down the corner of his mouth, towards his chin.

I really want to see that mouth take my cock.

Ok, he had to stop. Thank God for the long apron that he was wearing because his dick had decided to get hard during this interaction and it was about to be embarrassing.

One last jab at the poor man, maybe.

“There,” he said lazily as Shane chewed, “Good boy.”

And he watched the blood drain out of Hollander's freckled face.

“So? What do we think? Were they hot or super hot?”

Svetlana was sharing a cigarette in the back of the restaurant with Ilya and Chrissy, a young cooking school graduate from London.

She had excitedly walked by the prestigious table way more times than her job required and eyed a few of the men, clearly with a goal set in mind.

Chrissy sighed.

“So hot”

Ilya shrugged.

“I mean, they were ok. Most of them had barely any real teeth left, or nose cartilage, but if that's your type...”

“Oh, boo, you whore,” Svetlana shushed him “You have slept with half of this city, now you are picky about noses. You know who has a wonderful side profile? Shane Hollander. I mean, he kind of gave me serial killer vibes the way he was eating in absolute silence, but I could let him silently fuck me if he asked”

Ilya coughed, stifling the need to laugh. Somehow irrationally, in their total 3 minutes of interactions, he had gotten the vibe that Shane would rather eat dirt than fuck a woman, and he was usually very perceptive about these things.

“You should try” he challenged her, a strange idea forming in his head. He pulled out his phone and started typing

“I mean, maybe not try to ask Hollander to fuck you, he looks like he could spontaneously combust if you are that direct, but meet the team again, see if sparks fly with anyone. There is a Canada game on Saturday afternoon... here, see...”

He showed her and Chrissy the ticket purchase option.

“We could go and you could have one of those annoying signs that puck bunnies hold up all the time...” Svetlana punched him in the arm for that “...saying that they are all invited to the club if they win.”

Svetlana seemed to consider the plan.

“And what if they lose?”

“They won’t, it’s a first-round game against France, for fuck’s sake, do you think Canada is going to lose? But if they do, I’ll take you home and fuck you myself, so at least your night isn’t wasted, what do you say?”

Svetlana puffed out a little circle of smoke and smiled.

“Ilya Rozanov, you evil genius. Get me some paper and a sharpie. You’ve got yourself a deal.”

February 7th, 2026

International sports broadcast – An excerpt from the Canada vs France game commentary

Reporter 1 - It seems like the Canadians have this in the bag. Not much of a surprise here, I have to say. With the MLH stars once again allowed on Olympic ice, we would have been shocked if France had managed to hold the fort against Shane Hollander’s attacks. That man scored no less than 5 goals already, do you think he’s going to give France a break?

Reporter 2 – He’s out for blood, it seems. All of the Canadians look like they want gold and nothing less. I wonder if that sign I see up there is motivating them to win tonight as well, uh?

Reporter 1 – What sign? Let me see, ah the camera is zooming in. Very funny, ladies and gentlemen. For those of you who are not seeing this, there is a lovely young woman wearing a Canada scarf holding a large sign that reads “Canada if you win come to Club Luna tonight, VIP area reserved for you at midnight”

Reporter 2 – Club Luna, that’s the very popular night club here in the Milan city center where all the TV stars, models, and football players go when they don’t want paparazzi around, right? Sounds like a fun night for the guys if they win.

Reporter 1 – Yes, very exclusive I heard from our Italian colleagues. And it looks like these guys are about to get an invitation because that was Canada’s 7th goal right there, Jesus, the

poor French are wondering if they are in Milan or in Waterloo right now the way they are being beaten to a pulp by the enemy... Well, I guess Shane Hollander is going clubbing tonight.

Shane Hollander hated night clubs. Ilya was fairly certain of it, looking at the way the poor Canadian man had been hugging his still untouched drink for the past ten minutes while sinking back into the pillows on the VIP area couch and staring at his own feet. And yet he had come.

Had he simply complied with the wish of the rest of the team? Or had he seen Ilya standing next to Svetlana when she was holding the sign and done the math that this was a chance to meet again?

Ilya couldn't wait to know.

He undid another button of his shirt, a ridiculously flamboyant leopard-print Jean Paul Gaultier number that he and Sveta had found at a vintage store on the Naviglio Pavese.

Hollander was wearing the most boring outfit ever, black pants and a white t-shirt, but he was catching appreciative looks from the room nonetheless.

A couple of young models had tried sitting next to him, legs crossed, mini skirts riding up, long red nails scraping his knee just slightly as they talked. They had given up pretty quickly though, once faced with a wall of silence and they had been pulled away by his much warmer teammates, drunk and happy, into the middle of the dance floor.

"Stalker" Svetlana said, landing a shot of vodka in front of Ilya and one in front of Chrissy.

He scoffed and took the shot.

"I don't know what you are talking about."

Svetlana turned her attention to Chrissy.

"Please, tell him we both can see he's been staring at Hollander ever since we got here"

The girl, clearly tipsy, looked like she was actually about to repeat that to Ilya, like he wasn't standing two feet away.

"I have not" he blurted out, sounding way more bothered than he had intended to, "It's just that he is so boring I must have fallen into a coma while looking at him."

"Aaah..." Svetlana ironically agreed, shaking her head, "Well, Chrissy and I were just asked to dance by a couple very hot MLH players, so we are just here to grab a couple more drinks, then we are off. One of them is the goalie, God I hope he's a freak in bed. Have fun staring at your crush, Ilyusha"

Ilya just gave her the middle finger, then looked for the barman to get another drink.

"Uno Sbagliato, grazie"

Once he had acquired his drink, Ilya made a show of slowly crossing the crowded dance floor while holding his bright red drink up, hands in the air, shirt rising just enough to show a hint of the happy trail of dark hair leading down to his low-rise pants. He stopped in front of the VIP area, found Hollander's eyes immediately, and just... kept moving.

When he was a child, his mother would sometimes take him to the beach at night during the summer and show him a little constellation of blinking stars on the water. It was a moving, beautiful sight, yet a sad one. It was lamps, she'd explained, that the fishermen put at the end of their boats to attract fish such as anchovies towards the surface, moths madly driven to reach the flame, where they were easy to catch.

The thought had stayed with Ilya that his mother was herself once a tiny fish far too attracted to shiny things. She had met his father when she was 19 and he was 43, vacationing on his friend's yacht in Forte dei Marmi. Her father was dead, her mother had terminal cancer, her house was a crumbling shithole, but an older man with a charming accent and a lot of certainty in his life had been kind to her, he had offered her caviar on tiny little pancake things and made her tipsy with bubbly bottles that never seemed to end. She had gotten pregnant with Alexei not long after that, and then, well, she had gotten as much of a happy ending as the tinned anchovies.

But now Ilya was the fisherman, moving quietly in Shane's space, dangling something he thought he'd want in front of him, giving him enough bait to shut down whatever voice was inside his head now telling him to stick his ass to that sofa and not do anything foolish.

"Uhm, hi"

Ilya had reached a door with a big "staff only" sign on it and he had turned right before he heard Hollander's voice. He knew he'd follow him.

"Hello."

Ilya took a sip of his drink, and the liquid hit his palate with lively bubbles and bright citrus-fruit notes, then quickly transitioned into the complex, dark botanical sweetness of the vermouth. Ilya licked his lips and Hollander looked at his mouth the whole time before schooling himself back into a stern expression.

"Ilya Rozanov, right? You are the chef..."

"At this fine establishment, yes, yes."

Hollander was tapping nervously on his glass, opening his mouth, then closing it again. A poor little anchovy out of his water.

"Were you..." he managed to blurt out, "...were you at the game the other night? I think I saw you and your friends with the... uhm.. the sign? Did you plan this?"

He made an encompassing gesture with his hand to indicate that by *this* he meant whatever was going on around him with his team. He was shouting his words, on top of stuttering, because the music was loud.

Ilya shook his head.

"No, it was Svetlana's idea," he lied.

“What?”

“Svetlana... wait.”

He grabbed Hollander’s arm and pushed the service door open with his elbow, given his other hand was busy holding the drink, then he pulled both of them through.

“There,” he gleefully announced once the noise was locked away “now you can hear me. I said that was Svetlana’s idea. She likes hockey players.”

Hollander had all the enthusiasm about being where he was of a recently kidnapped child. He was taking in the fact that they were alone in some sort of corridor, the space that linked the club to the upstairs restaurant to be exact. Sort of dimly lit by red neon lights and flickering EXIT signs.

“Are we even allowed to be here?”

Ilya clicked his tongue, disappointed, and took another long sip of his drink before speaking again, watching Hollander squirm as he waited. Ilya looked for the clean, lingering bitterness from the Campari at the back of his throat, but the bartender had clearly added too much Prosecco, washing out the signature backbone, making the whole thing too syrupy and sweet. What a shame.

“Hollander you are so boring,” he finally said, lifting his eyes from the disappointing drink, “I work here, nobody cares. It was too loud, I want to enjoy my drink in peace. *Non gliene frega un cazzo a nessuno*. How do you say it? Nobody gives a fuck.”

Hollander smiled.

“Well that is not an expression my Duolingo has taught me yet.”

Ilya smiled back

“Ah, you are learning Italian?”

“Only the basics, you know, to get by. Useful phrases, like thank you.”

“Or... yes, please, harder...”

Hollander’s face flushed with embarrassment. He chuckled, then pretended to drink a sip of his sad looking drink. Probably some sort of gin tonic that cost 3€ to make and was sold for 30€.

“You don’t like that”

It was not a question, but Shane shook his head in response anyway.

“It’s just empty calories really, and I don’t think it is a good idea to have alcohol during the season anyway...”

Ilya scoffed and downed the rest of his drink in one long sip, smacking his lips in content satisfaction.

“Do you ever have a cheat day, Hollander? Maybe you’ve just never had alcohol or food good enough it was worth the cheating. Do you ever just relax? Eat something unhealthy? Drink wine on an empty stomach?”

Shane shook his head.

"I don't need that"

Ilya blew a raspberry and tilted his thumb downward.

"Boring"

"That is actually kind of rude"

"Even more boring"

Hollander opened his mouth to protest, but it was like the words had escaped him, or, more likely, he had realized he was going to say something even more boring and had had to stop himself. So now he just pouted.

He was standing with his back against the wall, near a small radiator that was clinking softly in the background. He deposited his gin tonic on top of the plastic that covered the radiator and sighed.

Ilya had been leaning on the opposite corridor wall, but now he pushed against it and quickly moved to put his empty glass next to Shane's. His arm brushed against the man's waist as he did. He stepped back only slightly, leaving a ridiculously short distance between them.

He heard Hollander swallow loudly. He was breathing like he had forgotten how lungs worked.

"Why did you come here?" Ilya asked, eyes glued to Shane's mouth

"You basically grabbed me by the arm"

"No, I mean, why did you come to the club? You don't drink, you don't dance, why come?"

Hollander's back, arms, and legs were glued to the wall behind him but it looked like he was going to melt off of it and into the floor any minute now. He dared not move. He dared not speak.

"Were you hoping to see me? I was hoping to see you" Ilya offered.

There. There is your light. I am giving you what you want. Come take it.

"I don't know," he blew out in a whisper, and the heartbreaking truth was that Ilya knew it wasn't just a conversation stopper, he actually did not know why he'd come. He must have gotten dressed, undressed, then dressed again. Drafted texts for his teammates that he wanted to rest, then that he was coming, then that he'd maybe join them later, God knows how many times.

"Did you like my food the other night?" Ilya insisted.

"Yes"

No hesitation. *Interesting*, Ilya noted.

"And do you like me?"

Hollander just blinked. Ilya could feel the heat radiating from his body, the light trembling of his limbs.

“This is foolish, I don’t know what... I mean, I barely even... We are... I mean, I’m not...”

He was rambling on now, and Ilya decided to put a stop to it. He placed his hands on his hips and pushed him slightly against the wall, grounding him where he was standing.

Shane’s eyes focused on his hands, looking at them like they were snakes slipping out of the wall to deliver a deadly bite.

But then he looked up at Ilya, mouth slightly parted, breath shaky. In the dim light his eyes looked incredibly dark, pools of desire hidden behind long lashes and years of training them to be cold and unyielding.

Ilya’s heartbeat was wonderfully slow, he realized, and his mind pleasantly foggy, like that great, short-lived, moment of bliss right before being drunk. He’d have expected his heart to be racing, instead he was calm. He was exactly where he wanted to be.

He raised a hand to grab the other man’s chin and stroke his lower lip.

“This is a bad idea...” Hollander complained, unenthusiastically. His last thread of self-control withering away.

“What is?” Ilya joked innocently, before closing the distance to crash his mouth onto Shane’s.

It was a hungry kiss, hands running through each other’s hair, pulling, tugging at clothes, looking for exposed skin.

Ilya pushed his tongue through Shane’s lips, letting him savor the lingering citrusy bitterness of his drink mixed with his own taste, enjoying the moaning sound Shane made when Ilya’s hands grabbed his ass and pushed their hips together. They were both hard and desperate.

All of Hollander’s Canadian golden boy’s self-control was now completely gone, apparently.

Ilya’s hand moved from Hollander’s chin just slightly, thumb sliding into his mouth, where it was enthusiastically sucked.

“Fuck...” Ilya muttered, lost in the need to have more.

Hollander let his thumb go with a wet pop, then sunk down to his knees and unzipped his pants.

Now Ilya was the one left speechless. He dared not move, afraid to spook him away, break the enchantment.

Hollander had his eyes closed and was pushing his face against the bulge in Ilya’s underwear. He nuzzled his crotch for a few more desperate seconds, then he slid his thumbs under the elastic, ready to get rid of that last barrier of cloth...

...and then a door somewhere in the distance swung open, probably upstairs, and Shane was springing back to his feet and into a different reality.

A reality where he was an MLH player about to get caught giving head to some stranger in a dark corridor in Italy and his career would be over.

Terror darkened his eyes as he looked around for an escape.

“Hey, relax” Ilya tried to calm him down “It’s just someone cleaning up the restaurant upstairs, nobody uses this passage at this hour of the night”

He tried grabbing Shane’s hips again, but he slipped away. He was shaking.

“This was a bad idea”

Ilya laughed and zipped his pants back up.

“You said that already, Hollander. Doesn’t mean you shouldn’t have done it. Did you not enjoy it?”

The look in Shane’s eyes was pure desperation. Of course he had fucking enjoyed it. That was the whole problem. That he had wanted it and he had enjoyed it and he wasn’t supposed to want it.

“Do you want to do it some more?”

He tried to extend a hand toward those beautiful freckles, but the other man was shrinking away, disappearing into the shadows, a lost soul in Hell.

“Not here. Not now.” was all he said, before he reached for the door handle that would lead him back to the club.

Well, that was not a no, right?

Ilya nodded.

“I will see you another time, then, Hollander.”

He gave one last longing look at Ilya before pushing the door open.

“Hollander?”

He stopped, but he did not turn again.

“Hollander.”

What did Ilya even want to say to him? He wasn’t sure. But he did not get the chance to say anything at all. The blink of an eye and Shane was already gone, swallowed by the loud black void of the club and whatever life was waiting for him on the other side.



Chapter End Notes

Well, this ended up being longer than I initially thought. I hope you enjoyed and I hope I did not mess up the HTML.

I make moodboards for myself to visualize some things and I thought they looked cute, so I added them at the end of first two chapters.

Author's note: If you are wondering why that Chrissy character exists, it's just because if there is an English speaking character in the scene I can have Ilya and Sveta speak English without it being weird :D

Thanks to everyone who took the time to leave kudos and comments. Much appreciated. I will try to write and post chapter 3 as soon as I can (little taste of what's to come: more food and more time together).

Meanwhile, be kind, be safe, be cool, eat lots of ravioli.

Chapter 3: Cross the line

Chapter Notes

This fic uses a work skin to simulate online articles and messages. You may turn it off by clicking 'Hide Creator's Style', but it will affect the formatting.

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

February 10th, 2026

Canada barely keeps it cool to survive and advance against Czechia at 2nd Olympics game

By Jake Morgan

9 Feb 2026



Rallying from 2nd-period deficit to win with only 3 minutes left on the clock, Canada somehow manages to win a truly ugly game and remain in the race to qualify for quarter finals



MILAN -- With time ticking off the clock, the third period draining away, Team Czechia still tied 2 to 2, it **must have been hard even for seasoned captain Shane Hollander not to at least consider the national nightmare this could become.**

“Something didn’t click in the first half of the game” Hollander acknowledged yesterday in a post-game interview, “but we never stopped believing in the team, we found our focus, and we proved we have what it takes to keep our eyes on the Gold.”

But now hockey fans are left wondering: **where was Hollander’s focus in that first half of the game?** He was on the ice for both of Czechia’s goals in the first and second periods and he missed more than one goal opportunity himself.

Fortunately for Hollander, his team was far less distracted than him. St-Simon managed to tie the score at the beginning of the 3rd period with two consecutive goals and Boodram saved the day when he deflected the puck down and through the Czech goalie’s five-hole to make it a 3-2 win with 3:27 left on the clock.

It was **not the clean win that Canadian hockey fans were expecting** and now we are all left to wonder if Shane Hollander and his team should spend less time drinking Aperol Spritz in bars and clubs and more time preparing for games...

“Fuuuuck...”

Shane closed the article on his phone and seriously considered throwing it out the window altogether. Luckily for his phone the windows in the Olympic village dorms did not open at all. But maybe he could throw it through the glass. He felt mad enough to.

The screen lit up with a message from his mother Yuna.

←  Whatsapp chat with: Mom  

Received Message: Shane, honey, congratulations on the win yesterday

Received Message: Dad and I watched the game

Received Message: Are you ok? You seem a little off, are you eating enough? Sleeping?

Received Message: Do you want me to talk to the team's doctor?

And there it was. That bitter sense of guilt that would crawl up Shane's stomach into his mouth like bile any time he was less than perfect.

He could feel the grasp of his parents' expectations, of his Nation's grabbing him by the throat.

His mother was trying to help, of course she was asking only to know if she could help, and yet seeing her message made Shane painfully aware that his game the previous day had been visibly off. Enough to disappoint.

An MLH sport journalist had seen it, his mother had seen it, every fucking person on the planet had probably seen the way Shane had fumbled St-Simon's assists at least three times, sending pucks straight into the goalie's pads, if not half a meter outside the net.

He had just spent the whole day watching tapes with his coach, training, planning, trying to patch together a strategy to ensure the next game in 3 days was smooth sailing.

But he knew he had made mistakes he hadn't made since rookie season and he knew it wasn't because he was recovering from a hangover like the article implied. He hadn't gotten drunk, let himself go, lost control.

Well, he almost had...

The image of Ilya Rozanov's unzipped pants, the heat of his body under his finger pads, the sound he had made when Shane had dropped to his knees... it was burned into his brain. But he hadn't lost control. Not fully, not in an irreparable way.

Sure, he'd kissed the man, which wasn't ideal. But nobody had seen them and he probably was never going to cross his path again. He'd considered giving him his number before leaving, even turned around to, then he had snapped back into reality and decided it would be a horrible idea.

He felt attracted to that strange man in a way so feral that he hadn't even stopped to question his own sanity before gnawing at his boxers in a dark corridor with only a door separating him from his team. At least Shane could justify that with the fact that Rozanov was undodly hot. Objectively.

But Shane Hollander couldn't afford to lose his focus on Olympic gold because he was busy analyzing his desire for a strange man in a foreign country.

Do you ever do cheat days, Rozanov had asked.

No, he did not. He could not. His brain did not work like that, he had learned it at an early age, like that time he was 5 and he had had a meltdown at the hockey ring because he'd arrived and discovered that practice was cancelled due to a kid having caught the mumps and his day was now ruined and what would his life look like if he didn't have his certainties.

You can have a glass of wine during regular season if you want one.

You can skip your workout today if you have a fever.

You can have cake for breakfast on your birthday – his mother would say, but he could not. His diet stated breakfast had to be focuses on restoring glycogen stores and kickstarting metabolism, with lean protein for muscle repair and if breakfast became cake then what would his day look like and everything would be wrong and his whole week would be ruined and he might as well just stop caring about living at all at that point.

Shane took a few steps around the room. Fingers hovering over the screen, thinking of what he could reply back to his mother.

No need to call the doctor, I am just distracted thinking about Italian dick.

Maybe not

←  Whatsapp chat with: Mom  

Received Message: Do you want me to talk to the team's doctor?

Sent Message: No need, I may just be jetlagged.

Sent Message: It will go away.

But would it go away?

Why did he feel like kissing Rozanov was the equivalent of cake for breakfast? Sure, he hadn't actually eaten the cake, but he'd stuck a finger in the frosting and licked it off for a second, and it had been enough to give him the craziest sugar rush of his life for some reason.

"Fuuuck..." he muttered again.

He threw himself face first onto his bed. He opened the Instagram app, logged in with his private profile. He wasn't even sure what he was looking for. He doom scrolled for a second, then opened random pages about Milan, food bloggers, recommendations for a night in town. He found the club, then the restaurant. He found a stupidly hot picture of a man that he immediately recognized as Ilya plating microgreens on some sort of roasted root. He clicked on it to see if it was tagged. Not that he'd look at the man's profile if it was, obviously.

It was tagged.

@chefroz

He clicked.

A beautifully plated dish. An artsy black and white picture of a pepper. Some beach town. A sunset in Milan. A couple of racy gym selfies that made Shane feel Catholic-level guilt just for looking at them. More vegetables. Ilya using a kitchen stove flame to light a cigarette that was dangling from his lips. A bunch of people holding wine glasses. An old picture of a little boy (Rozanov?) playing hockey.

He kept scrolling back.

"Idiot" he scolded himself out loud.

But he didn't stop looking.

It wasn't even the first time he had kissed a man. His sexual life was easily summed up into a few public displays of affection with girls he had no interest in and a handful of closeted secret hookup with nameless men that he had met as far away from the hockey scene as possible.

In his late teens and early twenties he had disappointed a good number of girls before finding the courage to experiment.

You'll just prove to yourself that you don't like boys either, he had rationalized in his brain. Once you kiss a man you'll stop wondering if it's any better, you'll be able to enjoy having a girlfriend.

Except it was better. Even if it was secretive, rushed, nerve-wracking, it was a million times better, and Shane had promised himself this was just a small lapse in judgement and he'd stop, he promised it after every hook up, but his brain did not work like that.

The logistics weren't easy. At 19 he was already a face that people recognized, and as the years went on and the advertising and sponsorships grew, it only got worse. Try being discreet when your face is plastered all over Montreal.

There had been guy he had matched on Grindr while he was in New York, that Shane had agreed to meet only after extensively checking whether there was any indication that he may be interested in hockey at all. He only cared about Broadway musicals, had a weird obsession for The Real Housewives programs, and even if he had tagged himself as "verse" on his profile, he had asked Shane to top, which he had politely declined, opting for reciprocal blowjobs instead.

Months of being seen with girls had followed, as Shane held his breath and compulsively checked the Google alert he had set for his own name, convinced that the next day would bring an infamous TMZ shocking interview titled "Shane Hollander sucked my dick and he wasn't even very good at it."

Then, there had been that Mexican guy while he was with his friends in Tijuana to whom he had introduced himself as David, his dad's name, because he could not think of another name fast enough. He was a top at least, but the sex with him had been terrible because Shane hadn't been able to shake off the guilt of having brought his father's name into whatever that was.

He had made sure to be photographed at a Montreal restaurant with a couple of Victoria Secret models not long after that. They were his teammate Comeau's date (both of them apparently...), but the photos looked convincing enough.

And so the cycle continued. Another random man in a dimly lit anonymous hotel room. Another flashy date with a woman.

At least Rose Landry had been happy to be his beard and fun to hang out with. She had clocked immediately that he had no interest in her, but she was getting out of a bad relationship with an obsessive TV show star that would not stop blabbing to the media how she was still in love with him, so she needed some high-profile boyfriend to shut up her ex and rewrite her narrative. He had been happy to oblige. They had used each other knowingly and become good friends in the meantime. Rose apologized profusely when she told him they were fake-breaking up their fake relationship because she had met someone. She was still one of his few close friends.

Almost twenty years stuck in this endless cycle and Shane had learned there were things in life he could control, like hockey and food, and things he absolutely couldn't. And whatever he felt for Rozanov belonged to that second category.

His finger slipped for a second when he scrolled all the way down to Rozanov's first post and he involuntarily double tapped the picture.

Shit.

The little heart that showed up might as well have been a bullet to the gut.

Shit, shit, shit

Shane unliked the post immediately. Maybe he wouldn't see it.

He closed the app and put his phone down like he expected it to bite him, then he just stared at it. Not for very long because about a minute later his screen lit up with an Instagram notification.

@chefroz had just sent him a message.

@chefroz

Hollander



Did you just like a picture from 2017?

Hello. No, I don't believe I did.



I got the notification

must be a bug or something



Wow you are a really bad liar

How did you know this was me anyway? Loon24 could literally be anyone

Someone liking a 10-year-old post is so desperate, and you are a desperate little thing Hollander, had to be you.



No idea about this stupid nickname but your profile picture is a close up of your nose and I can see the freckles. Could not mistake the freckles.

I am NOT desperate



You are so desperate for my dick you couldn't even shoot the puck straight yesterday

Shane's hands were trembling because how had he ended up chatting with Rozanov about 5 minutes after deciding the best course of action was never to utter his name again not even in thought? He needed to stop typing.

@chefroz



Hollander, less thinking more typing

Fuck off



Just admit I am so handsome you could not stop thinking about me

I am glad your good looks are not causing you to think too highly of yourself



So you think I look good

Fuck

Off



Is ok to like me, you know. No need to be freaked out about it. And be so wound up you forgot how to skate in the middle of the Olympics

I literally JUST WON a game



Barely... Was clear you were distracted

Great, once again, worst fears confirmed. Anyone had seen it. Shane tried turning his phone screen off again. He should just block him, go back to whatever routine he had planned for his days in Milan before that treacherous dinner. Go running. Go sightseeing. Buy souvenirs for the people at home that had asked. Grab a plushie of one of those weird-looking Olympics mascots for each of Hayden's children. Definitely do not think about what Ilya Rozanov's dick would feel like in your mouth. He opened the conversation again and typed out angrily.

@chefroz



Barely... Was clear you were distracted

Maybe I had food poisoning. Had some dingy raviolis the other night.



...

He could see the typing bubble appear and disappear.

Ah-ah no quick response if the jab was directed at him, uh? Shane instantly knew he'd struck a nerve. This guy had to be as intense about his food as Shane was about his hockey.

@chefroz

Maybe I had food poisoning. Had some dingy raviolis the other night.



You take that back

What, no smart comeback?

You wound me. And to think I was here adding stupid low-carb version to the menu





Ilya had sent him his latest post, and Shane now noticed that the beautifully arranged layers of veggies did indeed look like ravioli, even if there was no pasta involved.

Had he done that... for him? He started to type “why?”, then he erased it. Asking why was petulant, asking why was pointless when he was sure he would not like the answer. He asked himself “why” all the time and then he refused to hear his own brain answering.

Why are you still texting Rozanov? Because this is the most alive you’ve felt in years? No, it’s not. Don’t listen to that.

He started to type a very polite “that looks nice” instead but it felt ludicrous considering the man was a professional chef. He imagined himself sending someone the picture of his Stanley Cup win and getting a “that’s nice” back like you would say to a kid showing off his little drawing of a dog.

While he was overthinking it, Rozanov sent him a message. An address...?

Shane frowned at his phone. Was that message even meant for him or was Ilya mixing up conversations?

@chefroz





Via Giuseppe Brentano 2, in an hour

What is that?



Kitchen staff entrance. Closed today but you are trying the new dish

Well, that was not a question. And Shane's first instinct was to scream NO at his phone. It would be a terrible idea to go. Yet, he pulled up google maps. It was a 20 minute cab ride or a 45 minute walk.

He was not going to answer. He really shouldn't go.

He put on his shoes.

Ilya looked at appearing and disappearing dots for at least 45 seconds, which was 45 seconds more than he could tolerate.

Hollander was spiraling again. He needed to throw him a lifeline.

He typed in the restaurant address, he gave simple instructions. *Be here in an hour.* He made sure to reassure him that the place was going to be closed, that they would be alone.

Ilya put his phone back in his pocket and put out what remained of his cigarette. He headed back inside the restaurant kitchen where he had been working on the new weekly special.

He figured he was not going to get an answer from Hollander. Looking at this conversation from the outside it would seem the chances of him actually showing up were slim, but on the contrary there was a tingling sense of excitement in Ilya's gut telling him that the man would follow his instructions.

Canada's golden boy, it was evident, was good at following instructions. He'd probably done so his whole life. His mom's, his coach's, his sponsors'.

Do this, don't do that. Wear Reeboks. Don't raise your voice. Eat healthy. Don't kiss boys.

He just needed someone to give him fun instructions for once; Ilya had seen him in his eyes that night at the club... He held a bubbling, deep dark sea of desires under tight walls and he desperately needed someone to order him to just let the dam down.

Truly, Ilya was just very generously trying to help him, save him money on therapy even.

This had nothing to do with the fact that Ilya could not get the image of Hollander sinking down to his knees out of his mind. Truly.

Ilya went back to creating thin slices of celeriac and setting them out to marinate.

He checked the smoking process of the artichoke hearts.

The kitchen was quiet, his hands were moving automatically. The rhythmic sound of his knife on the chopping board was soothing; there was nothing requiring enough concentration to stop him from looking at the clock every five minutes like an idiot.

Ilya Rozanov, who had gotten into the beds of way more people than he cared to remember with a crooked smile and a remarkable lack of shame, hadn't been sleeping peacefully since Saturday night, after Hollander had turned his back on him. And not because that was one beautiful back to look at, but because... well, why? That was the part Ilya struggled to understand.

Svetlana had caught him checking the Olympics hockey news a few too many times to keep her thoughts to herself and had accused him again – how dare she – of having a crush, but Ilya did not believe in pining after people.

When he was younger, fresh out of culinary school and living alone in big cities for the first time, he had tried relationships. He was starved for love after years with his father and he was craving the intimacy, the idea of someone that would hold him and stroke his hair (*just like his mother used to*), and make him feel he mattered, that his presence made someone's day special, that his absence was heavy.

He had given so much to people in this attempt, and gotten so little back. Sure, intimacy in the form of sex was often granted. But then people always wanted to change something in him, to fix his way of loving more than they wanted to be loved by him.

So, Ilya had taken it down a notch. And then another. And then another. Until every encounter started with a promise to never call back, until he was out of fucks to give and he had gone from

cooking elaborate meals for his dates to barely caring if they kissed him on the mouth before a blowjob.

So, the fact that he was now in his kitchen, on his day off, making a stupid low-carb version of his dish for a stupid hockey player who refused to enjoy pasta like a normal human was setting off an alarm bell in his brain.

He had been thinking of said stupid hockey player more than he liked.

And he could tell himself that it was just for the promise of sex, but he knew there were far easier ways to get that. It was a challenge trying to get a crumb of this man's time. He had gotten lucky when the Canada team had booked a table, or when he had bumped into Hollander at the ice rink, then he had dared with the whole Svetlana holding a sign plot and finally now he was short of ideas and wondering if he should wait for a sign from the Universe or just try to nonchalantly walk into the Olympic Village to look for Hollander like a stalker.

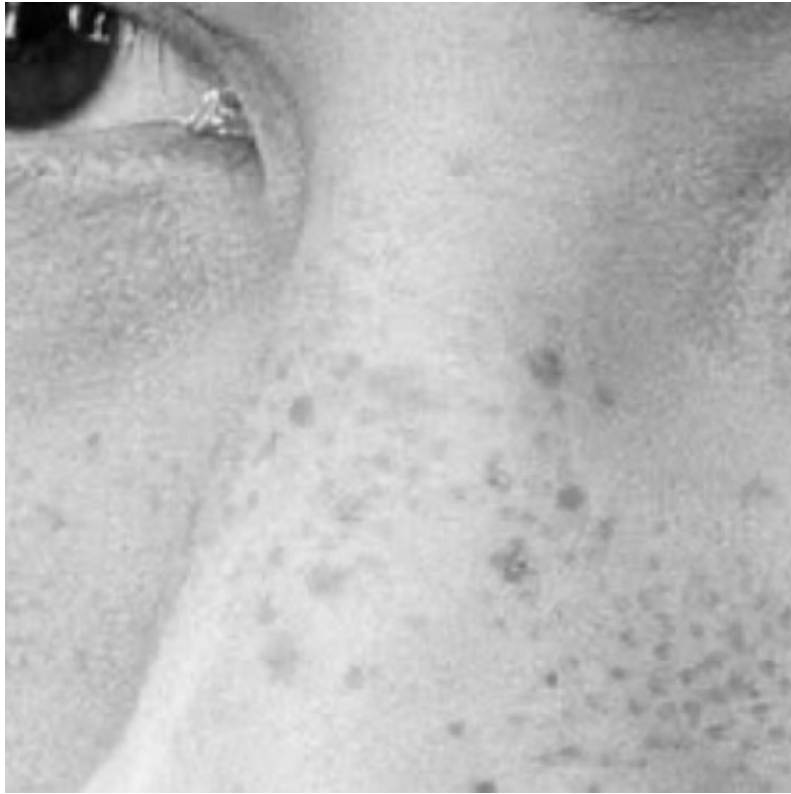
A sign had appeared as an Instagram notification.

@loon24 liked your post. An embarrassingly old post. Like, maybe his first post, a picture of a bar in Milano he'd found charming when he first arrived in the city. He knew it was Hollander without a reasonable explanation.

In the span of a few mere days, Hollander had gone from being some hot celebrity living in a distant universe to being an annoying celebrity sitting in his restaurant to being an endearingly awkward man stalking his Instagram against his better judgement to – soon – a very real presence in his kitchen, the one space where he would usually never allow anyone.

Ilya had just finished his third version of the plating when his phone buzzed with an Instagram message notification.

@loon24



What is that?

Kitchen staff entrance. Closed today but you are trying the new dish



I'm here

Of course you are, he thought.

He cleaned his hands on his apron, surprising himself to find them slightly clammy (was he nervous?), slicked back the short curls on the side of his head with a practiced motion and walked towards the kitchen entrance a bit faster than he'd ever admit.

Outside, Shane was looking at the kitchen entrance with wide eyes. Dante looking at the gates of Hell.

Abandon all hope, all ye who enter here

His cheeks were flushed from walking outside in the cold air. He looked like the skin he was wearing did not fit him comfortably and he was about to burst out of it.

Ilya thought words might scare him away, so he just moved aside and nodded towards the inside of the restaurant. Hollander slid past him, carrying in a draft of cold air and Ilya felt a shiver run down his spine. He decided it was because of the cold, not because of how close Shane had been.

Hollander advanced slowly, hands in his pockets, looking around at the steel appliances and then at the various plates of food lined on the counter among a flurry of hand written notes.

"The creative process" Ilya explained, "I try out versions, I note down what I like or don't like, I try again. Here..."

He pushed the latest iteration towards Shane, who was now taking off his winter jacket and beanie and did not appear on the verge of running away any longer. He examined the dish, pushed a ravioli around with the fork, tried it.

The celeriac gave way almost immediately beneath Shane's teeth, softer than pasta and faintly sweet, with none of the elastic resistance Shane expected from a ravioli shell after tasting the "original" dish at the restaurant. It was like stepping onto what you thought was packed ice and finding it was fresh snow. After a second the filling spread across his tongue in a dense, almost creamy wave, and for a moment all he could taste was the sweetness of the artichoke, then the smokiness arrived, dry and woody, lingering at the back of his mouth while the peppery bite of the nasturtium came through underneath it. The flavor seemed to move rather than just sit there and it made Shane want to take another bite just to find out where it would go next.

He swallowed and Ilya did not miss the way his jaw relaxed and his eyes rolled back slightly when the food slid past his lips.

"Good?" he probed. He realized Hollander had yet to speak.

"So fucking good," was the honest review, as he ate the next ravioli.

Ilya smiled. An honest-to-God smile that mirrored the blissed expression of the man in front of him.

"Had to smoke the artichokes to replace the flavor of the burn butter sauce and added nasturtium leaves for a peppery note, but I am not 100% sure I like the consistency of the celeriac for the shell, I'm thinking I might blanch it..."

"I have no idea what you are saying, but yes, to whatever you did."

Ilya laughed.

“Raving reviews from man who exists on grilled chicken and brown rice – now my career has peaked.”

Shane stopped chewing and frowned.

“You asked.”

Ilya had been standing on the opposite side of the kitchen island where Shane was doing his improvised tasting. He walked around the counter now, circling back around Hollander, who followed his movements and also turned around, back against the metal counter, eyes fixed on the approaching danger.

This time when Ilya put his hands on him, he didn’t say it was a bad idea. He slightly parted his lips and held in a breath.

“Do... do you think we need to talk?” he whispered.

Ilya shook his head.

“No. Later maybe. After.”

“After...?”

Ilya swallowed whatever he was going to say with an open mouth kiss and his words just turned into a whimper.

“Shit... Rozanov, we... I can’t, what if someone...”

“There is no one here, I locked the door, the restaurant is closed. You ate some good food for once and the world did not implode, let me show you something else that will feel good...”

He palmed Hollander’s cock through his pants to make his point clearer and was pleasantly surprised to find he was rock hard already. Maybe he did not need convincing after all, just instructions.

“Take off your shirt,” Ilya murmured, lips caressing the tender skin behind Hollander’s ear.

He complied, folding the garment into a perfect square almost automatically, like he always did that, and Ilya smiled softly at the sight as he also undressed. Their hands were on each other immediately, fingers exploring bare, hot skin, cupping, squeezing, teasing.

“Rozanov...”

It was the desperate whimper of a man wanting more and not daring to ask. Ilya kissed him hungrily, bit his lip, pulled it with his teeth before lowering himself to do the same with Shane’s nipples.

The silent kitchen was now filled with the sounds of their shaky breaths, the unholy moans that escaped Shane’s lips once Ilya pulled down his pants and underwear and started biting the soft flesh of his inner thighs.

“Sit.”

He pushed him slightly so that Hollander was now sitting on the kitchen counter, legs spread open, and he went down on his knees and took him into his mouth with a satisfied “Mmmh...”

Yes, he thought.

Yes, this, this was what he had been imagining obsessively. No, this was better than it had been in his mind, it was dreamy. The weight of Hollander’s cock on his tongue was the lifeline grounding him to reality.

He opted for a sloppy blowjob, lots of saliva and hands grabbing flesh everywhere he could reach. He wanted it to feel good, yet he wished it could last forever.

Hollander was leaning back on his elbows, face to the ceiling, except for when he dared to look down, at the head bobbing between his legs, but the sight seemed to be too much for him.

“Oh God, Rozanov, I’m gonna... I can’t...”

He pushed himself up to grab Ilya’s curls with his fingers, trying to pull him away, but there was no way Ilya was going to miss out on tasting him, so he just sped up and let his mouth be flooded with his release.

Shane let himself fall back on his elbows, fingers sliding through Rozanov’s hair one last time before he covered his own face with his hands. The metal counter felt refreshing against his hot skin. He pulled his hands away and opened his eyes. He saw the kitchen ceiling lights dangling above him. He suddenly felt very, very naked. A corpse on display on an autopsy table was the first image that popped in his mind. Dead. If anyone saw him, he was dead.

He jumped back up onto his feet, struggled to grab his pants, before realizing that Rozanov was staring at his jerky movement with a frown.

Oh, shit, he probably expected him to reciprocate the favor. Shane felt like an asshole. He had been fantasizing about this man’s dick for days and then he had gotten off and completely forgotten about it because he was panicking once again.

“Do you need me to...”

Rozanov shook his head and put his shirt back on.

“No, you are nervous again. I don’t *need* you to do anything you don’t want to do.”

Shane let out the breath he didn’t realize he was holding.

“It’s not that I don’t want...” he admitted.

Rozanov’s face softened, he grabbed his chin and kissed him lightly. Nothing like the hungry kisses from earlier.

“I don’t need to overwhelm you, how about that? You ate good food. Got a great blowjob. Let’s get you out of here before your head explodes.”

The face he was making was a cocky grin, but his eyes looked genuinely concerned and Shane felt grateful. He thought about making a joke about his humility for the “great blowjob” comment, but in all honesty it had been great, so...

The memory of the wet heat of his mouth was still lingering and it made the kitchen feel far too hot and small for him to breathe comfortably. He was glad when he stepped outside in the cold, dark night. The alley onto which the back entrance opened was quiet.

Shane gathered his thoughts. He realized he felt oddly at ease. Ok, the whole situation was absurd: he had left his room in a hurry and walked for almost an hour trying to convince himself that he was not going exactly where he was going.

He’d thought he would panic seeing Rozanov, instead his mind had stilled. His presence had felt oddly comforting, the way he had taken charge, fed him, talked to him, pushed his body against him, given him all he’d never dared to ask.

Shane wasn’t sure what would happen now. He heard Rozanov clean up the kitchen, wiping very carefully the counter that – Shane cringed at the thought – his naked ass had been on, then close shop. Soon he was standing next to him.

“So, I guess this is goodbye...” Shane tried out.

“You don’t have to go.”

“What?”

Rozanov shrugged.

“It’s still early. You only have a few days in Milano. Let me show you the good places you need to see.”

Shane shuffled on his feet. This wasn’t something he had expected.

“I... my roommate will wonder where I went”

“Oh my God, Hollander, just text him you are out for a walk or meditating or whatever sounds credible for you. He probably doesn’t care. I promise I will take you home before midnight, Cinderella”

Shane groaned.

“You are insufferable,” he replied “and impossible to say no to”

“That’s a yes, then, *si? Andiamo*”

He put his hand on the back of Shane’s neck and gently rubbed his thumb on the thin strip of skin between his beanie and his jacket. He guided their mouths together one last time before gently pushing him forward.

Shane just followed, feeling like he was on a leash and glad to be. He had not given a single thought to the Czechia almost-debacle since he had left his room. He hadn't thought about what he was expected to do to satisfy his obligations to his coach, his team, his sponsors. He realized he had redirected his whole self to satisfy what Rozanov asked of him and it felt so... easy.

He kept following as they reached a cobblestone street near a little river that Shane recognized.

"The Navig..io... something?" he tried out, remembering Hayden's list of places to visit in Milan.

Rozanov smiled at his butchered pronunciation.

"Naviglio Grande, yes, but we are not stopping here, the bars are... how do you say it... *una cafonata*? Uhm... trashy? Mostly drunk college students and tourists. We are going to a place I like."

Shane kept walking a few steps away from him, hands in his pockets, and eyes looking at anything but Rozanov. He realized nobody was looking at him now that he was not wearing Olympic gear. He felt wonderfully unremarkable. He dared to step a little bit closer to the other man, who seemed to notice and purposefully slow down.

"Did you know Milan used to have a lot more canals? They covered them and turned them into streets." Shane blurted out to cut the tension.

Rozanov grinned.

"You are adorable" he whispered without missing a beat.

He kept leading Shane through small streets with colorful houses pressed against each other, tiny balconies, vespas parked in the corners. Every once in a while, a winery or bar appeared in a corner, hidden away if not for the small crowd of glass-holding people that stood outside chatting, wonderfully oblivious to the bikes and cars that occasionally appeared on the street and slowed down to squeeze through them.

Milan was quietly buzzing with the energy of more or less young people getting out of their offices and into the bars to unwind and socialize. Surely part of it had to be performative. Everyone looked so polished, well-dressed, camera ready. Selfies and group pictures were being taken everywhere, and the smiles often faded as soon as the phone cameras went down.

Shane wondered how many people wanted to be there and how many of them felt the need to be. Just like he had felt the need to join his team on so many events and dinners and parties. Partly because he was the captain, partly because that's just what normal people want to do and he needed to think he was normal.

Was this also normal? Following Rozanov for kilometers, in soothing silence, breathing in the cold night air, feeling calm enough to try and chat every once in while about something he saw, like asking the name of a plant dangling from a balcony, or pointing at a funny looking little car. He complained about the pigeons and the lack of bike lanes, and the coffee being too strong, and the size of his bed. Rozanov seemed pleased with his attempts at chitchat. He answered politely, only laughed at him a couple of times, called him typical American, to which Shane felt the need to specify he was actually Canadian, thank you very much.

When Rozanov stopped under a small neon sign, Shane was almost sorry they had arrived, even though he had a feeling they had been walking in circles for longer than necessary, because Rozanov had felt his need to unwind and walk off the tension.

They stepped inside a small room with a soft ambience, plenty of plants dangling from the walls, and rows and rows of liquor bottles that Shane failed to recognize, besides the usual gins and vodkas. Rozanov gestured towards the bartender, who seemed to recognize him, they shook hands, exchanged a few words, then the man started preparing two drinks.

“I don’t drink” Shane felt the need to say

“You don’t drink shitty gin tonics in plastic cups, yes, that’s good. You don’t eat fried chicken in buckets. Strict, but also ok I suppose. You don’t have sex with people that could ruin your public image,” he made sure to underline the gender-less word *people*, “that’s something less good I think, but ok.”

Shane opened his mouth to ask where this was going, but Rozanov wasn’t finished.

“But I think you can fuck someone you are attracted to, eat delicious food that was made for you, drink a nice cocktail whose recipe was perfected for decades. And you probably need to think so too.”

Shane just stared back at him, completely stuck on that first sentence, on the promise of sex so nonchalantly dangled in front of him.

“No, I don’t do that... It doesn’t work like that; the lines that I never cross are not blurred,” he tried to explain, frustrated, “I have a list of things I eat, and I follow that. There is safe stuff I can have and then there is the rest, and I know the perimeter and that’s what makes it ok. No grey area where to wonder if what I am choosing is right or wrong. I don’t drink, I don’t smoke, ever, I don’t...”

“Get head from men in the back of a restaurant?” Rozanov suggested in a whisper, “I think you do that sometimes”

Shane blushed furiously.

“I don’t know why I put up with you, you are an asshole”

“I think maybe you like it. I also think maybe blurred lines are what you need to get out of your head. You played like shit last game, you’ll play better next one, you will see. Once you just let yourself have something outside this damn perimeter of yours and realize the world did not end because of it.”

“I should be thinking about my next game strategy,” Shane whined, while also accepting the short glass that the bartender had placed in front of him, “Instead of drinking whatever this is”

Rozanov grabbed an identical glass and tapped it against his, gently, whispering “cheers”. His fingers brushed Shane’s as he did that, and that was like a jolt of electricity.

Shane took a sip of the drink just to give his mouth something to do other than hang from his face like a dead fish.

The taste was immediately familiar. Bitter, layered, citrusy. Strong, but not too strong. He remembered suddenly that had been the taste on Rozanov's mouth the first time they had kissed. The chef seemed to notice the moment the realization hit him.

"Good, right? It's called *Negroni sbagliato*, literally means "wrong", because it's the wrong recipe for a classic Negroni, using prosecco instead of gin. But I like it better. It was invented in the 70s in a bar not far from here. Sometimes the things we call wrong are actually perfect."

Shane took another sip. The slight buzz of the alcohol was a blessing. He hadn't taken off his jacket. He felt flushed. The room was dark, at least, so it was hard to see he was blushing, the strongest light was coming from a red neon sign on a wall.

"What does that say?" he asked, pointing at the neon.

Rozanov did not have to look to answer

"Non è sbagliato se ti rende felice."

"Sbagliato means wrong"

"You are a quick study. Yes."

"I don't know the rest."

Rozanov took a long sip of his drink and waited for him to do the same. He obeyed silently.

"It means... It's not wrong if it makes you happy"

Shane swallowed his next sip with a loud gulp. His ears were basically on fire.

Rozanov took pity on him, slid some cash to the bartender and led Shane outside into the February air.

"This is the bar in that post I liked on your page," Shane noted, looking back at the neon sign.

"Oh so you did like it," Rozanov smirked

"Fuck off, my finger slipped."

"Yes, it's the same bar. I come here often. I live just upstairs."

His eyes pointed to a window somewhere above and Shane felt lightheaded, but also weirdly sure of himself.

"Aren't you gonna invite me upstairs to see you chef knives collection or something?"

Rozanov's grin turned into something dark and feral before he hummed an affirmative response and grabbed Shane's arm.

Suddenly they were kissing along the staircase like two mad men, unable to keep their mouths off each other. Shane did not even care if his neighbors saw them. He was no one to them. The sense of anonymity, and probably the two sips of alcohol, were making him daring and giddy.

He was already stripping Rozanov of his jacket before the man had even opened his door. He ended up against a shelf of some sort as soon as he was inside, with hands all over himself and the corner of some thick book digging into his ass painfully. He did not fucking care.

Rozanov was fully naked in a matter of seconds and he started to take off Shane's clothes as well, somehow trying to fold them the way he had seen him do earlier. He was attempting to be nice, but also way too far gone to do a good job. And Shane was too far gone to care.

He licked Ilya's neck, his pecs, a long stripe of skin from his shoulder down to his waist. His erection hung heavy between his muscular legs and Shane felt he had ignored his need to taste him long enough.

"Fuuuck..." Rozanov cursed, pressing a hand on the back of Shane's head as he took him into his mouth and for a few moments the world around fully disappeared behind the reassuring presence of that hand in his hair, and all Shane could think was how good it felt to give this man pleasure.

"Come here..."

Rozanov pulled him back up, put his strong hands under his ass and picked him up in one swift motion, like he wasn't a full grown muscular hockey player. Shane was a little ashamed to admit to himself that truly turned him on.

He found himself thrown onto a bed, then Rozanov was over him, taking off the last few pieces of clothes he had on, leaving him completely naked.

Shane pulled him closer, fingernails digging in his back, needing to feel his weight like a blanket.

"*Cristo, Hollander, sei perfetto...*" he heard him whisper into his ear before crushing his mouth on his. He had no idea if it was something filthy, or endearing, or complete nonsense, but the sound of it went straight to his dick.

Rozanov's mouth moved to his neck, his stomach, then his thighs, where little bruises were blooming in the spots he had bitten hungrily earlier in the kitchen.

Shane muttered some whiny nonsense.

Rozanov ignored him and kept going, his tongue finding his way to Shane's balls, then his ass.

"Oh God..." Shane muttered, before biting his hand to keep quiet.

"No," Rozanov scolded him, "Don't hold it in, I want to hear you"

And so Shane let him hear. Every embarrassing, needy sound that escaped his lips while Rozanov's fingers and tongue worked him open, leaving him a mess.

"Please, I need..."

He wasn't sure he could say it.

"What?" the words were whispered against his skin.

"You. I need you. I need you to fuck me, please"

Shane wasn't certain it was his own voice that had pronounced those filthy words, but it must have been because Rozanov was now strutting towards the nightstand and coming back with a condom and a bottle of lube looking like a man on a mission.

For once he had stopped giving Hollander instructions and was ready to follow his. Eagerly.

Shane opened his legs and rested his ankles on the other man's shoulders. Rozanov lined himself up and leaned down towards him whispering one last "You sure this is ok?"

Shane was too far gone to be embarrassed.

"Yes, fuck. Jesus Christ, just fuck me, please."

And he got what he asked for.

The sense of fullness, the pleasant stretch, the heat of Rozanov's body against his. The world reduced to that room, to that bed, to the centimeters of skin where their bodies touched.

And it was pure bliss.

There was nothing else.

Nobody else.

Shane's mind was empty, and he breathed in the air like it was the first time he could breathe in his life.

Ilya was looking at Hollander's content sleepy face and wondering how the hell he was going to wake up tomorrow and not get to see this again.

They had had sex twice. First in the bed, then in the shower where they were supposed to clean up. He had changed the sheets when he had seen Hollander grimace at the mess they had left, before inviting him to lay down again.

"I am not done with you" he had mocked to lure him back in when Hollander had seemed ready to find an excuse to leave.

And surely he could have gone for a third round, but really he was doing what he wanted to do. Laying next to the man and stroking his hair as he watched him drift in and out of a post-orgasmic state of bliss and drowsiness.

Ilya was suddenly struck by the thought that this felt dangerous.

It's just sex, he tried to remind himself. He's enjoying an oversea fling. He'll leave in a couple of weeks, get back to his life. Don't get attached.

He was good at not getting attached, practiced.

So when finally Hollander opened his eyes and looked at the numbers 1:04 on his phone screen and said “I should go” Ilya only nodded.

Of course he should go. Though maybe...

“Text me when you win your next game. I can fuck you again, makes you play better, you’ll see”

Shane laughed as he put his clothes back on, but he did slide his phone to Ilya, who typed in his number with shaky fingers and texted himself.

“So by that logic if we lose, I delete this forever, correct?”

“Of course. But you won’t lose.”

“Finland is no joke.”

Ilya shrugged, like that didn’t concern him in the slightest. “You’ll play better,” he said, reaching out to straighten the collar of Shane’s jacket, fingers lingering a second too long at his throat. “You’ll see.”

Shane let out a short breath that might have been a laugh, might have been something else entirely, like he didn’t trust himself to say anything smarter than that. He just nodded, grabbed the handle, and stepped out before he could think too much about it.

The cold hit Shane instantly, sharp and clean, like a slap that brought everything back into focus. The street was quiet in the night. Barely anyone in sight. He pulled his jacket tighter around himself and started walking, fast at first, then slower, falling into a steady rhythm. One step after the other. Back to where he was supposed to be. Back to something that made sense.

By the time he reached the main road where he remembered seeing a taxi stand, his phone was already in his hand, checking the time, the messages he had received and ignored in the previous hours, the world he had stepped out of and now slipped back into like nothing had happened.

He felt oddly calm. Maybe Rozanov was right, the world wasn’t going to end because he had stepped foot outside the hard lines that usually guided his every action.

Ilya stood still for a moment after the door clicked shut, listening to the silence settle back into his apartment. It felt different now. Too quiet. Like something had been pulled out of it.

He moved automatically, picking up discarded clothes, straightening things that didn’t need straightening. His hands knew what to do. His head didn’t.

It's just sex, he told himself, grabbing a glass and then putting it back down without pouring anything into it. *That was the whole point, that was a rule put in place to prevent further damage.*

He walked back into the bedroom, stopped at the doorway. The sheets were still slightly rumpled, the faint impression of a body still there if you looked at it the right way.

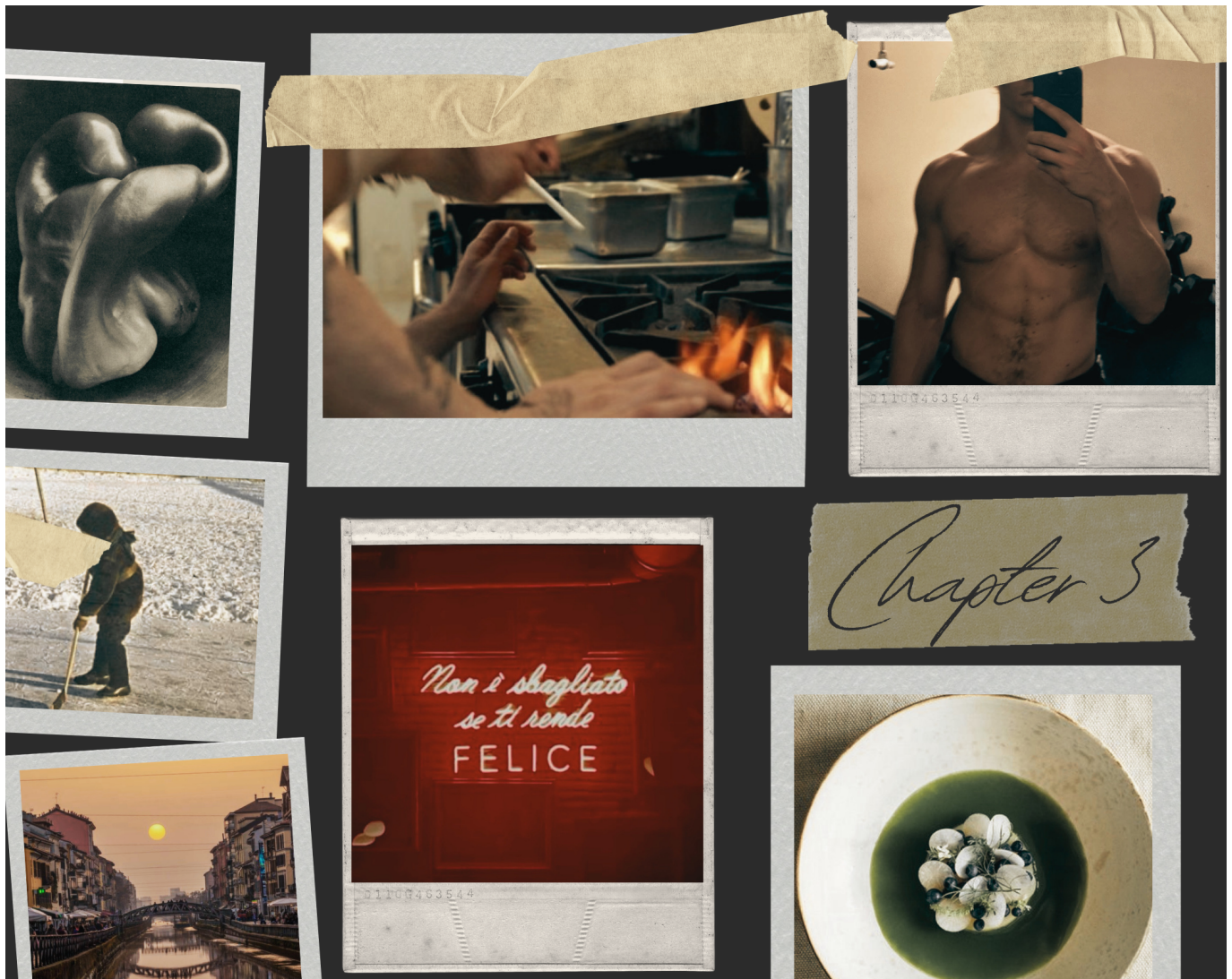
Ilya exhaled slowly, dragged a hand through his hair.

He didn't like how empty the place felt without Hollander.

He liked even less that the thought had occurred to him.

This is just sex, he repeated, like repetition made it true.

It had to be.



Chapter End Notes

Well, I hope you were in the mood for something spicy. And slightly angsty, I suppose. The next chapter will be even more about feelings, as the boys get to know each other and unpack what is happening. I am still figuring out a few things I want to have in the story before I wrap it up, so this will most likely end up being 5 chapters instead of 4. We'll see.

If you are wondering what Ilya said when they were in bed: "Cristo, Hollander, sei perfetto" -- > "Christ, Hollander, you are perfect". So sweet. The poor boy is already head over heels and doesn't even know.

All chapters now come with a dedicated moodboard at the end if you need a little help visualize the things that are described.

Lots of love.

Chapter 4: Horror Vacui

Chapter Notes

This fic uses a work skin to simulate text messages. You may turn it off by clicking 'Hide Creator's Style', but it will affect the formatting.

The events in this chapter unfold over a couple of weeks - you can follow along the time jumps by checking the date on top of the text message chains.

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

◀  Whatsapp chat with: Lily 📞 ☰

Thur, 12 Feb

Received Message: See? Told you 08:32 pm

As weirdly predicted by Rozanov's cheesy line "*You'll play better after sex with me, you'll see...*", Canada dominated the match against Finland. A satisfying 7–2 win after leading for the entirety of the game, three of those goals scored by captain Shane Hollander.

Shane grabbed his phone almost as soon as his gloves came off.

It was not like he believed he could only play well if he had sex with Ilya Rozanov again. Shane had done perfectly fine for twenty years without access to the Italian man's apparently magic dick, thank you very much.

Still.

He had spent most of the previous week telling himself that Rozanov was a distraction, and technically that had been true. Pining after him had been distracting. Fantasizing about him during practice had been distracting. Wondering if he was going to see him again had been distracting.

Actually sleeping with him and then getting his number, on the other hand, had apparently reorganized Shane's brain chemistry into something terrifyingly functional. His body felt loose. His head felt clear. He had scored three goals.

When he opened their chat, there was already an incoming message waiting for him from "Lily". It had been Rozanov's cheeky idea to save himself under a woman's name, so that Shane would freak out a little less about getting found out. On the other hand he was pretty sure his number was saved in Ilya's phone under "Hollander – peach emoji – eggplant emoji – tongue emoji" or something of the sort.

◀  Whatsapp chat with: Lily 📞 ☰

Thur, 12 Feb

Received Message: See? Told you 08:32 pm

Sent Message: The whole nation of Canada is very grateful for your service 08:55 pm ✓✓

Received Message: They say hockey players are superstitious... 08:55 pm

Sent Message: Indeed 08:55 pm ✓✓

Received Message: ...that means you want some good-luck dick before your next match maybe?
08:56

Sent Message: please do not call it that 08:56 pm ✓✓

Just dick? 08:56 pm



Type a message



Shane rolled his eyes so hard it almost hurt.

He told himself he'd wait before setting up another meeting with this annoying man.

Canada's next game was on the 20th, they had a full week of time, technically, for this lucky sex pre-game ritual or whatever.

Shane probably didn't even have time to go see Rozanov the next day, anyway. He told himself he had other things to think about, it wasn't worth changing his schedule for this, it was just a hookup.

Then he realized, against all dignity and reason, that he was smiling at his phone like a fourteen-year-old with a crush.

Which, he had to admit, was ridiculous.

He was thirty-five years old, captain of Team Canada, and currently still wearing half his hockey gear while grinning at a man who had made him come twice in a row two nights ago.

Objectively humiliating behavior.

Fri, 13 Feb

Sent Message: I'm here 07:01 am ✓✓

Shane had told his still-very-sleepy roommate he was going for a run before showing up at Rozanov's apartment at seven a.m., taking advantage of the few free hours the chef had before work.

And because Shane was fundamentally incapable of skipping a workout even for sex, he actually *did* go for a run first. 10 kilometers, calculated including the distance to Ilya's apartment, which meant he arrived flushed, sweaty and slightly out of breath.

That seemed to trigger something primal in Rozanov.

"Fuck..." Ilya muttered under his breath the second he opened the door.

He grabbed Shane by the front of his compression shirt and kissed him hard enough that Shane barely had time to gasp out, "Sorry, I might need a shower..."

"Don't be boring," Ilya interrupted immediately.

He looked like he had just woken up: sweatpants hanging low on his hips, no shirt, just his usual gold chain resting on his bare chest, hair still sleep-mussed. He smelled like clean linen, but also faintly like cigarettes and expensive soap. Shane had the brief deeply embarrassing thought that he wanted to bury his face against his neck and stay there for an hour.

Then Rozanov shoved his shirt up and dragged one long lick from Shane's navel to his throat.

"Jesus Christ..."

Shane should not have gotten hard that quickly at something so fundamentally disgusting, but apparently his body had no standards whatsoever where Ilya Rozanov was concerned.

"Off," Ilya ordered. "Take it all off."

He helped Shane peel out of his damp running clothes, then paused when Shane frowned instinctively at the sweaty heap abandoned on the floor.

Ilya noticed immediately.

With a long-suffering sigh that suggested Shane was personally exhausting him, he stepped away, gathered the clothes, shoved them into the washing machine and started a quick cycle.

"What are you doing?" Shane asked, genuinely bewildered.

"You don't want to wear dirty stuff again after we are done," Ilya replied simply, already walking back toward him. "Like this you don't have to stress."

Then, calmer:

"I'll throw them in the dryer after I finish fucking you, don't worry."

Shane made a deeply undignified noise.

Partly because that was annoyingly thoughtful. Partly because Ilya's hand had already wandered lower, fingers digging hard into his ass with enough strength to make his knees threaten to buckle.

"Mmhhh..." Rozanov hummed on Shane's neck, before biting and sucking lightly, making sure not to leave marks, "I like you all sweaty and breathless, Hollander, is how you looked after I fucked you speechless last time, now you already show up looking like this... is too much, you want me dead, Hollander?"

"You like me, uh?" was the smartest comeback Shane could master, as his hands worked their way to pull down the grey sweatpants that Rozanov had yet to take off. And thankfully he had spoken before the pants pooled down at the man's feet because he wasn't wearing any underwear and the sight of his hard cock definitely left Shane unable to form any further sentences.

"I like you..." Ilya repeated softly, eyes slipping shut while one hand wrapped around Shane's cock and his own.

Then, after a beat:

"...not as a person."

Shane laughed helplessly.

"Of course not. I'm boring – *ngahhh*..."

Ilya gave them both a couple strong strokes and Shane's sentence dissolved into a shameless moan. Rozanov's chain swung with the movement of his body, the little gold crucifix and charm clicking softly together against his chest in an uneven rhythm. Shane found himself staring helplessly at the glint of gold against flushed skin and he had the irrational realization that he wanted to press his mouth against the little gold image of the saint every time it bounced against Ilya's chest, which felt vaguely sacrilegious considering the things they were doing.

Then Ilya pulled his hand off their cocks and pushed two fingers past Shane's lips, immediately finding him ready to enthusiastically suckle on them. He applied pressure on his tongue, gently pushing down to guide him on his knees, and Hollander went down willingly. His knees hit the floor with a soft *thud* that reverberated through Ilya's whole body like a shock wave.

He had meant to fuck Hollander's mouth, but now he wanted more, he wanted it all.

He let himself fall on his knees too, mirroring him perfectly, and kissed him without pulling his hand away; he pushed his tongue past his lips and around his own fingers, then he wrapped his other arm around Shane's lower back, guiding him towards the floor.

He had also meant to get Hollander onto the bed, or sofa at least, but now he wanted him right then, right there.

I like this a little too much, was his last coherent thought before Shane flipped onto his stomach and started grinding his ass against his erection, then he figured he might as well shut down his brain for a while.

After Hollander left his apartment at around 8:30, Ilya felt buzzing with energy as he got ready to head to the restaurant. He normally hated working the Friday and Saturday of a Valentine's day weekend, but somehow his current good mood felt unshakeable.

When his sous chef burned a whole tray of asparagus tarte tatin and Ilya didn't throw even a fork in his general direction but rather sighed and said "We have extras anyway" everyone in the kitchen was left speechless.

One of the older kitchen staff members left out a cackle, then put into words what everyone else was thinking.

"Who are you and what have you done with that bastard Ilya Rozanov?"

←  Whatsapp chat with: Lily  

Sat, 14 Feb

Received Message: Happy deeply capitalist holiday Hollander 06:34 am

Sent Message: is this your way of asking me to be your valentine 06:55 am ✓✓

Received Message: absolutely not 06:56 am

Received Message: unless you say yes 06:56 am

Sent Message: tragic for you, I already have plans 06:58 am ✓✓

Received Message: with who 06:58 am

Sent Message: your dick apparently – remember? 06:58 am ✓✓

Received Message: ah, yes, be here in an hour 06:59 am



Type a message



Shane rang his bell exactly one hour later and Ilya made sure to show him in bed exactly how much he appreciated how well he followed his instructions.

Later, while he was putting his clothes back on, Shane felt the soft brush of Rozanov's fingers caressing his lower back absentmindedly as he walked past him towards the kitchen. The touch

lingered just enough that Shane followed after him automatically.

Rozanov pushed a cup of coffee towards him and that was when Shane's eyes landed on the accidentally-obviously heart-shaped pastry that had been placed on the kitchen counter.

He stared at it like it was a snake about to bite him.

"It was left over from service yesterday," Rozanov mumble, suddenly very focused on his coffee.

"Today is Valentine's day, not yesterday," Shane felt the need to notice.

"Very observant."

There was a strange stiffness to the answer. Like Ilya regretted the pastry being there at all now that Shane had seen it.

And then, almost immediately, he pivoted.

He leaned back against the fridge in nothing but sleep pants, stretching his arms over his head lazily. The movement pulled his shirtless torso taut; the gold chain on his chest caught the kitchen light, his abs tightening in a way that looked practiced only because nothing about Ilya ever seemed accidental.

Shane's eyes dropped before he could stop them.

No underwear.

Of course.

"You keep staring at me like that," Ilya murmured, amusement slipping back easily into his voice, "and you're going to end up late for practice."

There it was.

The easy way out.

Back to teasing. Back to sex. Back to something they both understood.

Shane exhaled slowly, relieved.

"I have to go..." he whispered, before he started reading too much into heart-shaped pastries and half-naked Italians.

Ilya smiled like he had successfully redirected the conversation exactly where he wanted it, grabbed the pastry, slid it into a Ziplock bag and held it out toward him.

"For after-practice snack," he explained, trying to sound nonchalant, "It has peanut butter, only sweetened with dates, no refined sugar, it's good protein."

And Shane took it and left and didn't ask why something that was supposedly leftover from service and not specifically made for him seemed to so perfectly fit into his diet.

Later that afternoon, after practice had ended and everyone had showered and left (Shane being the last one off the ice meant he was also consistently the last one out of the locker room), Shane found the pastry at the bottom of his bag as he was digging for socks and realized he had somehow completely forgotten about it. For a second he just stared at the little Ziplock bag, the heart-shaped thing inside slightly squashed from having been buried under his gloves and training gear all afternoon.

He was exhausted from practice, his legs felt heavy, his shoulders ached, and there was a hollow, insistent feeling somewhere beneath his ribs that he had been ignoring since he had downed a protein shake as “lunch”.

He opened the bag and the sweet smell of warm dates and roasted peanuts hit him immediately, something almost buttery underneath, with the faintest hint of cinnamon. It was almost embarrassingly pleasant. His stomach contracted and Shane looked around the empty locker room as if he had just been caught doing something very naughty.

There was no one there. And it was ridiculous to hide, it was a pastry and it was not like snacks weren't allowed after practice. Except this wasn't just a snack, not really, it was first and foremost something Ilya had made for him, something completely unnecessary and awfully tempting, pretty much like anything regarding Ilya.

Shane looked at it again and had the strange, sudden feeling that anyone walking into the room would know immediately, that they would take one look at the pastry in his hand and somehow see everything else too: Ilya's kitchen, Ilya's hands, Ilya's fingers on Shane, *inside* him, the lust between them, the way Shane had started wanting things he had spent years teaching himself not to want.

He took a desperate bite nonetheless, after looking around the empty room, feeling like a child stealing a cookie from a jar. The outside shell gave way softly beneath his teeth, yielding immediately to the dense, sticky sweetness inside. The dates had melted into something almost caramel-like, while the peanut butter cut through it with a salty richness that spread across Shane's tongue and clung to the roof of his mouth. There was something about it that made him chew slowly, trying to understand where one flavor ended and the next began.

A happy little moan escaped him before he could stop it and Shane froze. He shifted on the bench and had to check for a second that he hadn't been getting hard under his towel. He swallowed and looked around yet again, his face burning even though there was still nobody there.

The next bite he took was worse. Or better. He wasn't sure anymore. The taste had become deeper as the pastry warmed in his mouth, making it sharper, fuller, somehow more addictive. His stomach gave another quiet, traitorous growl. This time he was pretty sure he felt his dick twitch.

Shane ate half of the treat before his brain caught up with him, then he stopped. The remaining piece sat in his palm, soft and uneven where his teeth had broken through it.

Shane stared at it for a moment before hurriedly folding the plastic back over the pastry and pushing it into the bottom of his bag, telling himself that half was enough, more than enough.

He zipped the bag shut and stood there for a moment, breathing slowly, adjusting the towel around his hips, looking for the clothes he had been meaning to wear, trying to ignore the fact that his mouth was still full of the taste of the pastry and his mind still full of Ilya.

Trying even harder to ignore the fact that he wanted the other half. He wanted the whole thing and he couldn't let himself have it.

←  Whatsapp chat with: Lily  

Sun, 15 Feb

Received Message: I just realized something horrible 11:45 am

Sent Message: ??? 11:46 am ✓✓

Received Message: you have Pavlov conditioned me 11:47 am

Sent Message: what?? 11:47 am ✓✓

Received Message: every time my phone buzzes I get horny now 11:47 am

Sent Message: tragic 11:48 am ✓✓

Received Message: this is your fault somehow 11:48 am

Received Message: meet me at 3 pm? I have an hour off and can get a room at the hotel above the restaurant 11:49 am

Sent Message: yes 11:49 am ✓✓



Type a message



Shane put away his phone and could feel it buzz a couple more times in his pocket as he answered the questions of the journalist in front of him. He was done with practice but his coach had asked him to sit down for this brief interview.

The first questions were the usual. How is team morale. How well do you find you are playing together even if you are not normally on the same team. How is the Olympic village. What is your strategy to face the quarterfinals next week. Blah blah blah...

He was almost zooming out, his mind already projected towards the 3 pm meeting, when he registered that the journalist had just asked him "Captain Hollander you seem unusually relaxed

this Olympics. You are smiling even right now. Different approach this year?”

He let the corner of his mouth go up a bit in a smile, thinking *Oh if only you knew why...*

“Maybe Italy agrees with me,” was the polite answer he manage to summon.

The answer made it into the published interview, which Ilya read later that night, while on a cigarette break with Svetlana.

Maybe Italy agrees with me.

He bit his lower lip trying not to smile.

Svetlana shook her head very theatrically.

“Patetico,” was all she said before patting him softly on the shoulder and going back to work.

←  Whatsapp chat with: Lily  

Mon, 16 Feb

Sent Message: can't meet up this morning, early practice with the team 05:46 am ✓✓

Sent Message: and I need to focus 05:46 am ✓✓

*Received Message:*ok 08:53 am

Sent Message: been distracted all day 10:46 pm ✓✓

this is your fault somehow 10:46 pm ✓✓

*Received Message:*fascinating accusation 11:04 pm

Sent Message: you should stop texting me 11:04 pm ✓✓

*Received Message:*you are the one texting me 11:06 pm

Sent Message: am I coming over? 11:06 pm✓✓

*Received Message:*restaurant closes at midnight 11:10 pm

Sent Message: I can wait 11:10 pm ✓✓

*Received Message:*dangerous thing to say to me Hollander 11:11 pm



Type a message



Shane stared at the screen for a long moment after that last message.

It was late. Much later than his usual bedtime.

The room was empty because Jack and a couple of the other MLH guys had upgraded themselves to some ridiculous five-star hotel downtown, which meant Shane could technically leave without anyone noticing. He probably should not. He absolutely should not this late and only a few days away from a quarterfinal.

He had spent the entire morning pretending he did not care that he would not get to see Rozanov that day.

And maybe that would have worked if Rozanov had made it difficult.

If he had complained.

If he had pushed.

If he had sent something obscene and distracting on purpose.

Instead Shane had gotten one dry little *ok* eight hours ago and nothing else.

Which was objectively normal. Mature, even.

Unfortunately, Shane had spent the rest of the day irrationally annoyed about it.

Because apparently some deeply pathetic part of him had wanted Rozanov to sound disappointed.

The worst part was that Shane could not even accuse him of playing games, because Ilya had simply mirrored Shane's own tone back at him perfectly.

Casual, detached, unaffected.

Just sex.

Right?

And yet the silence had followed Shane around all day like an itch under his skin.

Now his gear was packed for tomorrow, the lights in the Olympic village had gone quiet hours ago, and he was still staring at his phone instead of sleeping.

He should stay put.

Instead, Shane grabbed his jacket.

←  Whatsapp chat with: Lily  

Tue, 17 Feb

Received Message: You sleep in today at least? 08:03 am

Sent Message: ashamed to say I did 08:03 am ✓✓

Received Message: you need beauty sleep to stay pretty 😊 08:03 am

Received Message: important question 08:34 am

Sent Message: afraid already 08:35 am ✓✓

Received Message: if I made pasta shaped like your ass would you eat it or would that feel narcissistic 08:35 am

Sent Message: what 08:35 am ✓✓

Received Message: answer carefully 08:36 am

Sent Message: I hate talking to you 08:36 am ✓✓

Received Message: but you are talking to me 08:36 am

Sent Message: I am blocking you 08:37 am ✓✓



Type a message



Shane shuffled around under the sheets and smiled at his phone, and at the way Rozanov's nonsense had quickly taken his mind off the guilt he was feeling for (for once in his life) hitting snooze on his 5:45 am alarm.

He'd come back from Rozanov's place at 2 am the night prior and he needed more than 4 hours of sleep to be functional. Clearly. Considering that the most embarrassing part, the real guilt eating away at him, wasn't sleeping past 8 am, but having fallen asleep at Ilya's place for a little while.

Rozanov had been an absolute menace, making Shane come with only his mouth before bending him over the kitchen counter and spending a ridiculous amount of time kissing every centimeter of skin on his back and then eating his ass like a starving man. When he'd noticed Shane was hard again he'd finally grabbed a condom and given him what Shane was practically begging for at this point.

After all of that, it wasn't that hard to believe that, while Rozanov was cleaning him up gently with a washcloth, Shane had accidentally fallen asleep on his sofa for twenty minutes and woken up in genuine panic, with Rozanov sitting next to him and caressing his hair.

Shane had not fallen asleep in another person's arms in years. Maybe never. Usually, his brain remained alert even during exhaustion, like some overtrained guard dog refusing to stand down. But with Rozanov's fingers grazing his skin, it had just shut down...

"You drooled on me a little," Ilya had informed him calmly.

"I absolutely did not."

"You did. Was cute."

Shane had briefly considered killing him. He'd made plans to meet up the following day instead.

◀  Whatsapp chat with: Lily  

Fri, 20 Feb

Sent Message: We won 12:07 pm ✓✓

Canada had won the quarterfinals just as easily as they had won the previous match.

The locker room was full of energy, banter, and young men yelling at each other enthusiastically. Shane had honored his duty as Captain and given a brief but firm speech about the importance of keeping the momentum going.

Then he had reached for his phone. He waited patiently for Rozanov's reply. He knew it might take him a little longer to get back to his messages during lunch service, but he didn't have to wait long.

←  Whatsapp chat with: Lily  

Fri, 20 Feb

Sent Message: We won 12:07 pm ✓✓

Received Message: obviously 12:09 pm

Sent Message: wow 12:09 pm ✓✓

Sent Message: no "congratulations, captain"? 12:09 pm ✓✓

Received Message: I already congratulated my dick privately 12:10 pm

Sent Message: please stop talking about your penis like it's part of team Canada 12:10 pm ✓✓

Received Message: after this win I think it deserves a medal 12:10 pm

Sent Message: you are insufferable 12:10 pm ✓✓

Received Message: and yet you keep coming back 12:10 pm

Also, I just saw you in the post-game live interview 12:11 pm

Sent Message: unfortunate 12:11 pm ✓✓

Received Message: I think your resting bitch face scares children 12:11 pm

Sent Message: I'm afraid my face scares everyone 12:11 pm ✓✓

Received Message: not me 12:11 pm

Sent Message: because you're deranged 12:11 pm ✓✓

Received Message: because I know what your face looks like when you come 12:12 pm



Type a message



Shane locked his phone instantly, looking around to make sure nobody was noticing how red his face had turned, but everyone was still celebrating their victory. Jack and a couple of the guys were passing around a bottle of prosecco and someone tried handing it to Shane.

“No thanks guys, it's a little early for that”

“Oh, come on Cap,” Jack mocked him “get your hands off the phone and have fun with us. Who the fuck are you even texting all the time?”

“Hayden Pike” was Shane’s instant and stiff reply.

Too fast.

The room had gone silent.

“...you wanna try that lie again, captain? It’s like 6 am in Canada right now.”

Shane straightened his back, hiding away the panic rising from the bottom of his stomach.

“Yeah, and Hayden is more of a hockey fan than the lot of you, if you are saying you would not wake up at the crack of dawn to watch your country move on to the semifinals.”

He punctuated that sentence with a gulp of awfully warm prosecco from the bottle he had been offered, just to redirect the attention of the boys. It worked. They all cheered, grabbed the bottle again, and started jumping around.

It was Friday, they would go out to celebrate tonight, the semifinals were on Monday, they had time to prepare for that game.

Shane had time to squeeze one more rendezvous with Rozanov in his schedule. Despite this little jump scare, he didn’t even lie to himself and pretend he didn’t want to.

←  Whatsapp chat with: Lily  

Mon, 23 Feb

Received Message: Semifinals, uh? I’d say good luck, but we both know you’ve gotten enough of that lucky dick to last you through the next Olympics 6:44 pm

Sent Message: I am officially requesting you let that joke go 6:44 pm ✓✓

Received Message: never 6:44 pm

Shane’s head was wonderfully empty as he put on his gear for the semifinals.

At this point, he had been meeting up with Rozanov almost on a daily basis, sneaking off to his apartment or a discreet hotel room whenever they could both spare the time.

It felt *so good* to have this thing waiting for him on the other side of his hockey life... And it was relatively safe as long as it was just sex. Shane understood sex. Sex was easy. Sex had rules.

The dangerous part was whatever came before and after the sex, like the way Ilya looked at him afterward sometimes, sleepy and unfocused, while he pushed coffee into Shane's hands exactly the way he liked it despite only having known him for... what 2 weeks? (It felt both like a lifetime and the smallest bit of time).

The dangerous part was that by the time semifinals had rolled around, Shane had somehow developed a routine that had Rozanov in it.

A deeply stupid routine, but a routine nonetheless.

There was Rozanov's apartment somehow carved into the structure of Shane's days now.

There were smoothies prepared with the right amount of protein and sweetness to make them feel safe.

There was the exact shape and color of the golden chain that Rozanov never took off carved into Shane's memory, the image of it glinting warm against his throat. And Shane kept wanting to touch it with his mouth, but he had no idea why that felt intimate in a way putting Rozanov's cock down his throat somehow didn't.

There was the way Rozanov had laughed wholeheartedly at Shane's attempt to say "I hate you" in Italian before spending half an hour teaching him the proper pronunciation of "ti odio", together with a couple swear words thrown in for extra flair.

There was the horrifying realization that he now instinctively checked how far he was from Rozanov anytime he crossed Milan.

Twenty minutes by cab from the arena.

Thirty-five if traffic was bad.

He knew because apparently his brain had decided that was useful information to retain.

There were increasingly explicit messages Shane absolutely did not open around teammates anymore after nearly giving himself a heart attack when Boodram had leaned over his shoulder once.

But there were also messages that felt alarmingly domestic, and that was probably where Shane should have realized he was in trouble.

Not when Rozanov fucked him into the kitchen floor or pushed him to his knees or talked filth into his ear with that low accented voice.

No.

When Shane had started smiling automatically every time his phone buzzed.

That was the truly catastrophic development.

And yet Shane's life did not feel catastrophic lately. He had been texting Hayden, Rose, and his parents enthusiastically, to the point where each one had asked him why he was in such a good mood. He had blamed Olympic success nonchalantly.

He had also caught himself imagining Ilya barefoot in his kitchen back at his cottage near Ottawa, swearing in Italian at one of Shane's knives because they were not sharp enough while something simmered on the stove. He had caught himself fantasizing about what time with Ilya felt like when there was no expiration date, and that was definitely not allowed, not when all this could be was just sex...

"Ready, captain?" Jack's sudden words as he patted him forcefully on the back took him out of his daze, "Let's go fuck those cocksuckers from Slovakia!"

Shane cringed at the slur while the team cheered enthusiastically.

And that was exactly why this thing with Rozanov, whatever it was, could not be more than a momentary secret fling.

Ilya almost burned his last batch of puff pastry because he was too busy refreshing the results of the Canada-Slovakia hockey semifinals and Svetlana was quick to mock him once she heard the kitchen staff gossip about it.

"Devo preoccuparmi?" she teased him, only half-jokingly. *Do I have to worry about you?*

Ilya flipped her off.

"Certo che no", *of course not.*

Why would she have to worry? This was just sex. Really good sex, but just sex. And what if he had moved around a couple of work shifts when they had not fit Hollander's training schedule or turned down all invitations to hang out from anyone who wasn't him. He was only around for a few more days, it was logical to maximize time together.

It was a bit harder for Ilya to find a good excuse as to why he kept making an effort in the kitchen to have something ready for Hollander to snack on after sex, except that it was satisfying to hear such a picky eater literally moan when he bit into a warm zucchini muffin. Except it made Ilya fucking horny when Hollander let him hand feed him the last crumbs of that muffin, teeth scraping his fingers.

"È solo sesso," he mumbled in response to Svetlana's accusing glare.

It's just sex.

Canada had just won the semifinals and was going to face the US team in the finals in three days, the last match before the team could fly home.

Ilya's phone buzzed and he knew who it was before looking. He turned around to protect his screen from Sveta's prying eyes.

←  Whatsapp chat with: Hollander 🍆🍑📞📶

Sent Message: never 6:44 pm ✓✓

Received Message: we won 10:13 pm

Sent Message: lucky 10:13 pm ✓✓

Received Message: the luckiest 10:13 pm

Sent Message: I meant my dick 10:14 pm ✓✓

Received Message: WILL YOU EVER LET THAT JOKE GO 10:14 pm

Sent Message: when you stop winning 10:14 pm ✓✓

Received Message: unlikely scenario 10:15 pm

Sent Message: then we'll just have to keep this up. My place tomorrow? 10:15 pm ✓✓

Received Message: I have a whole day off tomorrow, most of the team is going on a day trip to Como but I said I'd rather stay put and prepare for the match 10:15 pm

Sent Message: Ah and do you plan to do that? Because the restaurant is closed on Tuesday, so I also have a whole day off 10:16 pm ✓✓

Received Message: I know 10:16 pm



Type a message



Ilya realized his fingers were shaking slightly. He'd been happy to steal a couple of hours here and there, but a whole day... the things he could do... that was exhilarating.

He was lost enough in his thoughts that he didn't realize Svetlana had moved behind him

"Solo sesso?" she asked knowingly, having both read his conversation and the excitement in his face.

Ilya frowned and put his phone away. Svetlana's hand came up to his face, cupping his cheek. He closed his eyes and let himself lean into the touch.

She didn't have to utter words to let him know what she was thinking.

You are gonna get hurt. Again.

They had both been through this. Svetlana still put herself through it regularly, and Ilya regularly gave her shit for it. His own walls had been up for long enough that this was the first time the roles were reversed in years.

Hollander would leave in a few days, there was no pretense whatever they had could go on past that, and Ilya knew. But whatever they had now, for these few days, felt good enough to have distracted him temporarily from resenting his brother, constantly worrying about his father's declining health, or simply freaking out about his life.

Two weeks ago he'd regularly wake up before dawn feeling the dread of having to face his life once again weigh on his chest like a boulder. Would his brother ask for more today? Would the clinic in Russia finally call with news of his father's death? Did he fear that call or hope for it? What option made him a worse son?

Now instead he was sleeping peacefully through the night. Hollander had somehow become the first person in years around whom Ilya's brain finally went quiet. He could finally wake up looking forward to a text that Hollander would have sent after his (ridiculously) early morning practice. He had started thinking of ways to make a vegan protein smoothie taste good, just so Hollander would absent-mindedly hum a bit while drinking it.

Hollander relaxed and smiled so rarely when they had first met, and Ilya had now started collecting the happy, quiet moments unconsciously.

The sleepy look after orgasm. The way he nuzzled up against his armpit like a puppy seeking shelter. The way he stopped checking the time whenever they ended up tangled together in bed.

Ilya found himself wanting to create more of these moments for Hollander.

Not in Milan. Not with the polished version of himself he fed coworkers, customers and strangers.

The thought arrived suddenly and lodged itself beneath his ribs before he could stop it.

He wanted to take Hollander to the place where he'd grown up.

Which was, objectively, an insane impulse.

Fuck, he was gonna get hurt.

Well, might as well make it worth it. He took his phone out and typed again, letting Sveta look. She was now leaning against his side, nuzzling his shoulder.

←  Whatsapp chat with: Hollander 🍆🍑📞📶

Sent Message: How about I take you for a day trip of your own? 10:17 pm ✓✓

Received Message: sounds like a bad idea 10:17 pm

Sent Message: everything we do is a bad idea 10:17 pm ✓✓

Received Message: maybe 10:17 pm

Sent Message: I'll make it worth your while 10:18 pm ✓✓

Maybe meant no, *maybe* meant Hollander was looking for an excuse.

I'll make it worth your while meant it was just about sex. It was reassuring.

Keeping it sexy, keeping it light.

Like when he'd asked him back into his bed after their first time saying *I'm not done with you*, before spending an hour stroking his skin with disbelieving fingers.

His heart bumped in his chest while the typing dots appeared and disappeared.

←  Whatsapp chat with: Hollander 🍆🍑📞⋮

Received Message: maybe 10:17 pm

Sent Message: I'll make it worth your while 10:18 pm ✓✓

Received Message: why not? 10:21 pm

There were a million reasons why they should not. Svetlana could probably list all of them off, based on the way she sighed and patted Ilya's back soothingly.

Two weeks ago, the idea of spending an entire free day alone with another person would have exhausted him, now Ilya could not believe his luck being able to take Hollander to the place where he had spent his youth with his mother. He had not willingly brought anyone there in years.

One more text to Hollander to tell him to be at his place at 7 am and then Ilya turned back to the kitchen and shoved the phone back into his pocket before he could think too hard about what exactly he was doing.

←  Whatsapp chat with: Lily 📞⋮

Tue, 24 Feb

Sent Message: here 06:58 am ✓✓

should I come upstairs? 06:58 am ✓✓

*Received Message:*no, coming down no, wait a sec 06:59 am

Sent Message: ok 06:58 am ✓✓

you good? this is a long sec 07:04 am ✓✓

*Received Message:*may need help 07:05 am

Sent Message: ?? 07:05 am ✓✓

*Received Message:*getting a stain out of my pants 07:05 am

Sent Message: come again? 07:06 am ✓✓

Received Message: No, this time it's coffee I think 07:06 am

Sent Message: ... 07:06 am ✓✓

Received Message: I put on other pants, coming down now 07:06 am



Type a message



And just as Shane finished reading the text Rozanov appeared through the heavy door of his building, all wrapped up in a thick coat and carrying a duffle bag that had Shane immediately worried he was unprepared for the day.

"I didn't bring anything" he immediately blurted out, eyes wide with the terror of not having planned correctly.

Ilya waved a hand in the air, dismissively.

"Is ok, I have brought a couple of things for both of us in case we need to change or something. You know, like if I make you come in your pants..." he ended the sentence with a shit eating grin and Shane felt the need to punch him.

"Or like if you spill your coffee on yourself again like a baby," he chirped back. But he was also grateful that Rozanov had planned for both of them. He felt reassured.

Ilya shrugged and took Shane's hand to guide him around the corner to where an obnoxiously yellow sport car was parked. Before Shane could finish thinking "who would ever drive this thing on possibly icy roads in the dead of winter", Rozanov had opened the hood and was pushing the bag inside.

“You having a midlife crisis or something?” Shane teased him.

Ilya rolled his eyes.

“Millionaire hockey player and you probably have some boring, four-wheel drive, grey dad’s car”

“I have a Range Rover, it’s practical, good in the snow! Montreal winters are no joke.”

“Boring. Get your pretty ass in the car.”

And that was the end of discussion, except for a couple extra remarks on how ridiculous the color choice was that Shane felt compelled to express as the two of them made their way out of a still sleepy and mostly empty Milan.

As the car started drifting down the highway and the cityscape morphed into the vast flat lands of the Pianura Padana, Shane felt increasingly... relaxed. The Olympics felt far away, his family was still asleep somewhere in Canada, his team wasn’t going to look for him for at least 24 hours. He realized he had no idea what his day would look like and for once that wasn’t terrifying.

Rozanov had planned something, that weirdly was enough.

They left the highway after roughly 2 and a half hours at an exit marked as “Versilia” and Ilya made a couple quick turns almost automatically. Shane noticed he wasn’t using Google Maps or anything of the sort.

“You come here often?”

Ilya stopped at a red traffic light and answered flatly, without tearing his eyes from the road.

“I grew up here.”

Oh

The casual revelation hit Shane like a gut punch. It wasn’t anything tremendous in and of itself. Of course Rozanov had grown up *somewhere*, he hadn’t just materialized into the world as a 35-year-old man just to be a menace in Shane’s life for 3 weeks then disappear, and it made sense that if he wanted to go to for a day trip he’d pick a place he knew. Shane was suddenly hit by the terrifying thought that he was going to meet Ilya’s family like in one of those terrible Christmas rom coms.

“Does... does your family still live here then?” he mumbled tentatively.

Ilya’s knuckles whitened for a second as he gripped the wheel tightly.

“No,” was all he said before the light turned green and he hit the gas.

Shane figured it was not a topic he should push, so he just diverted his attention to the scene around them.

They were driving on a long road with houses on one side and beach resorts on the other. Every once in a while the rows of palm trees and fences opened up and Shane could get a glimpse of the dark sea foaming up against a long sandy, empty beach. All the beach resorts were closed for the winter, doors and windows shut, parking lots empty. Lonely metal poles sprung out from the sand, waiting for sun umbrellas to be returned to them come summer.

Rozanov parked in front of one of the few hotels that didn't look completely abandoned for the winter.

Shane frowned at the faded sign.

"...why are we stopping at a hotel?"

Ilya looked genuinely confused by the question.

"Because I plan to fuck you before lunch."

He said it in the same tone someone would use to explain they needed gas for the car.

Shane nearly choked on his own saliva.

"We just got here..."

"Yes."

"We are in broad daylight."

"Yes."

"There are people..."

Ilya glanced around at the empty street, the shuttered beach clubs and the aggressively deserted promenade.

"One receptionist and maybe a ghost," he corrected.

Then he grabbed the duffle bag from the trunk and hooked his free arm around Shane's waist like this was the most natural thing in the world.

Shane followed on instinct, face burning hotter with every step toward the entrance.

The woman at reception looked up from her crossword puzzle.

Her eyes flicked once over the two of them, Shane visibly malfunctioning beside a very smug Ilya carrying an overnight bag, and immediately seemed to sharpen with understanding.

Shane wanted to die.

Ilya, meanwhile, leaned casually onto the counter and started chatting with her in rapid Italian.

The receptionist laughed at something he said.

"Oh my god," Shane muttered under his breath.

"What?" Ilya asked innocently while signing something and sliding a few euro bills over the counter.

"What in hell did you just say?"

"I only asked if the room still had functioning heating."

The woman behind the desk snorted, which convinced Shane he most definitely had not asked her that. He contemplated walking directly into the sea.

A minute later Ilya was pressing a room key into his palm and guiding him toward the elevator with a hand warm against the small of his back.

“Relax,” he murmured. “You look like I’m walking you towards the guillotine to get your head chopped off or something.”

“You rented a hotel room for sex at ten in the morning.”

“And?”

“And that’s insane behavior.”

Ilya grinned.

“Yet you still got in the elevator.”

When they entered the room Shane thought that it looked exactly like the kind of seaside bed-and-breakfast that only made sense during summer.

Pale blue walls.

Plastic seashell decorations.

A cheap framed photograph of mountains he had seen in the distance while they were driving, striped white with marble quarries.

Out of season, it all felt vaguely surreal.

“It’s not the Ritz,” Ilya admitted, dropping the bag near the bed, “but most places are closed in February.”

Then he unzipped the duffel.

Shane got a glimpse of the content, which included condoms, deodorant, a spare phone charger, socks, protein bars, and, horrifyingly, a neatly folded extra pair of Shane’s preferred briefs.

“...are those mine?”

“You left them at my apartment.”

“You packed me emergency underwear?”

Ilya shrugged like it was obvious, like he knew how much Shane would have hated to be in sweaty clothes or in underwear that was sticky with precum and saliva.

“I also brought lube, Hollander,” he added with an unmistakable grin, “I’m not a saint.”

Shane leaned back against the warmth of a radiator and just stared at him.

This should not have affected him as much as it did.

Because yes, technically, Ilya had packed the bag because he fully intended to wreck Shane hard enough to require a change of clothes afterward.

But he had also remembered what kind of protein bars Shane liked.

And packed him clean socks.

It was dangerously close to caring.

So naturally Ilya ruined the moment immediately by stepping closer and grabbing a handful of Hollander's ass, which was all warmed up from resting on the radiator.

"You heating up my lunch, Hollander?" Ilay teased, before biting down on the soft skin behind his ear, earning him a groan.

Back to more familiar territory.

Sex was the answer.

Simple, easy to understand sex.

"Fuck off, Rozanov, leave me alone..." Shane whispered, but his hands were saying the opposite, softly holding on to Ilya's curls, so Ilya didn't feel a bit bad when he replied "No" and crushed his mouth onto Shane's.

They got out of bed two hours later because Ilya's stomach was growling.

Shane hadn't been quiet when Rozanov had folded him with his knees besides his ears and fucked him into the mattress and the hotel was basically empty so there was no way the receptionist hadn't gotten an earful of his performance. He exited the room looking like a man fleeing the scene of a crime.

He was well aware that he was fresh out of the shower, wearing fresh underwear, and looking freshly fucked.

Meanwhile Ilya looked radiant. Absolutely radiant.

He had one hand hooked lazily into Shane's back pocket while they crossed the lobby and gave the room key back.

The receptionist took one look at them and slowly slid a complimentary mint across the counter toward Shane without a word.

Ilya burst out laughing so hard he nearly folded in half.

Shane considered changing his identity and moving to another continent immediately.

"You are never allowed to bring me here again," he hissed once they were outside.

And all Ilya could think while he put the bag back in the car was the fact that he had said “bring me here again” like there would be a next time, like a universe existed in which *this thing* didn’t have an expiration date that was only a few days ahead.

“Let’s go,” he said, trying to shake off those thoughts, “I’m starving and I cannot live on a diet consisting purely of your ass.”

Shane looked outraged for a second, but was easily soothed with lunch. Rozanov knew the perfect place to pick up a warm, oily, gigantic piece of focaccia for himself and a to-go box of roasted salmon and veggies for Shane, which they took to the empty beach.

They sat down on the brown sand just shy of where the waves caressed the shore and ate most of their lunch in silence.

It was a nice kind of silence, Shane found himself thinking.

It was the same quiet that he could feel around him all over this place. The town looked washed out and abandoned in the way only seaside towns could in winter – all the chaos packed away somewhere until summer returned for it. It was just him and Rozanov on the beach, together with a couple hungry looking seagulls and whatever the sea had washed up on the shore. It felt controlled and empty in the same way hockey arenas did when there weren’t games, when the ice was all for Shane and his mind could just... go quiet.

Shane found himself dividing the food into neat little sections the way he always did. He ate the salmon first (protein was important), but not all of it, then some veggies to fill up his stomach on something rich in fiber and low in calories. Zucchini first, then peppers, but he made sure to skip the potatoes.

He was halfway through his bowl when his eyes were drawn to the movement of Ilya’s hands. He was tearing off large pieces from the chunk of focaccia in his hands, exposing the pale, airy middle beneath the browned surface. Little pools of olive oil had soaked into the finger shaped holes on the surface of the bread, there were flakes of salt caught in the uneven surface and dark green flecks of rosemary pressed into the crust. Rozanov folded a piece in half and bit into it, his sharp canines digging into the crust the way they had pushed against Shane’s skin in the hotel room no more than an hour earlier. Hungrily. Happily. He hummed softly as he licked the oil off his fingers and when he lifted his eyes Shane realized he had been staring.

“What?” Rozanov asked, with a smirk.

“Nothing... You... You are making a face,” Shane mumbled, looking away.

“What face?”

“*That* face,” Shane said, still not looking at him, just waving a fork in his general direction. It was too similar to the face he would make when he had Shane’s cock in his mouth to ignore it. But he didn’t elaborate.

“It is called enjoying lunch, Hollander.”

Shane looked down at his own container, at the potatoes neatly stacked away in a corner, at the remaining salmon he still hadn’t decided if he could eat. He wasn’t going to practice today and he

didn't know if he'd earned it. He also did not know what face he was supposed to be making while eating this right now.

"Want some?" Ilya asked, offering the last piece of oily bread in his hand, like a fucked up communion.

Shane had been to a Catholic wedding once, where towards the end people had lined up in front of the priest to receive a thin white wafer that was supposedly the body of Christ. He'd been relieved nobody had asked him to participate to that specific ritual. The whole thing had felt vaguely wrong, the little wafer feeling a lot heavier than it had any right to, especially when the priest had held it up and said, *this is my body, which will be given up for you*. Shane hadn't understood what any of it was supposed to mean. He'd just known he didn't want to eat it.

This bread felt wrong too, except this wasn't offered as absolution, this was undoubtedly temptation.

Shane looked at the focaccia for another long moment, then he shook his head.

"No. I'd have to run up and down the beach for half an hour to burn that off."

"I didn't ask if you had earned it," Ilya scoffed, making Shane look up at him, "I asked if you *wanted* some."

Shane still shook his head, maybe less convinced. Ilya's hand began to withdraw and Shane reached out before he could think better of it, catching him by the wrist. He held on, then, instead of taking the bread, he pulled Ilya toward him. Rozanov followed easily, leaning down until Shane could close the distance between them.

The kiss was slow and soft, Shane could taste the focaccia immediately: olive oil slick against Ilya's lips, salt lingering on his tongue, the faint, herbal sharpness of rosemary still caught in his breath. He lingered there, sucking on Ilya's tongue, tasting what he had eaten, letting the flavor spread through his mouth until he could no longer tell where the taste of the bread ended and Ilya began.

When he pulled back, Rozanov was smiling. He didn't say anything about the kiss. He just tore off another piece of focaccia and ate it, still watching Shane with that infuriating little smile.

After a while when they both went quiet again, Rozanov turned his attention to the sand, absentmindedly digging his fingers through it. Every so often he'd pick up a shell or a smooth pebble and toss it back toward the waves.

Then his fingers stilled.

He pulled something out carefully and rubbed it clean with the pad of his thumb before holding it up between them.

It was a small seashell, rounded and made of small ridges like it had been folded together by careful hands. Pale orange faded into cream-colored stripes along the grooves, the colors softened by seawater and time. From certain angles it almost looked heart-shaped.

"That's pretty," Shane said before he could stop himself.

Ilya glanced at the shell, expression briefly unreadable.

“My mother used to call these *reginelle*,” he said. “It means, like... uhm... little queens.”

His thumb brushed once more over the shell as he smiled, lost in a memory.

“I think the correct name or at least how most people call them is... *cuore di laguna*. Lagoon hearts.”

Shane smiled faintly.

“That sounds fake.”

“Everything in Italian sounds fake to you.”

“Because you say things like lagoon hearts.”

That got a quiet laugh out of Ilya. Then he ate his last bit of focaccia with a satisfied hum and slipped the shell into the pocket of his coat instead of throwing it back into the sea.

“You know,” Rozanov said after a while as he washed the grease off his hands in the freezing cold seawater, glancing back at Shane, “you are allowed to enjoy food sometimes.”

Shane snorted softly. “I enjoyed the salmon.”

“Sure you did.” Ilya looked over his shoulder at him then, eyes softer than Shane knew what to do with. “But you eat like someone is going to punish you if you don’t stay in control all the time.”

Shane’s chest tightened unexpectedly.

He had spent most of his life around people who encouraged that behavior. Coaches. Trainers. Nutritionists. Himself. Nobody had ever said it like it was something worth being sad about before.

“You sound deeply offended by my relationship with carbohydrates,” Shane deflected, stepping away to throw out the almost empty container in a nearby trashcan.

That finally earned him a laugh.

“I am Italian after all.” Ilya replied gravely.

When he got back, Shane let himself plop to the ground right next to where Rozanov was once again sitting and he laid down with his head in his lap. He didn’t care if a lonely fisherman saw them or something. He felt like giving the seagulls a show. Rozanov appreciated and started ruffling his hair with slow, intentional strokes of his fingers, which were still cold from the winter seawater. Shane closed his eyes.

He could hear the roaring sound of the waves, the faint screeches of the birds, the soft humming of the wind.

“Well,” he mumbled, leaning into the touch, “You always joke about the things I don’t eat, but I never asked you why you don’t eat meat. Is it a health thing?”

The question had been bugging him for a while. To him food had always been a means to an end, something he needed to control (*count the macros, count the calories, count the deficit or the surplus, need to bulk or need to cut?*). To summon a reason why someone might not want to eat

meat, Shane had obviously thought of the nutritional label, maybe it had something to do with increased risk of cancer or cholesterol levels.

“I stopped eating meat after my mother died.”

Shane nodded in his lap.

“Like... an ethics thing?”

He felt Rozanov’s hand still, then drag a slow path towards his cheek bones, tracing his freckles quietly, then to his lips.

He was silent for a while and Shane had just reopened his eyes to check on him when he spoke again.

“Kitchen floor smelled like blood for weeks.”

Shane didn’t understand at first, but he felt suddenly cold. It took him a second to relate the two uttered sentences. His mother had died. There had been blood. He hadn’t touched meat since.

Whatever had happened couldn’t have been good.

“How did... how did she die?”

“Accident,” was the automatic response. The one response Ilya’s father had given to everyone who had asked after that day. Bullshit.

“She accidentally slit her wrists,” he clarified.

Now it was Shane’s turn to go still.

“She was a beautiful woman. I loved her very much. She taught me how to cook. But she was not happy. And my father... he was not good to her. I was the one who found her in the kitchen that day, I was twelve.”

The whole confession had just poured out of him like a dam had been opened.

Ilya wasn’t even sure why the fuck he had just unloaded all of that onto Hollander, but somehow he felt relieved he wasn’t carrying it around all by himself for a day.

He was staring at the sea ahead as he felt Hollander softly kiss the fingers that were hovering near his lips. He bent down until their lips met, and it was a wet, gentle kiss, that tasted salty from both the single tear that had rolled down Ilya’s cheek despite his best efforts and the seawater still lingering on his fingertips.

For a while after that kiss neither of them spoke.

The sea kept moving with the same indifferent rhythm it had before the confession, waves folding onto themselves again and again while gulls screamed somewhere farther down the shore.

Shane stayed where he was, cheek pressed against Ilya’s thigh, one hand loosely hooked around his wrist.

There was something strangely unbearable about the fact the world had not changed after hearing something like that.

The sky was still grey.

The beach was still empty.

Cars were driving by somewhere in the distance.

And Ilya was absentmindedly combing his fingers through Shane's hair like he had not just cracked himself open.

Eventually Ilya inhaled sharply through his nose and cleared his throat.

"Come on," he muttered, voice roughened around the edges. "I want gelato."

That got a startled laugh out of Shane.

"We are literally freezing our asses off."

"It is never too cold for gelato, Hollander," Rozanov corrected him with a baffled look in his eyes, like he had just been asked to explain that water was wet.

They got back into the car and Ilya drove for a few minutes away from the beach.

The historical city center of Pietrasanta on the hills looked different from its beachfront counterpart – narrower streets, cozier somehow, more fit to exist in this season.

Winter afternoon sunlight slid over old stone buildings and shuttered windows, over empty streets and tiny cafés with handwritten menus and sculptures standing casually in the middle of the street, in the town square, in front of houses, like they just belonged there.

Every other storefront seemed to contain marble statues or canvases or drawings.

"Why are there so many art galleries?" Shane asked after the fourth one in two blocks.

"Marble," Ilya replied, finishing up the cup of lemon and blackberry gelato that he'd immediately gotten once they had stepped out of the car. "Carrara is twenty minutes away. You know... the famous white Carrara marble? Michelangelo used to come here to choose stone. The nickname of this town is also "Little Athens" because of how important it still is for sculptors."

Shane blinked at him and Ilya took advantage of this moment of silence to steal a quick kiss. Shane tasted lemon and sugar, and maybe a faint memory of the salty tears from before.

"You're making that up," he finally said.

"You have very little trust in me, Hollander, I simply give you well known facts, is not my fault Americans don't know basic things."

Shane was about to reply again that he was from Canada not the US, but Rozanov took his hand and guided him into one of the galleries, a small room that smelled faintly of dust and varnish.

Shane looked around for a while, then stopped in front of a pencil drawing that made his skin crawl almost instantly.

It was impossible to look at it all at once. The entire page was packed edge to edge with frantic graphite strokes – spirals and knots and feathered textures layered so densely they almost seemed to be moving. Everywhere he looked there were too many lines, shapes folding into other shapes until his eyes struggled to separate one thing from another.

And somewhere inside all of it, half-buried beneath the chaos, there was a face.

Or several faces.

Eyes emerged unexpectedly from the paper, swallowed again by the tangle around them. A nose. A mouth. Something star-shaped splitting the center of the composition like a wound. The drawing felt less like something made by a person and more like something clawing its way out from under the page.

The longer he stared at the piece, the more it unsettled him. The lines looked almost organic, like muscle fibers or tangled hair or veins stripped out of a body and pressed flat beneath glass. His mind flashed back to the statue of San Bartolomeo he had seen in the Milan Duomo his first day in the city, stripped of his skin.

“Horror vacui,” Ilya read from the little plaque beside it.

Shane frowned. “What’s that?”

“Fear of empty space.”

Shane looked back at the drawing, then read the rest of the plaque

“Born in 1957 in Paris, David Abisror lost his mother when he was 8. Unable to attach himself to anyone or anything else, he started to paint and draw and found himself able to exorcise his deepest feelings of emptiness through the obsessive use of his pencil work. For him it is a question of filling the entire surface of the empty page with detailed elements, manically, in response to the well-known psychological concept of Horror Vacui, literally terror of the void or fear of empty spaces.”

Fear of empty space.

The artist had filled every inch of the page like stopping even for a second would have meant drowning.

Shane realized with a shiver that in a way hockey had done that for him too.

Filled every available moment of his life.

Training schedules. Meal plans. Statistics. Systems. Practice drills. Flights. Recovery. Media obligations. Superstitions. Noise. Constant noise.

Because maybe if he packed enough structure into himself, there would never be enough room left for panic to seep through the cracks.

Shane had spent most of his life terrified of empty spaces without ever calling it fear.

He had called it discipline instead.

He suddenly wondered whether he had ever loved hockey, or whether he had simply feared everything that existed outside it.

“You hate it,” Ilya observed softly, eyes fixed on the way Shane was frowning.

Shane opened his mouth to deny it, then looked back at the impossible density of graphite and stopped.

“No,” he admitted quietly. “I think I hate that I understand it.”

The rest of the day in Pietrasanta and the drive back to Milan would later blur in Shane’s memory into one long flow of quiet moments.

There was the silence and dusty smell of a church they visited. There was the long walk on the pier to watch the sun set over the sea. There was the small bookshop where Rozanov had briefly stepped in to wave hello to a fragile-looking old lady who had seemed very surprised and pleased to see him there. There was the bar where Rozanov had convinced Shane to try grappa, which was a lot stronger than he had thought and tears had sprung into his eyes as he swallowed, trying not to grimace. There was the long drive back.

When Shane got out of Rozanov's car and was back into the cold air of Milano he suddenly felt like his legs were heavy. There was a lump in his throat and he was basically shivering.

When Rozanov suggested going upstairs to warm up a bit, Shane only nodded and followed him up the stairs.

The apartment was warm and cozy as always. Rozanov took both of their jackets and hung them by the door before moving to the bedroom to drop off the bag.

Shane went straight to the living room window instead, looking down at the street they had just left. He could feel the cold seeping through the window pane. He could see the neon light of the bar where Rozanov had taken him for a Negroni Sbagliato the night they had slept together for the first time.

It was crazy to think that stranger that Shane had followed around Milan keeping a few steps of distance was now someone so entangled in his daily life. Shane let himself plop down on the couch and realized he knew the texture of the fabric by heart. He knew the feel of the fluffy rug on the floor on his knees. He had learned that he needed to turn the bathroom faucet towards the “C” if he wanted hot water and towards the “F” he wanted cold water.

To confirm his thoughts Rozanov leaned on the couch and asked “You want your tea Hollander?”

Your tea. The herbal tea that Ilya had bought because he had once offered Shane black tea and had seen him grimace. *No thanks, do you have any herbal tea?* He didn’t. Not that day. But he did the day after. Three different kinds. And now he knew which kind Shane preferred.

Shane shook his head and stood up a bit stiffly.

“I should probably go”

“Or you could stay”

“Stay?”

“You said your teammates get back tomorrow morning. You could sleep here, leave in the morning as well.”

Shane scratched his neck. He felt nervous saying yes. He didn’t want to say no.

“I guess I could stay...”

Rozanov didn’t let him linger on the thought too long and immediately moved to kiss him, swallowing whatever else he could have said, in case there was a “but” coming up in that sentence.

Shane’s fingers caught briefly on the gold chain resting against Ilya’s chest.

He had spent two weeks staring at it. Watching it swing against flushed skin while Ilya fucked him into mattresses and counters and walls.

Up close, the medal looked worn smooth with age.

“You always wear this,” Shane murmured.

Ilya glanced down briefly, almost surprised by the question.

“Mh.”

Shane rolled the little charm gently between his fingers. The metal was warm from Ilya’s skin.

“Who is she?”

“Sant’ Agata.”

Shane placed the charm back on his chest, covering it with his hand gently.

Ilya’s expression softened.

“It was my mother’s.”

“You wear it for her?”

“Cooking is something I do for her, is how I still talk to her, I think,” Ilya admitted softly, “and sometimes lighting a candle for Sant’ Agata in a church,” he added after a bit

Shane frowned slightly, eyes still fixed on the chain that rested on Ilya’s broad pecs.

“You pray?”

A small huff of laughter escaped Ilya.

“Not really.”

His fingers slid lazily along Shane’s wrist.

“I just... go there sometimes,” he shrugged one shoulder, “Talk to my mother a little.”

Shane hummed softly in understanding.

The room had gone too quiet again and Shane had that open, careful expression that made something dangerous stir low in Ilya’s chest.

Too much.

They were getting too close to something neither of them had agreed to name. And they were about to run out of time.

So Ilya smiled crookedly instead and hooked two fingers into the waistband of Shane’s pants.

“Now, Hollander” he murmured against Shane’s throat, “tell me if speaking of churches and prayers while staring at my tits counts as a sin.”

Shane barked out a startled laugh, tension breaking instantly.

They kissed, it started as a gentle contact, but it grew needy and hungry soon. They dragged their tongues slowly against each other for the longest time, savoring it.

When Ilya broke the contact Shane almost fell forward chasing his lips. He smirked, then grabbed Shane’s face with his hands and went for an open mouth kiss on the side his throat. Shane closed his eyes. He could smell Rozanov’s cologne, his skin, a faint memory of salt from the sea.

Rozanov’s mouth travelled South, fingers working rapidly to scrunch up Shane’s clothes, take them off. He grabbed a handful of his chest, flicked his right nipple with his tongue before closing his teeth around it.

“Oh god...”

“So sensitive...”

“Fuck off”

But Shane didn’t mean it. And so he ran his fingers through Rozanov’s curls and pushed him against his body again, encouraging. Ilya immediately obeyed, showering his chest and stomach with kisses as he went to his knees. He rubbed his face against his crotch, feeling how hard he was even through the denim.

He looked so gorgeous, glassy-eyed and flushed, and yet incredibly focused. And wearing way too many items of clothes. Shane pulled anxiously at his sweater and Rozanov understood, stopped what he was doing and took it off together with his shirt.

“Better” Shane whispered, before thinking too much about it. He ran his fingers along Rozanov’s broad and muscular shoulders, feeling every crease of muscle. Strong hands were now pushing him back, guiding him towards the couch. He sat down, let his knees fall open, and raised his hips to

allow Rozanov to position himself between his legs and slide his jeans and briefs off. His cock twitched when he felt warm breath millimeters away from his skin.

“Please...”

He needed to be touched, but Ilya ignored his plea and opted for biting the soft skin where his inner thigh met his hip. He pulled and sucked between his teeth until he saw a bruise bloom, drinking in all the moans that were filling up the room.

“Oh god, Rozanov, fuck...”

And finally Ilya gave his cock one long lick and let it slip into his mouth.

The groan that escaped Shane’s chest at that was truly undignified, but he did not care.

He let the sensation of warmth and pleasure flood him completely, even more when Rozanov pushed the spit that was dribbling out of his mouth down in between his ass cheeks and pushed in a finger.

He was going to come too soon.

“Wait, stop...” he pulled on Rozanov’s curls to still him and he immediately obeyed and let go of him, eyes suddenly sharper with questioning worry.

“You are going to make me come,” he explained sheepishly, regretting immediately the loss of contact.

Ilya’s tense expression morphed into a grin.

“Come here,” he said with a voice lustful and deep enough to give Shane the chills, before hooking his arms under his thighs and lifting him up and carrying him towards the bedroom.

“Fuck –” Shane gasped as Ilya dropped him down face first onto the mattress and slid two fingers back inside him.

“Good?” Ilya breathed.

Shane nodded helplessly.

Ilya made quick work of a condom and some lube and pushed inside him, kissing him back all over, tenderly now, like he had forgotten this was supposed to be casual somewhere along the way.

Shane’s mind felt foggy, his body loose and oversensitive and completely ruined from the long day, the morning sex, the way Rozanov’s every action felt impossibly intimate. He let himself get lost in the feeling, thoroughly enjoying the weight of the other man on top of him, the pressure of a large hand pinned between his shoulder blades, so grounding and reassuring.

After a while he felt Rozanov’s movements grow more frantic. He was close too.

Shane turned his head to the side, hands reaching helplessly behind. He felt Rozanov’s hands move, one grabbed his own hand near the pillow, fingers intertwined, the other went to strike his dick. Rozanov was now bent down on top of him, lips caressing the back of his neck, and he was coming inside him.

“Oh god... Shane,” he murmured against his ear.

Everything stopped.

Not physically.

Rozanov was still stroking his cock, still holding him gently by the hand, still breathing against his neck.

But something inside Shane jolted violently awake.

Because that was not *Hollander*.

That was not teasing or flirting or filthy.

That was *Shane*.

His orgasm hit anyway.

“Ilya...”

The name tore itself out of him before he could stop it.

The silence that followed felt impossibly heavy. Rozanov pulled out of him with a groan and discarded the used condom before flopping on the mattress beside him.

He was breathing heavily and staring at the ceiling.

After what felt like the longest moment he turned towards Shane and tried gently stroking his cheekbone.

Shane felt panic slide coldly under his skin.

Too much.

The day.

The beach.

The clean clothes and the perfectly fine food and the right herbal tea that made him feel so seen.

He was panicking because nobody had ever cared for him in a language he actually spoke before, and this felt awfully closed to something he didn't dare to name.

He sat up too quickly.

“I should go.”

Ilya blinked at him, still flushed and soft-looking from sex.

“Now?”

“Yeah. Early practice in the morning tomorrow, I had forgotten.”

“You had forgotten a practice?”

Ilya’s tone did nothing to hide his skepticism. He had understood exactly what Hollander was doing. He had feared this from the second his name had slipped out of his lips.

Fuck.

“Hollander...” he said lightly, reaching for him again “You are freaking out...”

Shane laughed.

Wrong.

Thin.

“Nah,” he said. “Just can’t stay.”

And Ilya knew immediately he was losing him.

“Hollander...”

His tone was weaker, one last desperate attempt that he already knew would fail.

Shane didn’t even repeat his excuse, he just moved mechanically away from him. Grabbed his wrinkled clothes, didn’t even take the time to clean himself up before putting on his briefs.

Ilya followed him around helplessly.

Hollander stood in the doorway, hand on the door handle for a second before turning around one last time.

His mouth opened, like he wanted to say something, then closed again.

Ilya just stood there, still naked, still silent, almost daring him to say something, to tell him what was wrong, to let him fix it.

Shane couldn’t let him fix it, he needed to rip the band aid off.

“Good night,” he whispered, and then the apartment door shut behind him.

The next morning Shane woke up at 5:12 am.

Stretching.

Practice.

Protein shake.

Mobility work.

Cold shower.

Practice footage review.

In the afternoon his phone buzzed and he opened the Lily chat despite himself.

←  Whatsapp chat with: Lily  

Wed, 25 Feb

Received Message: you alive? 03:42 pm

Shane stared at it for a full minute before locking his phone again.

More stretching.

More practice.

Another shower.

While he was rubbing himself raw under the hot water his hand found the hidden spot on his inner thigh where Rozanov had bitten him hard enough to bruise.

He pushed on the sensitive spot, feeling a little jolt of pain.

He pushed again.

The pain was proof that the previous night had happened. The bruise was the last trace of the fact that Rozanov had really been in his life for the past three weeks.

How had he let this happen? Had he really been so stupid?

It had all started with a joke about lucky sex, but Shane knew now that he'd turned Ilya into a superstition because that was easier than admitting he had become necessary.

He got out of the shower and went on with the rest of his day together with his team.

He did not answer Rozanov's text.

The following day, on February 25th 2026, Shane Hollander stood in the middle of the Milan hockey arena with a gold medal around his neck looking like a man who had stumbled on the ice by mistake.

He had been laser focused on the game for the whole match, like his life depended on getting that puck into the US team's net. He had given instructions to his team, he had followed every word from his coach, he had scored a goal, he had celebrated raising his stick in the air when the match had ended with a winning 1-0 for Canada.

Then everything had become overwhelming.

Cameras were flashing.

Champagne was being sprayed.

Jack was yelling something directly into his ear.

Someone was dragging him to pose for a photo, then into an interview.

Gold hung impossibly heavy around his neck. It felt like it was going to drag him to the ground.

And through all of it, absurdly, Shane realized that his first instinct was still Rozanov.

Not his team, not his parents, not Hayden. He was going through the motions of the winning captain waiting to get back to the locker room, grab his phone and find a text from Lily.

The realization left him a bit nauseous.

He forced himself not to open the chat, not to even check if he had gotten a congratulations message.

He kept going through the motions.

Back to the locker room.

Shower.

Back to the Olympic village.

Grab the luggage.

Get on the team bus and get off at the airport.

Their coach had been a bit anxious about traffic, so they arrived in Malpensa more than three hours ahead of their scheduled flight.

Shane waited for his luggage to be checked in and wandered around looking at the shopping windows.

He stuffed his hands in his jacket pockets.

His fingers brushed something ridged inside one of the pockets.

Shane frowned and pulled it out.

A small seashell rested in his palm.

White and faded orange, ribbed like folded fabric, shaped vaguely like a heart.

Lagoon heart.

He could suddenly picture Ilya's hands turning it over carefully in the winter sunlight, putting it in his pocket. When had he slipped it into Shane's?

Why had he done that?

Shane stared at it for a very long time before grabbing his phone and opening the Lily's chat.

Rozanov's last unanswered message was still there.

No congratulations.

Shane typed fast before his brain could catch up with his fingers.

←  Whatsapp chat with: Lily  

Wed, 25 Feb

Received Message: you alive? 03:42 pm

Thur, 26 Feb

Sent Message: if you come to the airport I won't get on that plane 07:05 pm 

He swallowed hard after he had pressed send, panic immediately settling in.

His message was delivered, not read.

He went back to checking in his luggage without putting his phone away, eyes glancing down every so often.

The following two hours felt like a whole historical era.

The team moved through security and towards the gate. Boarding announcements blurred together overhead, his teammates were laughing nearby, posing for pictures, posting Instagram stories with their medals. Someone asked him if he was coming to the duty free and Shane said something automatically without looking up from his phone.

Nothing. Still received, not read. No answer.

Every time the terminal doors opened his heartbeat kicked hard against his ribs.

Blonde man.

Not him.

Long dark coat.

Not him.

Tall enough...

Not him.

When his flight was announced Shane was this close to crushing his phone in his hand.

He mumbled an excuse to his coach about having left something in the bathroom just to be able to linger a little more in the airport, but no one came.

Of course he wasn't coming.

What the fuck had Shane expected?

A romantic gesture like in a movie with Rozanov buying a last minute ticket just to rush through security and sweep him off his feet at the gate?

Grand declarations when he'd always been told this was just sex?

"Final boarding call for Air Canada flight..."

Shane turned around sharply and handed his boarding pass and passport to the lady at the counter. He moved along without looking back, typing furiously into his phone.

←  Whatsapp chat with: Lily  

Thur, 26 Feb

Sent Message: if you come to the airport I won't get on that plane 07:05 pm 

forget it 09:18 pm 

was kidding anyway 09:18 pm 

Then he blocked Rozanov's number. Because he didn't think he'd survive it if he saw the word *typing* appear on his screen.

By the time the plane took off, Shane had convinced himself he no longer cared.

Somewhere over the Atlantic, he finally fell asleep with his phone still clutched in his hand.

It was easier, Shane had decided, to think Ilya Rozanov had simply not wanted him enough.

Easier than considering any alternative.



Chapter End Notes

Don't hate me. I had to split the fourth chapter in 2 parts, there was too much happening (this chapter is already over 11.000 words... ooops), I wanted the ending to have its chance to shine. I already have most of the final chapter, I just need to proof read, fix the HTML and publish it, so you will not live in this angsty reality for much longer.

First of all thanks to everyone who left comments and kudos. Much appreciated.

Some notes to understand where my mind was going with this story.

This chapter is titled Horror Vacui because that is a concept that's been in the back of my mind for this story since the beginning, which is why in chapter 1 Shane was thinking that he did not like too much free time, free time was empty time and empty was scary. Here we put this into words a bit more clearly. Shane fears emptiness, unstructured existence, the collapse of identity outside hockey. But really he's built a life full of routines, of rules about food, etc. because these are methods for him to fill the void, to sooth himself with predictability and repetition. Problem is, he forgot to include love in his routines. And now what he feels for Ilya

is the first thing in years that feels worth disrupting the system for. He starts to think he may want to rearrange his life around the possibility of Ilya, and that is scary as fuck.

It is also important to notice that Shane texting Ilya at the airport is impulsive, and most of all deeply unfair. It places the emotional burden on Ilya: “prove this matters enough.” It gives him an excuse to spare himself the guilt, when really he could have just not gotten on that plane. But Shane doesn’t realize that because he’s panicking, and because he is not ready to understand his feelings yet. It takes time.

On the other hand, Ilya has felt real emptiness, he's lost his mother, his family, his attachment to Russia, hockey. He fills the emptiness in his life with cheap thrills, sex, work. He's tried love and gotten hurt. He fears attachment because attachment in his life means grief. Except, for the first time now he's found someone he thinks he could get attached to, and that is also scary as fuck.

But why did he not answer Shane's text you ask? Did something happen? What's going to happen now? Mh... I guess we'll have to wait and see in the final chapter.

Chapter 5: Ode to the unknown

Chapter Notes

This fic uses a work skin to simulate text messages. You may turn it off by clicking 'Hide Creator's Style', but it will affect the formatting.

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

←  Whatsapp chat with: Hollander 🍆🍑📞📶

Wed, 25 Feb

Sent Message: you alive? 03:42 pm ✓✓

Ilya kept staring at his phone while spooning mango and jalapeno coulis onto a plate of coconut cake.

The sauce smeared crooked.

He swore softly under his breath and wiped the plate clean with the side towel tucked into his apron, then he redid it, carefully placed a thin, long dark chocolate shaving balancing across the cake, finished with a single edible flower and three dots of West Indian cherry reduction.

He had to focus so hard on making sure his hands didn't shake that he was sweating. His mind was all over the place.

He had spent hours pretending not to care enough to text first.

At 3:42 p.m. he had failed.

He had tried a very simple, very casual text. Something that still gave an opening for Hollander to reply something smug, restart the banter, pretend everything was back to normal.

The text had been read but there was no reply in sight and it had been fucking hours.

Fuck.

He wasn't even sure what he had hoped to obtain. Even if Shane hadn't completely ghosted him, he wouldn't have met up with him for sex the night before playing for Olympic gold, Ilya wouldn't even ask that. But maybe they could... talk? No, not when talking was exactly what had gotten him into this mess.

He had said too much.

The confessions, the shared stories, that fucking first name that had gotten past his teeth against his better judgement. It had all been enough to make it clear that the “it’s just sex” ruse was just a façade and that, once again, Ilya just cared too much. Admitting to himself that he had let Hollander slid past his defenses and had started to care was somewhat of a relief.

No, it wasn’t just sex.

Maybe it hadn’t been since the first night Hollander had rested his head on Ilya’s chest and practically purred when fingers ran through his hair.

Like there was nowhere else on earth he wanted to be. Like Ilya was good for him.

Hollander with all his cute little hyper fixations and the way he required someone to pay attention to his quirks had become something Ilya craved. Ilay could anticipate what would make him frown or smile and could see the raw gratitude in his eyes when he adjusted something around him to ensure the second outcome. Bring him clean underwear for post-sex activities? Smile. Keep the overhead lights in the bedroom off so the room wasn’t too bright? Smile. Replace caramel with melted peanut butter because it has no added sugars? Smile.

Hockey players weren’t supposed to look grateful over things like that.

Hollander always did.

Ilya had reveled in this for weeks, calling it something that it wasn’t, pretending he was just casually hooking up with someone that he was carving a space in his life for.

And now it was all about to end, maybe it had ended already, considering the total radio silence.

He had gone through this before. He always faced the world all armored with a strong exterior of not giving a fuck, but the moment he showed the soft underbelly, that was when someone always stabbed him in the gut.

Ilya laid his phone on the counter, screen down, and went back to finishing the plating on the last desserts going out to the restaurant.

He could feel the frustration boiling up.

His phone started buzzing against the stainless steel counter and a delicately placed chocolate shaving rolled down, breaking in half and smearing the coulis.

Ilya’s stomach flipped so fast it almost hurt.

He grabbed the phone immediately.

His brother Alexei was calling.

The disappointment hit hard and ugly.

He absolutely did not have it in him to hear his brother complain some more about the cost of taking care of their father. He shoved the phone in his pocket and let it go to voicemail while he went back to the dessert.

His fingers were shaking. The plating was ruined already.

He picked the dish up and shoved it down the counter so hard it shattered. Porcelain exploded across the kitchen tiles.

“Merda!” he yelled, *shit*, and he shoved the broken pieces off the counter and onto the floor towards a slightly frightened mostly surprised sous chef who had seen him break things before, but not in a while.

Svetlana heard the outburst from the dining room and rushed in. She saw the scene, grabbed him by the wrist and pulled him outside to their favorite smoking spot without any added words.

Ilya just stood there bouncing around on his feet, arms crossed in front of his chest, little puffs of breath coming out of his mouth in the cold winter air.

“Mi vuoi dire cos’hai?”

Wanna tell me what’s wrong?

Ilya absolutely did not want to tell her. He also knew that she had already guessed what was wrong and was just trying to force him to say it out loud. Instead he just took out his phone and showed her the sad lonely unanswered message he had sent 8 hours earlier.

Svetlana sighed heavily and pulled him into a hug. She was tiny, but she was a fierce hugger, squeezing him with all of her might and burying her face into his chest. Ilya let his chin rest on top of her head and allowed himself to lean into the comfort of her presence and be vulnerable once more.

He blurted out all that had happened the previous days, their conversation at the beach, how close to Hollander he had felt, how unbearable letting him go had been, to the point that he’d stupidly asked him to stay for the night, he’d stupidly even slipped a seashell in his pocket because if he had to leave he wanted to make him leave with something of his. But Shane had just run out the door.

He’d probably thrown the seashell in the trash by now.

Deleted their conversations.

Archived whatever this Italian sex vacation had been under “good time but the guy got too attached”.

And it fucking hurt.

When morning rolled around Ilya briefly considered sending Hollander a good luck text but he still had standards about how low he would stoop even for this man. Mostly he didn’t think he could take being ghosted twice.

He tried to go about his morning as normally as possible, but he had forgotten he had a google alert about team Canada hockey so he ended up getting a notification with an article about the upcoming finale and the role the team captain had had in getting the team this far.

Fuck he looked beautiful.

There he was, in the official photos, all flushed up from the skating, brows furrowed in concentration.

Ilya was mindlessly scrolling through the article while pouring himself coffee when his phone rang again, and it was once again his brother. It was the third time that morning and it wasn't even 8 yet. Had he run out of money again?

He sent it again to voice mail.

This time he got a text.

←  Whatsapp chat with: Alexei   

Thur, 26 Feb

*Received Message:*Подойди к телефону 07:25 am

папа умер, придурок 07:25 am

Answer the phone

Dad died, you asshole

For a second Ilya just stared at the screen.

Dad died.

The coffee he was somehow still pouring was now flowing slowly over the rim of the mug and across the marble counter.

Only when the liquid rolled down on the floor and reached his feet did he finally jerk the moka pot away.

His thumb slipped once on the phone screen before he managed to call back.

Alexei picked up immediately.

“Наконец-то.”

Finally.

There was noise in the background. Traffic maybe. A television turned on too loud.

“Что случилось?”

What happened?

His own voice sounded strange to him in Russian. Flat. But he needed his brother to understand him quickly.

Alexei let out a short bitter laugh.

“А ты как думаешь? Инсульт. Ночью. Я пытался дозвониться до тебя весь день.”

What do you think? A stroke. During the night. I've been trying to reach you all day.

Ilya leaned both hands against the marble counter.

It felt freezing cold beneath his palms.

All day.

That late call yesterday that Ilya had ignored while finishing up his shift at the restaurant had come when it was already past one am in Moscow. That must have been when it had happened. Hours had passed since then, while Ilya had been obsessing over whether Shane Hollander would answer a fucking text. Meanwhile his father's body laid forgotten in a hospital bed in Russia.

Then the conversation dissolved the way it always did with Alexei .

Arrangements now needed to be made, there was the issue of the will, the funeral, calls to be made to long forgotten relatives and ex colleagues of their father, and of what was going to happen to the apartment that Ilya had gotten Alexei, the one close to the nursing home so that he could be there for their dad. Would he get to keep it now? How about the shared bank account?

At one point Alexei said:

“Он хотел, чтобы его похоронили в Италии. Рядом с мамой.”

He wanted to be buried in Italy. Next to mom.

“No,” Ilya answered immediately, in Italian this time.

Too fast. Too sharp.

Alexei went quiet for half a second.

“нет?” he repeated.

No?

Ilya pressed a hand hard against his eyes.

“No,” Ilya said again, jaw tightening. “Assolutamente no, col cazzo.”

Absolutely fucking not. His mom had taken her own life to get away from that man, he wasn't going to force her to spend the rest of time buried next to him.

At this point Ilya was furious and overwhelmed. He gave Alexei some instructions while he google flights to Moscow. He didn't even have to time to register his feelings, he just sprang into action, called the restaurant manager, explained what had happened and asked for few days off, texted

Sveta, started planning his travel. Getting to Russia from Italy had gotten fucking hard ever since the war in Ukraine, so he was going to have to take 3 different flights, and it was going to take forever.

He threw whatever he thought he'd need in the suitcase, grabbed his passport.

He could feel the phone buzz in his pocket again and again throughout the day. A text from Alexei. A text from Svetlana. Texts from his colleagues at work who had heard. A call from the nursing home in Russia. Emails. More Google notifications about Canada winning gold. Even spam calls. It was all too much.

He put his phone on silent and headed for the airport.

He felt numb. Everything was surreal.

The first flight to Serbia took less than 2 hours. He landed in Belgrade feeling exhausted at six in the evening, it could have been midnight based on how tired he was.

He took his phone off airplane mode just to give his brother a chance to call him if he needed.

He couldn't help but register there were no texts from Hollander.

The idea that somewhere in Italy in Milano Shane Hollander was probably now heading to the airport and disappearing from his life without a word was a throbbing wound in the back of his brain, but it was not something he had the energy to scratch right now.

He put the phone away and vowed not to check it again.

He boarded the next plane like a robot, arrived in Istanbul, boarded one last plane and then stepped foot on Russian soil for the first time in years when it was already early Friday morning.

The weather was unforgiving, cold wind and snow slapping him in the face like that was the welcome back he deserved for not even bothering to answer the phone while his father was dying.

Alexei picked him up from the airport to take him to the funerary home even if he had had no chance to rest.

Things needed to get done.

It was only after a few hours of complete whirlwind that Ilya finally reached a hotel room and let himself fall onto the bed.

He groaned into the pillow.

He felt so fucking *wrecked*.

He opened his phone again. There were so many unread messages, varying from condolences to questions from his coworkers who didn't know whether they should roast the beets or steam them.

And then he saw it.

The chat with Hollander.

Three new messages.

His heart skipped a bit.

←  Whatsapp chat with: Hollander    

Wed, 25 Feb

Sent Message: you alive? 04:42 pm ✓✓

Thur, 26 Feb

Received Message: if you come to the airport I won't get on that plane 08:05 pm

forget it 10:18 pm

was kidding anyway 10:18 pm

Ilya stared at the screen so long the image went out of focus.

“Cazzo.”

Then louder:

“Cazzo, cazzo, cazzo.”

Fuck fuck fuck

He had completely missed it.

Shane had asked him to show up and he had completely missed it.

He tried calling him, irrationally. The call did not go through. He tried to calculate what time it was. Was he still on a plane? He had no fucking idea, barely knew what day it was.

He tried texting and the message also did not go through.

He sighed.

He'd call Hollander again once he had landed. He'd just have to see when his message would go through to know he had reception again.

He could not stop looking at those texts. He was still holding the phone in his hand when exhaustion finally dragged him under and he fell asleep on top of the bed, still fully clothed, a faint shadow of a smile on his lips.

His messages did not go through.

Not that day, not while his father funeral took place, not while he fought with Alexei and told him to fuck off because he was done paying for his shit, not while he took a cab back to the airport. Not when he got back to Milano. Not even the day after.

And so Ilya knew, Hollander had blocked him.

The finality of it hollowed something out inside his chest.

This time, there would be no reply.

Hollander had made things simpler for them.

It was a good thing, a clean cut. He wanted to let him know he agreed, but he didn't know how. He soon figured he'd been blocked on Instagram as well.

So he just wrote a text. A text he knew would not go through, but a text he needed to put out there in the world.

He deleted the message multiple time.

Half-finished thoughts.

Are you still mad...

Did you land...

Fuck it.

←  Whatsapp chat with: Hollander 🍆🍑📞⋮

Sun, 01 Mar

Sent Message: I'm sorry 10:23 pm ✓

He stared at it for a long moment after hitting send, watching one lonely little grey mark appear and stay there next to the most honest words he had probably ever written, never to turn into a double check mark.

Blocked.

Of course.

Still, the next evening, after service, he opened the chat again.

←  Whatsapp chat with: Hollander 🍆🍑📞⋮

Mon, 02 Mar

Sent Message: Saw someone eat salad without any dressing today. Like a rabbit. Thought of you.
11:58 pm ✓

That one failed to be delivered too, obviously.

Ilya snorted softly at his own phone despite himself, exhausted enough that the sound surprised him. For one stupid second he could almost hear Hollander's offended voice in his head.

I simply prefer my salad without dressing, it's not that strange.

Yes, it fucking is.

The phantom conversation faded fast.

He shoved the phone back into his pocket and went back to wiping down his station harder than necessary.

The night after that he wasn't working. He went out clubbing with Svetlana and he made it until almost midnight before opening the chat again.

←  Whatsapp chat with: Hollander 🍆🍑📞⋮

Tue, 03 Mar

Sent Message: I miss you 11:50 pm ✓

He didn't even hesitate before sending it this time.

Blocked messages disappeared into silence differently. They didn't hang there waiting to be read. They just died immediately, swallowed whole before they could become real.

Maybe that was why he kept doing it.

No risk of an answer.

No risk of finding out Hollander regretted him.

No risk of hearing him say it had meant nothing at all.

And yet every night his fingers still drifted back to the same conversation like touching a bruise just to confirm it still hurt.

Meanwhile, Shane Hollander kept winning.

Olympic gold turned into MLH wins, into interviews, headlines, clips all over social media. Ilya kept catching glimpses of him accidentally between recipes and hockey alerts and posts his algorithm didn't know better than to send his way.

Hollander speaking to reporters in the locker room with damp hair sticking to his forehead.

Hollander nominated for MVP once again.

Hollander leaning into reporters' microphones with that sharp-eyed focus he got before games and during arguments and sometimes right before orgasm.

Every sight of him landed somewhere directly beneath Ilya's ribs.

And every now and then, despite himself, Ilya kept texting a number that would not answer back.

For Shane coming back to Canada and his team felt like sliding back into an old skate boot.

Broken in perfectly. Familiar pressure points. The shape remembered by muscle memory.

Everything fit.

His condo. His routines. Practice schedules taped onto the wall. Greek yogurt and overnight oats in his fridge. Hayden stealing his expensive protein shakes. The weight of that "C" onto his jersey so natural it barely felt heavy anymore.

It should have felt good.

Instead, it was more like he had worn the boot for too long and softened and thinned the material until there was too much space inside it now. Enough room to notice, to feel uncomfortable.

Just enough room to miss something.

So, Shane threw himself into hockey completely, letting it fill every crevice of his day with practice, hours at the gym, sessions with his coach, video reviews, his doctors, the physiotherapists for that pain in his right knee that had never gone away after that 2023 bad fall.

If he exhausted himself enough, his thoughts quieted.

If his thoughts quieted, he didn't think about Italy.

He didn't think about blonde curls dump from the shower or heavy hands at the small of his back, or the terrifying calm he had felt lying in another man's lap while the sea folded into wild waves in front of them.

Most importantly, he did not think about the fact that blocking Ilya had not made him stop wanting him.

The days went on, regular MLH season had restarted. There was the match against the San Jose team on Tuesday March 3rd, then Anaheim the next Friday, Los Angeles on Saturday. Tuesday March 10th was back to Canada with Toronto, then Ottawa on Wednesday, and so on and so forth.

Journalists were praising Shane's unrelentless focus left and right. The Metros qualified for the playoffs as the absolute leader in their conference.

Shane thought he was doing a pretty good job at pretending everything was fine. Except he probably wasn't because right after the last game before the playoffs Hayden approached his stall as they were packing their bags and getting ready to leave the arena. He looked worried.

"Shane, buddy, are you... ok?"

Shane lifted his face from his bag and looked around, then at himself, like he half expected to find out he was missing a limb or bleeding to death and hadn't realized.

"Yeah, I am fine..." he murmured skeptically, lowering his eyes towards the bag once more.

This didn't feel like the start of a conversation he was about to enjoy.

"I was just thinking... you don't seem very cheerful."

Shane blinked. He had made sure to smile in the photo op after their victory. That should have counted for something.

"Of course I am. We just won. I cheered for the team. With the team, whatever."

Hayden let out a long exhale, like he had just realized as well that this conversation was going to be tough.

"It's just, it's been like this since you got back from Italy, you know? You smile for the pictures and then it's like you just shut off. Don't get me wrong I am not saying you are distracted or something, you are playing so well it's fucking scary, it's just... I don't know, I worry something is eating you alive and you are not telling anyone."

Shane had no good reply to that.

"We won gold in Italy," was all he had to say, like that was enough to end the conversation.

"Yeah, and you know normal people celebrate Olympic gold for more than twelve fucking hours, right?"

Shane kept stuffing his bag.

"I celebrated."

"No, you got back to Montreal, got to a bar with me and the guys and stared at a wall. What happened at the Olympics?"

"Gold happened."

"Yeah, no shit. Not the point."

Shane finally looked up. “Then what’s the point?”

Hayden leaned back against the locker.

“The point is you look like someone killed your fucking dog.”

“I don’t have a dog.”

“Not the point also.”

“I don’t know what to tell you. We just won a game, you should not be worrying about this, you should be happy.”

Hayden sighed heavily and put a hand on his shoulder, squeezing lightly.

“Yeah, and you deserve to be happy too Holzy, I think sometimes you forget that.”

Then he grabbed his bag and left and Shane suddenly felt like closing the zipper on that bag and putting it on his shoulder and continue with his day was going to be the hardest fucking task of his entire life.

But he went on.

He went on to play the first playoff game against Philadelphia on April 19th like his life depended on it. The Metros won the first match at home, lost the second in overtime, won the following three and moved on to the second round.

Shane was focused on playing with the intensity that people normally only reserve for surviving.

His mom came to Montreal to visit him the weekend before the second round of playoffs began. Technically she had come to have Shane sign some papers to confirm yet another sport gear sponsorship, but like Hayden, she had a certain worried look in her eyes that was hard to miss.

They didn’t talk much at first, which was their usual dynamic. His mother existed in his condo organically, he was used to seeing her there and there was no need to treat her like a guest. He would go around his day and find her sitting behind her computer with an intense look, talking on the phone, setting up the table for dinner, cleaning, or moving around things that he would later move back to where he liked to have them.

In the evening they would sit on the couch together, under a warm blanket, with a cup of herbal tea in their hands, and watch something on TV until they both got sleepy, until one of them nudged the other and said “time to go to bed.” They watched hockey games highlight for a while, then Yuna changed the channel a few times, finally landing on the National Geographic. She had always liked strange documentaries, the kind with soft-spoken British narrators and cinematic footage of migrating birds or deep sea fish no one had ever heard of.

One of those programs was now playing quietly on the television in the background while Shane doom scrolled his Instagram.

“Did you hear that?” Yuna said suddenly.

“What?”

He hadn't been paying attention.

“They just said there are places in New Zealand where almost all the flowers are white” his mother explained, like that was supposed to be mind-blowing.

Shane barely looked up from his phone.

“So?”

“Just white flowers, or some pale yellow ones. Very dull-looking. Not what you’d picture if I said imagine a vast field of flowers in New Zealand.” She stirred her tea absently. “He said scientists think it’s because there are almost no bees there.”

That got his attention somehow.

“No bees?”

“No. The flowers are pollinated mostly by other insects, like flies. And flies are colorblind.”

She shrugged lightly.

“So there was no reason for flowers to evolve bright colors. No reason to compete for attention if the creatures around you can’t even perceive the difference.”

Shane stared at her now.

The room was quiet except for the television murmuring softly in the background.

“That’s kind of sad,” he said.

Yuna hummed softly like she agreed.

Then, after a moment:

“You seem sad.”

The transition was so smooth Shane almost didn’t realize they had changed subjects.

His throat tightened instantly. Ridiculous. Embarrassing. He didn’t give her an answer.

“But you seemed happy in Italy.” Yuna added.

At this, Shane nodded almost imperceptibly, despite himself.

“I was.”

His phone buzzed.

His hand snapped toward it immediately.

Coach.

Of course it was not Rozanov. He had blocked him. His brain still struggled to retain that information.

His stomach dropped and he threw his phone away on the couch.

Yuna's hand settled gently over his forearm before he could pull away.

"Did you meet someone there?"

Shane nodded once. He could feel tears gathering at the corners of his eyes, prickling, threatening to roll down his face if he wasn't careful and remained still.

"And did you fall in love with her?"

His mouth opened automatically.

Then closed again.

Yuna's expression softened almost imperceptibly.

"Or him," she corrected quietly. "Or them."

Something in Shane's chest cracked open with terrifying ease.

He had never technically come out to his parents, but he also sort of knew they knew. You don't spend your whole life watching your son half-heartedly trying and failing to start relationships with every sort of girl without asking yourself if maybe he is not into girls at all. They must have noticed that the number of rumored girlfriends had progressively gone down. Maybe they had caught him staring at the wrong person in a crowd for too long, noticed how his eyes got caught on men, not women. Maybe they had seen something in him he had refused to see in himself for years.

He looked down hard at the Metros logo on the white ceramic of the mug of herbal tea slowly cooling between his hands, at the Ralph Lauren blanket he had been gifted by the brand years earlier, at the couch that had already been there when he had bought the condo because a designer had furnished the whole place and Shane had chosen absolutely nothing in it.

Safe things. Familiar things.

Things that fit his life correctly but didn't feel his.

And suddenly his life felt strangely colorless, like a field of white flowers.

Like he had spent years inside a world of useful things, not necessarily vivid ones.

He realized he hadn't answered his mother's question.

Did you fall in love?

He tightened his grip on the mug.

"I don't know," he admitted roughly.

"You don't know if you loved him?"

Shane noticed she had switched naturally to him now. No hesitation. No discomfort. Just acceptance. She had never been one for subtlety and mind games.

He let it happen.

“I don’t know what that’s supposed to feel like.”

A sad little smile crossed Yuna’s face.

“Did he make your heart beat faster?”

A laugh escaped him despite everything.

“Mom, I have anxiety. Everything makes my heart beat faster.”

“Fair enough.”

Silence stretched between them softly.

“Did he make your mind go quiet?”

Shane froze.

Because *yes*.

Christ.

Yes.

The terrifying thing was that Ilya had done exactly that. The constant static in his brain had dimmed around him. Like somebody lowering the volume on a noise machine Shane had stopped noticing years ago because it was always there anyway. And now the noise was back and he couldn’t help but notice. He swallowed hard.

“Yeah,” he whispered.

Yuna squeezed his arm gently.

Maybe nobody in Shane’s life had done anything wrong exactly.

Maybe they had simply lived in an ecosystem that rewarded survival over softness.

Maybe Shane himself had too.

And then Ilya Rozanov had walked into his life and noticed everything anyway, and he had cared, and he had dared to be soft around him.

“But it doesn’t matter,” Shane added, voice cracking slightly, “It was never supposed to be anything, he lives 6.000 kilometers away, he probably forgot I exist anyway. I texted him from the airport, asked him to show up if he cared, and he did not.”

Yuna seemed to be thinking.

“Did you consider doing the same? Show up for him?”

Shane looked at her, confused.

“I texted him.”

He sounded childish. She smiled.

“I know, sweetheart, and that took courage, but you also asked a lot of him, did you consider maybe showing up at his door instead of asking him to risk it all and show up at yours?”

Shane shook his head quietly and put down his now barely warm tea. He had not. And he hadn’t even realized how selfish that was.

His mother hugged him tightly now and Shane hugged her back and let a tear fall down into the soft cotton of her sweater.

For a moment, he could let himself feel this.

Just for a moment.

The next Tuesday he was back into focus, making sure the Metros made it to the next round in the playoffs.

First on the ice every morning, last off of it.

His birthday came around in May and 35 never felt so daunting. His back was killing him, his knee wasn’t fine by any means, and he had gotten slammed into the boards more times than his ribs cared to remember. He swallowed the painkillers his doctor prescribed without checking the labels.

He swallowed protein shakes and vitamins, and liters of water.

He did whatever they told him to do.

When the announcement came that he had been nominated for another MVP award, that surprised exactly nobody. The shared jokes in the locker room were for those other poor fellas nominated alongside him, who were sure to not win the Hart trophy considering what a year captain Hollander was having.

Shane tried not to think about it too much, tried *not to think too much* in general. The endless noise around him helped.

Sometimes, late at night, his thumb still hovered over Ilya’s blocked contact considering the possibility of reaching out, before he locked the phone again.

Nope.

Games.

Media appearances.

More games, until there was no one left standing in his way.

On June 21st 2026 the Metros Captain Shane Hollander once again lifted the Stanley Cup over his head while cameras flashed bright enough to blind him.

The arena roared.

His teammates screamed.

Red and blue confetti flew everywhere.

There was music, there were fireworks, and lights flashing all over the place.

Somewhere beneath all that noise, his heartbeat remained strangely, horribly steady.

He had done it again.

Olympic gold.

Stanley Cup.

MVP finalist, most likely winner before the week was over.

Everything he had built his life around.

Everything that was supposed to be enough.

And all Shane could think, standing there at the center of the celebration, was that he wished he could turn his head and find blue eyes looking back at him from the crowd with a crooked smile.

The realization knocked the breath out of him.

He passed the Cup to Hayden and remained standing still in the middle of the arena, feeling terribly empty-handed now.

Not because he wasn't physically holding the Cup.

Because if this wasn't enough... if *even this* wasn't enough...

Then he had absolutely no idea what to do next.

When it was time to celebrate, Shane let his team drag him around town, like a well-trained dog being led by the leash. He put on a smile for the cameras, he shook hands, signed jerseys, went around town among a sea of fans in blue and red.

The team had booked a pub, there was food, though mostly greasy, fried options that Shane had no wish to try, and there was an open bar.

That, for once, was something Shane did not refuse.

"Go, captain!" the boys cheered him on, as he took down his third tequila shot of the night.

He grimaced and bit down on a lime wedge.

It was almost 2 am. The room felt too warm. The music was too loud. He wished he had his noise cancelling headphones. He drank a cold beer instead.

Someone put a glass in front of him after that. He gulped it down, no questions asked.

He could feel the room going slightly out of focus and an acid taste running up his esophagus.

Shit.

“I have to throw up” he announced to Hayden, before stumbling towards the back exit.

He heard Hayden coming behind him to help, but he waved him off.

“I’m fine, please.”

He didn’t need someone to see him like this. Hayden insisted.

“Let me get you some water at least.”

Hayden disappeared for a second and came back with a brown paper bag that Shane grabbed hastily on his way to the back exit.

The door swung open, Shane took three long steps, put his hands against a brick wall and dry heaved.

His eyes were burning, he felt a terrible pressure at the base of his stomach.

After a second he was emptying his stomach on the concrete by the trash cans.

That made him feel slightly better.

He found a step by the entrance and sat down, breathing heavily and cleaning his mouth with the back of his jacket sleeve. He opened the brown paper bag to find a bottle of water and a pretzel. One of the stale-looking ones that had been hanging on a warm display by the bar, speckled with salt and looking a little too wrinkly for their own good. Hayden probably knew Shane hadn’t touched the French fries, the fried chicken and the cheese filled jalapenos and was trying to give him something “to soak up the alcohol” as he liked to say.

Shane only took a few sips of water and closed his eyes as he let the back of his head rest against the cold wall behind it. He bonked it softly twice, hoping the little jolt of pain would bring clarity. Nothing came.

When he opened his eyes again, he realized his hand was in his pocket, fishing for something that he unconsciously knew was there. A lonely heart-shaped seashell. He hadn’t dared to ever throw it out, he had just moved it from his winter jacket to his spring jacket, pretending like it had just been forgotten there.

Shane grabbed his phone. His thumb trembled only a moment, then he opened whatsapp, scrolled down months of meaningless conversations and found the one that was lodged like a thorn festering in his side.

Lily.

He hit unblock.

It took Shane a moment to realize what was happening.

The phone began vibrating violently in his hand.

One buzz.

Then another.

Then dozens.

Shane stared at the screen in confusion, genuinely unable to process what he was seeing at first. For one insane second he thought someone was calling him.

But no, it was the backlog, months of undelivered messages suddenly crashing into him all at once.

He felt suddenly awfully sober. He started to read.



Whatsapp chat with: Lily



Thur, 26 Feb

Sent Message: if you come to the airport I won't get on that plane 01:05 pm ✓✓

forget it 03:18 pm ✓✓

was kidding anyway 03:18 pm ✓✓

Fri, 27 Feb

Received Message: call me when you land 04:22 am

Sun, 01 Mar

I'm sorry 04:23 pm

Mon, 02 Mar

Saw someone eat salad without any dressing today. Like a rabbit. Thought of you. 05:58 pm

Tue, 03 Mar

I miss you 05:50 pm

Wed, 04 Mar

I guess I should tell you why I didn't read your texts 06:23 pm

My dad died, the day you won gold 06:23 pm

Had to fly back to Russia, lost track of everything else 06:23 pm

I am sorry 06:24 pm

Thur, 05 Mar

That was not to say you should have waited or something 06:40 pm

I don't hate you for blocking this number 06:40 pm

not anymore at least 06:40 pm

Fri, 06 Mar

Also, congratulations on the fucking gold medal. And winning against San Jose. 11:00 am

Looks like you are on a fucking roll 11:01 am

Can I say I am proud of you without making a stupid dick joke now? 11:02 am

Sun, 08 Mar

Look at me not texting for a whole full day 05:58 pm

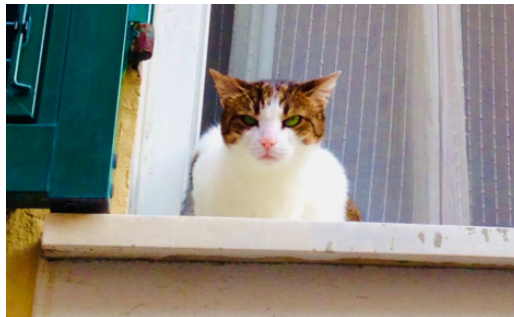
baby steps 05:58 pm

Mon, 09 Mar

I saw a cat that looked like you 04:46 pm

This is not an insult, he was cute 04:46 pm

But he was looking at me from a window and he had that same pissed off expression you get when I make an inappropriate joke 04:46 pm



Received Message: 04:47 pm

Fri, 13 Mar

Today is unlucky day Friday 13 02:45 am

Maybe my lucky day and you text back? 02:45 am

Sat, 14 Mar

Well, that didn't work 02:40 am

Sun, 22 Mar

I think your team will make it to the playoff, I am watching the games even if they are at a ridiculous time, and you are playing so well 05:01 pm

But you never smile, Hollander 05:01 pm

Please don't be sad 05:04 pm

I am sad enough for both of us I think 05:04 pm

Mon, 23 Mar

I found one of those protein bars I bought for you in my cupboard today and tried to eat it 06:12 pm

It is foul, Hollander 06:12 pm

I am never buying you those again 06:12 pm

Sorry – never buying those again, I meant 06:14 pm

Tue, 24 Mar

The days when I don't work are the ones when it is hardest not to text 03:30 am

I am sorry, Shane 03:30 am

I can say your name here you won't hear it, won't freak out 03:30 am

I am sorry that I tried to pretend I didn't care if you left 03:31 am

Everybody leaves, I was just bracing for impact as they say 03:31 am

I realize is stupid 03:32 am

Wed, 25 Mar

I think about you in that airport sometimes 06:48 pm

Waiting for my reply and not getting anything and I want to punch myself 06:48 pm

Now I write and do not get anything 06:48 pm

Is only fair 06:50 pm



Type a message



Shane's vision was increasingly blurred as he kept reading message after message.

He had to wipe away tears and snot from his face a couple of times.

The texts seemed endless. There were more pictures, more words, almost every day, and Shane could just picture Rozanov, cigarette in one hand and phone in the other typing away his thoughts and getting a single fucking grey checkmark for all his effort.

Shane kept scrolling. He was nearing the end of the conversation now, the messages had become more spaced out over time, shorter too, drained of energy.



Whatsapp chat with: Lily



Thur, 30 Apr

Wow, Hart Trophy nomination, uh? 02:20 am

Show off 02:20 am

Sun, 10 May

Happy birthday Hollander 02:25 am

I think is not too much stalker behavior that I know your birthday 02:25 am

Is on Wikipedia 02:25 am

Wed, 13 May

I went to talk to my mother yesterday, in the church, you know 11:31 am

Stood there a while and talked about you 11:31 am

Thur, 21 May

Do I ever cross your mind, Hollander? 08:12 pm

Mon, 15 Jun

Happy fucking birthday to me 06:02 pm

Im at a club full of sexy women throwing themselves at me 06:02 pm

And all I can think of is stupid Candian hockey player with beautiful freckles 06:02 pm

Want only you 06:02 pm

I guesswe don't always get what we want 06:03 pm

Srry 06:03 pm

Am very drunk right nw 06:04 pm

Sveta is about to take my phone away I thi 06:04 pm

Tue, 16 Jun

Sorry about that 05:05 am

Sun, 21 Jun

Congrats about the Cup 09:35 pm

I knew you still had it in you, old man 09:35 pm

Looks like you got all you wanted 09:35 pm

Was a good idea to block me and move on, a lot smarter than what I am doing 09:36 pm

I am not being ironical, seriously 09:36 pm

I hope you get to live the life you want 09:36 pm

Perché ti amo e non posso farci niente e non so come evitarlo 09:38 pm

Just hope you don't regret those weeks in Italy too much 09:38 pm

But I do hope you are happy 09:39 pm

And I hope you never read these 09:43 pm



Type a message



Shane read the last few messages twice, then a third time.

They had been sent only a few hours earlier and there was a sentence in Italian and a couple of words in it - *ti amo* - that he understood without wanting to.

Somebody inside the bar started chanting his name again.

Shane.

Captain.

For he's a jolly good fellow...

Shane's vision blurred. He stood up but folded in half immediately, vomiting again.

As he slid down the brick wall once more, he pressed the heel of his hand hard against his mouth and realized, with sudden horrifying clarity, that blocking Ilya had not made this hurt less.

It had only made him hurt alone.

On Monday June 22 Ilya woke up, made himself some coffee and scrolled mindlessly through a few articles about the Metros winning the Stanley Cup, then he opened the chat with Hollander automatically.

He froze.

Something was off. It took him a second to realize what: he could see Shane's profile picture again and every message now had two blue checkmarks beside it.

He had been unblocked.

That was it. All messages delivered. And read.

And most importantly, no new messages incoming.

His throat tightened. Could this be worse than being blocked?

He hoped for a second this was just a nightmare, until the vibration of his phone snapped him back into reality.

Incoming call: *Hollander*.

Ilya just stared at it for a second, before his brain had time to reboot and his finger pressed the green button.

When he lifted his phone to his ear he could hear a lot of background noise, like people singing in the distance, traffic, music, and someone breathing shakily, but nothing else.

"Hollander?"

He heard a sob on the other line, then a painful, raw sigh that scratched something in his brain. It was the sound of a man coming undone under the weight of pure relief.

He remained quiet.

"Hi," Shane said eventually, voice rough and slightly slurred, but unmistakable.

Ilya let himself sink down slowly into a kitchen chair.

Fuck, it was real.

“You read them,” was all Ilya could say then. Because his whole brain power was now consumed by the fact that he had laid his soul bare in those texts for months and now Hollander had read them, all of them, the many “I miss you”, the sad “my dad died”, the pathetic “I only want you”, the final “I hope you never read these”. And he had called. And he sounded... relieved?

Shane sighed again.

“Yeah.”

There was another long silence.

“Your dad died.”

Not a question.

Ilya nodded before realizing Shane couldn’t see him through the phone.

“Yeah.” He provided instead, “And you won the Cup?”

“Yeah”

“Annoying.” Ilya joked, a smile pulling at the corner of his lips.

“I’m in love with you.”

That made Ilya thank god he was already sitting down or he would have flopped to the ground like a sack of potatoes.

He tried to steady his voice.

“That is significantly more annoying.”

Shane let out a wet burst of laughter. He sounded like he was crying.

“Fuck off”

“I love you too.”

“I know asshole, even if you wrote it in Italian to make my life harder”

Ilya grinned.

Perché ti amo e non posso farci niente e non so come evitarlo. Because I love you and I can’t stop it and I can’t help it.

Yes, he’d told Hollander he loved him in Italian, not to hide behind the foreign language, but because it was too real to translate it into something foreign like English.

Because Italian had more words for “love” than English.

Because he thought Shane deserved to be told he was loved in every language of this world.

“Ah, shut up, google is free.”

“I’m going to block you.”

“No.”

That came out a little stronger than Ilya had meant it and they both froze. Because this had been a running joke for them, Ilya making silly remarks and Shane threatening to block his number. Until he had, and the joke had turned ugly.

“I am sorry,” Shane mumbled, barely audible above the background noise.

“No, no, I am sorry.”

“This isn’t a competition.”

“Yes it is, and I win I am more sorry than you. I was sorry first.”

That got another laugh out of him.

“I couldn’t stop thinking about you” Shane confessed, all of a sudden, voice cracking “Today on the ice, with the Cup, and everybody celebrating, I was so out of it, I couldn’t stop thinking that you weren’t there, that I wanted you there.”

Ilya felt the pain in his words. He remembered the videos he had seen of the celebrations, Hollander’s practiced empty smile that faded away as soon as the flashes stopped, his rigid posture, shoulders slumping forward as to fold into himself and disappear.

“You are drunk.”

“A little.”

“Sounds more than a little.”

“Doesn’t change what I feel. I wish you had been there.”

It was Ilya’s turn to laugh.

“Did you want me there as hot sexy WAG? Wearing your jersey number and running down to the ice to kiss you in the middle of the arena when you win?”

“A man can only dream”

It was so easy. So easy to tease each other, and be gentle, and for once also perfectly open and honest about how they felt.

They kept talking for longer than Shane realized, until Hayden came looking for him, drunk and panicking because he had just realized that he hadn’t seen him come back and was half expecting to find him choking in a puddle of vomit in the back alley.

“Sorry, that was my teammate checking on me. I told him I am fine, but I think I may have to go back inside the pub soon. Plus... shit... it’s 3 a.m. here, so it’s like 9 in the morning there already. You probably have to go to work.”

Ilya was going to be extremely late for work and he did not care a bit.

“Is ok, I am head chef, I can be late. But you should go to bed. Eat something before that – did you eat anything tonight?”

“Do lime wedges count?”

Ilya’s cackle reverberated through the phone call.

“They do not.”

“I have a pretzel that my teammate gave me. It’s from the bar and probably a week old.” Shane looked down at the wrinkled thing in his hand. The salt had gone slightly damp, leaving little pale patches on the darkened surface. “But I could eat a pretzel.”

“Yes. Eat it.”

Shane tore off a piece and put it in his mouth.

It was stale. The outside was tough and leathery, the inside dry enough to drag against his tongue, and it tasted faintly of beer, as if the whole thing had somehow absorbed the smell of the bar. Or maybe that was just Shane, still tasting the beers he’d downed earlier. He chewed anyway.

“Well?” Ilya asked.

Shane swallowed.

“Terrible.”

“Don’t care. Eat it all.”

Shane laughed, and something in his chest loosened.

“You are very bossy.” He took another bite. “I am eating, no worries.”

“Good boy.”

“Christ...” Shane whispered, and he was not about to expand on what hearing that had just done to his body, when he was hit by the flashback of that first dinner in Milan and Rozanov basically hand feeding him.

“Bye, Ilya,” he said instead.

“Good night, Shane.”

And just like that, they were sucked back into their respective lives. Shane scraping himself off a dirty wall behind a pub in Montreal to get back to celebrating his Stanley cup (finally with a true smile on his face) and Ilya getting frantically dressed and heading down the stairs two steps at a time towards the crowded Milano subway, heart pounding in his chest both from the run and the excitement.

To the rest of the world, nothing had changed.

To them, everything had changed.

Shane only had a few more commitments to honor before the hockey season officially ended.

A charity appearance in Montreal.

Two shoots for sponsors.

The MLH Awards ceremony in Las Vegas.

A few interviews from various sport magazines and websites.

Endless questions about leadership and legacy and whether he intended to retire anytime soon now that he had won everything there was left to win.

Shane answered all of them automatically.

“No plans yet.”

“We’ll see.”

“I still love the game.”

Technically, none of those statements were lies. But for the first time in years, it was also true that hockey no longer felt like the only shape his future could take.

The Hart Trophy ceremony took place in late June.

When Shane’s name was announced the room erupted into applause.

MVP.

Again.

He walked to the stage calmly while cameras flashed bright enough around him to leave white spots in his vision, accepted the trophy, thanked his teammates and his family first like he always did, then the coach, the MLH, the fans. He added an extra thank you for a special person that he was not going to nominate (“you know who you are”) that had gossip website talking for days afterwards.

He gave the usual professional, predictable speech by the usual reliable Captain Hollander, until somewhere in the middle of it, he heard himself say “I’ve been lucky enough to play this game a long time now...” - a strange sentence, in the past tense, which practically made the room sharpen with attention.

Shane glanced toward his table where Hayden sat looking deeply suspicious and a smile tugged briefly at his mouth.

“There’s a lot of younger guys coming up now,” he continued. “Guys who are faster than me. Which is rude, honestly.”

A ripple of laughter spread through the room.

“But it’s good for the league. Good for the teams. And honestly… it’s been incredible watching some of these guys grow into themselves.”

He paused and looked down at his notes. Carefully written and redacted to hint at something he wasn’t ready to say but also wasn’t willing to keep quiet anymore.

“I think hockey is at its best when people don’t have to spend energy hiding parts of themselves just to stay in the room.”

The room was silent, attentive. The only noise was mostly the shuffling of pens and paper in the news reporter section.

Shane felt his own heartbeat in his throat.

“The league’s changing,” he said more quietly. “And I think that’s a good thing. Thank you.”

He waved and went back to his table amid the applause, holding his trophy tight in his hands and holding on to the memory of his pre-ceremony call with Ilya to calm down his heartbeat.

The implications of what he had said hung quietly in the room. Hayden smiled at him and squeezed his arm.

“Congrats, buddy.”

“We are so proud,” his father added, voicing also what his mom was saying with her teary eyes.

He hadn’t announced his retirement, he hadn’t come out. He had just sort of implied for the first time that the narrative around him might have to change. By morning sports media had already started dissecting what exactly Captain Hollander had meant by “hiding parts of yourself,” but Shane barely gave them a second thought.

What mattered to him was that for the first time he had publicly acknowledged that hockey would not be forever, and strangely enough, this thought no longer felt like dying, because through all of this, there was Ilya.

He had crept into Shane’s days and nights like water finding cracks Shane had pretended weren’t there. Whenever Shane had usually been alone with his thoughts, he was now in a conversation with Ilya. They slipped into each other’s lives across continents with terrifying naturalness.

At first their texts remained cautious. A few messages here and there, small things, like a picture of something that had made them think of each other, good mornings and good nights, silly jokes.

Then somehow caution dissolved without Shane noticing exactly when.

The texts became calls.

The calls became FaceTimes.

Most importantly, they became the norm.

Shane became used to having breakfast with his phone beside him while Ilya chopped vegetables in some Italian kitchen six time zones away, complaining dramatically about tourists and influencers and suppliers and the hardship of finding a peach in Milano that actually tasted like something more than plastic. The sound of Ilya's voice alone and the soft noises of the kitchen grounded him in a way he still didn't entirely understand.

Ilya, on the other hand, started falling asleep with his phone on his pillow and the sound of Hollander's voice retelling to him his day or random facts about hockey that (only) he found extremely exciting. The first time it happened Shane was almost offended ("Am I so boring I made you fall asleep?" "Yes, of course, you know that already") but then he realized how endearing it was, that Rozanov would get back from a long restaurant shift at one or two in the morning and never miss a chance to listen to his voice until his eyelids gave out. And Ilya on his part had basically become so addicted to hearing Shane's voice as he dozed off, that he had trouble sleeping if for any reason the call couldn't happen. Sometimes Shane would go to the ice rink for a lonely evening practice and he would talk to him in his airpods while shooting pucks in the net or skating around, and the echoing sound and the background *swooshes* only added to the beauty of it all for Ilya.

Rozanov found out that Shane was doing the New York Times wordle every day and immediately bought a subscription just to try and beat his scores. It wasn't easy with English not being his first language, but he was nothing if not stubborn. The day he got "mania" in 3 attempts and Hollander got it in 4 he was simply insufferable about it.

"You just got it fast because you are a maniac." was Shane's loving (only-mildly-irritated) reply when Rozanov printed out the screenshot of their results side by side and literally fucking framed them in his bedroom.

Svetlana's new favorite past time was now lovingly mocking Ilya about how whipped he was for Shane Hollander, always busy texting him on his phone or looking at pictures of him with what she called "heart eyes". She didn't even pretend to act surprised one night when she saw him looking a little too intently at Normand Laprise's article on Food and Wine about his new Montreal opening and his search for a chef to run it. *Of course you don't drag your ass through 5 subway stops if I want to go out with you, but you'd change continent for that man* she mocked. He shrugged and said he was *only reading an article*, not selling his apartment any time soon.

Somehow, after that night, she found a t-shirt online that featured a picture of a very shirtless Hollander from a 2015 Calvin Klein photoshoot cropped inside a pink heart frame, surrounded by equally pink letters spelling "But daddy I love him" and she immediately bought it. The back had the number 24 in pink rhinestones. Her grin was ear to ear when she handed it to Ilya unceremoniously.

Late birthday present, she explained. And when Ilya, looking equally horrified and delighted by the gift, made her notice that she had already gotten him vodka for his birthday, her reply was simple. *Yes, because you looked miserable and depressed then, you are obnoxiously in love now – this fits the new you better.* The t-shirt itself barely fit though, probably because the largest size Sveta had found was a women XL that still looked a bit like a crop top on Ilya's broad frame. He put it on for his FaceTime with Hollander that night nonetheless and his belly hurt from laughing when Shane took one look at the shirt and immediately choked on his protein shake badly enough that he sprayed it out of his nose.

There was one night when Shane answered a FaceTime shirtless after practice and Ilya stared for a full five seconds before whispering one long "Fuuuck..." that went directly to Shane's dick.

It became frighteningly easy after that to make the calls turn soft and dangerous.

Shane would stay up until midnight, Ilya would set his alarm for 6 am, waking up already horny as hell from the promise of morning phone sex while the soft light of dawn seeped through the blinds.

Shane stretched out alone in his dark Montreal bedroom at night while Ilya's sleepy voice melted into something rough and low through the speakers.

"Tell me what you want, tell me what you would have me do to you if I were there."

And Shane did.

God, he did.

Openly now, not pretending it was only sex, that any of this was casual. Not when after coming down from their orgasms they always stayed on the phone breathing quietly at each other for long minutes, neither wanting to hang up first.

There was also that time when Shane liked a picture of a plate of vegan ceviche on Ilya's Instagram and just like that the chef became absolutely determined to teach him how to make it, regardless of how poor his knife skills were. They spent evenings with their phones propped against whatever could hold them upright, Ilya watching from an Italian kitchen while Shane worked his way through palm hearts, avocado and mango. Every few minutes Ilya would lean closer to the screen to inspect his progress, complain that his cuts weren't regular enough, tell him he'd bought the wrong limes or wasn't using enough cilantro. It went on for almost a week.

"Smaller," Ilya said for perhaps the twentieth time.

Shane held up the piece of mango between two fingers, bringing it closer to the phone camera. "It is the size of a fucking pea. Like you said."

"It is the size of a very large fucking pea. Are peas this big in North America?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake."

Shane laughed and went back to chopping. The mango left his fingertips sticky and sweet.

"Okay," Ilya finally said. "Now add the lime."

Shane cut one in half and pressed it over the bowl, letting juice run cold over his knuckles. He scraped the last drops in with his thumb. His kitchen now smelled sharply of citrus, bright and almost floral.

"Enough?"

"More, Are you afraid of a little acidity? It needs to cut through the avocado. Add the crushed pepper too. And the cilantro. All of it this time. You always season your food like you are cooking for a retirement home or a hospital."

"Fuck you." Shane chirped back, smiling.

"Yes, later, but first more lime."

Shane rolled his eyes and squeezed another half.

When he finally tasted it, the first thing that hit him was the cold, sharp, almost electric taste of the citrus against his tongue, cutting straight through the soft richness of the avocado, like Ilya had said, while the mango followed with a sudden burst of sweetness. The palm hearts that he had marinated with nori seaweed overnight had a faintly briny taste and a firm, almost meaty texture that tricked his brain into thinking it was actually raw fish. Cilantro lingered at the back of his mouth, while the pepper arrived a second later, warming the inside of his cheeks.

Shane blinked.

“Well?”

He looked at the screen, where Ilya was already smiling.

“It's really fucking good,” Shane blurted out, going for a second bite.

By the time he scraped the last pieces from the bottom of the bowl, Shane realized he had eaten all of it. He looked at the empty bowl and waited for the familiar calculation to arrive: how many calories he'd eaten, how many grams of carbs, how many grams of fat, how much he'd have to compensate for later. But Ilya was still talking to him, his face glowing on the tiny screen, and the thoughts of calories and macros came eventually, but so late that they felt almost irrelevant at that point, not at all impossible to ignore.

He looked at Ilya's face on the screen and smiled.

“Thank you.”

Ilya's expression softened.

“You're welcome, Hollander.”

Shane couldn't even remember the last time he'd eaten something he'd made himself simply because it tasted good.

The day before leaving for his usual few weeks at his lake cottage, Shane was on the phone with Rozanov while packing his luggage and cleaning up his apartment.

Barefoot in his trophy room, Shane balanced his latest Hart Trophy awkwardly on the shelf while dusting and FaceTiming Ilya.

“You have so many ugly little statues,” Ilya observed.

“Jealous?”

“Deeply.”

Shane smiled. A real smile.

Ilya noticed immediately and his expression softened. Making Shane Hollander smile had become Ilya's favorite pastime.

"You look happy," he said quietly.

The words lodged somewhere deep beneath Shane's ribs.

Before he could answer, Ilya went back to his usual chit chat.

"Anyway, I will be in Pietrasanta for few days."

Shane's heartbeat stumbled.

"Oh?"

"Mhm."

Ilya pretended not to notice Shane suddenly sitting straighter.

"I can call you from the beach, show you what it looks like when it is not a winter desert zone."

"Sounds nice."

"Yes."

A pause.

"Are you going to stay in a hotel or do you still have a house there?"

He had almost said home, but he knew already that term felt wrong given Ilya's family history.

"No, we sold the house after my mom died and my older brother moved back to Russia, we rented an apartment for a while, then I left for culinary school, my dad got sick, I've barely ever gone back in the last fifteen years."

Shane looked at him for a long moment, thinking about how vulnerable Ilya had made himself that day by bringing him there.

"Hotel, then"

"Yes, I booked the same one where I had you on your hands and knees," Ilya's voice went low and his tone was smug, "Asked for the same bedroom, so it is easier to jerk off to the thought of you at night."

And just like that the tone had shifted from vulnerable to horny as hell.

"Jesus..." Shane whispered, "I hope the summer receptionist is not the same one."

"Why? I liked the last one, she was cute"

He winked, the usual asshole.

"Oh yeah? I'm afraid the last one knows far too well that you fuck men."

Ilya shrugged.

“Oh, she knows I fuck women too. *Fucked*, that is. I have a boyfriend now.”

Shane was so endeared from the correction to the past tense and the you-are-my-boyfriend reminder that he almost missed the meaning of the sentence. The image of Ilya leaning over the desk and muttering something that had made the receptionist laugh flashed in his brain.

“What do you mean *she knows*?! What the fuck did you actually tell her? And do not say you asked if the heating was working again.”

“But sweetheart,” Ilya was taking out the big guns, using pet names to sooth him, “I really did tell her I needed to know if the heating was working.”

He looked so sincere Shane almost didn’t question it for a second, but he knew too well how his brain worked.

“...and?”

“... and I told her I needed to know that because I was going to have you very naked very fast.”

“Fucking hell, Rozanov!”

Ilya looked way too guilty for that to be all.

“Oh, ok, it gets worse” Shane pushed.

“...well, I also told her she was welcome to join if she wanted because I don’t discriminate, so that’s what I meant when I said she knows.”

“You are fucking unbelievable”

“I wasn’t serious, Shane. I just wanted her to like me so she’d give a nice room. I wouldn’t share you with anyone, *amore mio*.”

The Italian pet name did the job and Shane folded immediately, especially because he wasn’t really mad to begin with. He might have been embarrassed, but he also deeply admired how fearlessly and openly Ilya loved.

The memory of that winter day together was dear to him, it filled him with a sense of tenderness that overwhelmed anything else.

He finished dusting his trophies and went back to closing his luggage. Looked at the swimsuits and t-shirts inside.

Then, very calmly, while Ilya kept talking about something else entirely, Shane reached for his laptop with one hand and, making sure Ilya couldn’t see his screen, he opened a flight search tab.

For once in his life, he booked the ticket before he could talk himself out of it.

As it turned out, the hotel receptionist in the summer was indeed the same girl that had gotten an earful of Shane's moans that day in February.

Shane cursed under his breath a few times before finding the courage to go up to her and ask her about Ilya Rozanov's room number. In the end it was a lucky coincidence that she'd been working because she recognized him immediately from that day and had no problem letting him know that his hot blonde boyfriend was at the beach at the time. She offered to keep an eye on Shane's luggage while he went looking for said boyfriend and silently slipped him one more mint.

She winked.

Shane's ears went bright red, but he took it.

He crossed the street and headed towards the sea. All around him there were kids screaming, running, kicking soccer balls, building sand castles, or throwing themselves into the waves, adult yelling at them not to swim too far, a guy going around with a big plastic bucket selling fresh coconut pieces.

This place was now so much more alive than it had been in winter that Shane barely recognized it. Months ago it had felt empty enough to swallow them whole, now it felt full, life spilling over from every corner.

Even in the complete chaos around him, it wasn't hard for Shane to find Ilya immediately.

White linen shirt unbuttoned and blown open by the wind. Sunglasses pushed into blonde curls. Bare feet in the sand and eyes looking longingly at the sea ahead where the sun was beginning to set, ready to sink into the water.

He was there. He was real.

Shane was about to say something when Ilya turned, looking like he had heard the sound of his name directly from his mind and he went completely still.

For one horrible second Shane had the sudden thought that maybe he had made a mistake flying there uninvited.

Half a second really. Before Ilya screamed "Shane!", took off running and tackled him roughly into the warm sand below.

The people around them snapped their heads in their general direction to check whether that nice Asian man was being mugged but quickly turned around when they realized he was being showered with kisses.

Shane laughed and pushed Ilya off himself, trying to get them both back on their feet. He only managed to sit up while Ilya straddled him.

"You idiot," he scolded him, "you couldn't greet me like a normal person?"

Ilya was basically in his lap, his hands were on each side of his face. He looked incredulous.

"No, I am not normal about this. You are here. You came. Here."

Shane smiled, leaning into his touch.

“Yeah, I guess I did.”

Ilya’s lower lip trembled for a second before he pulled Shane into a tight hug.

“Took you long enough,” he murmured into his neck.

Shane laughed. Actually laughed.

It had taken 35 years to be exact. To feel like this. To feel like this for someone enough to be willing to blindly fly across an ocean in the hope to see him.

“Let me get up, you asshole, people are staring.”

Ilya gave him one sultry look and murmured “Let’s give them something worth staring at, then” before he leaned in for a long kiss, tongue sliding past Shane’s teeth greedily (and Shane was suddenly very grateful for that mint).

Shane groaned and realized his first day back in Italy was going to end with a charge for indecent exposure if he didn’t make Rozanov get off his lap.

“Let’s get back to the hotel...” he whispered, and that was enough to have Ilya jump up immediately, mind already drifting towards all the things he was gonna do to his boyfriend in the privacy of their bedroom.

Shane laughed at his enthusiasm and got up as well, then he tried to shake off the sand that had ended up everywhere in his shorts. Something pale tumbled out of the side pocket when he pulled out his hand.

A seashell.

Small. Ridged. Off-white.

Ilya stared at it and recognized it immediately.

For a second the whole beach seemed to go muffled around them. The waves. The people. The gulls overhead.

“You kept it,” Ilya said quietly.

Shane looked down like he had forgotten it was even strange that it was there, like it had simply become something he grabbed everyday, the way he grabbed his phone or his keys.

“Yeah,” he shrugged, putting it back where it belonged.

Ilya made a broken sound somewhere between a laugh and a sob.

Because of course. Of course, Shane Hollander had carried his stupid little keepsake for months and then across countries like it was only natural to do so, like seeing it hadn’t just ripped Ilya’s soul in half.

“Hotel. Bed. Now.” was all Ilya said and then they basically ran back to the room at that point, tugging at each other’s shirts to fight for who was going to get through the door first, giggling and elbowing each other like two kids.

Shane crossed the threshold first, but his victorious smirk was soon swallowed by Ilya’s mouth and the race immediately forgotten. They didn’t even make it to the bed before taking off their clothes.

Ilya pushed Shane against the wall so hard he made a picture fall down. He ran his hands on his chest, along his throat, through his hair, and finally dragged him into an obscene kiss.

He pulled off just enough to breathe something into Shane's ear.

“How long are you staying?” Ilya asked.

Carefully.

Because this somehow still felt dangerous.

Like touching something injured and alive, that might decide to run away.

Shane looked up at him, then down at the gold chain resting on his chest as always. His fingers caught briefly on the pendant, he lifted it carefully, pressed one soft kiss against the worn gold before looking back up at him.

“I don’t know,” Shane admitted, with a smile, “I don’t know how long I’m staying. As long as I want I guess, as long as *you* want.”

Ilya basically purred into his neck with contentment, before speaking softly against his skin.

“You don’t have a plane ticket back?”

“No. I mean, I’ll have to go back *at some point*, I have signed with the Metros for another season, but I mean... I don’t know. I can stay a while. Come back other times during the year too.”

Ilya was smiling so hard he thought his face would break.

“I can visit you too,” he offered, “I hear Montreal has an interesting restaurant scene.”

A gentle confession that he'd been thinking about this as much as Shane had.

“I’d like that.”

Ilya’s hands were going lower now, tracing Shane’s abs, running along the curves of his hips, along his thighs.

“So, absolutely no plan for now? You don’t have to go back anytime soon? We have time?” he teased, feeling the way Shane was craving to be touched.

Shane made it very clear what his immediate plan was by grinding his erection against Ilya's leg.

“...No.. *fuck*... I don’t know... I just know I might *die* if you don't fucking touch me right now, so... please?”

Ilya dutifully obeyed and that was the final full sentence Shane managed to say before his brain went foggy and his knees buckled under the weight of sheer pleasure and want.

He didn't know what the next few weeks or months or years were going to look like. He had ideas of what he wanted with Ilya, but he didn't know what was going to happen besides being with him.

And for the first time in his life, answering "I don't know" did not feel like drowning.

The words should have terrified him.

No schedule.

No plan.

No return date carefully carved into stone.

Just uncertainty.

Just want.

But when Ilya pushed him onto the mattress and pressed their lips together and murmured "I love you", Shane simply said it back and realized something quietly astonishing: for the first time in his life, *not knowing* felt exactly like *peace*.

Chapter End Notes

Mmhh... *bet-ter*.

(to quote the great Shane Hollander)

Thanks to everyone who took the time to read this. I hope reading it was at least half as much fun as writing it was for me.

I had left you on a pretty sad note after chapter 4, so this is my apology happily ever after.

A few author's notes. This story unfolds over a few months not 12+ years like in the books (in a way it is more similar to the Scott/Kip timeline, which doesn't exist in this AU, by the way - if Shane had kissed Ilya on the ice after winning the Stanley Cup like he teases, that would have been a first). This is why the story does not end with a grand proposal or marriage or someone deciding to move to another continent on the spot, but with two people opening up about their feelings, and beginning to consider life together. Shane is thinking about retirement, Ilya is thinking about moving to Canada, they are considering options, figuring out what works for them. Together. They don't have a plan and that's ok. There is no fear of the unknown as long as they have each other. This felt like the most natural happy ending for them.

Silly note on the messages: you may have noticed (or not, maybe I'm crazy for thinking it is relevant) that the time sent for the same message changes depending on who is seeing it where (e.g. Shane in Canada, Shane in Italy, Ilya in Russia...). That is because I found out that whatsapp will always show you the times in your current time zone. Hence, if Shane send THE text from the airport at 7:05 pm Italian time, that same text will appear as sent at 8:05 pm in Ilya's phone when he reads it in Russia and at 1:05 pm in Shane's phone when he's looking back at it in Canada. Did anyone care? Probably not, but I spent way too much time doing the

math to risk letting you think the "time sent" changes were typos. ;)

Lots of love,
MmeBovary

.....

A note on the workskin I used.

There are several parts to it, and I need to thank all the wonderfully talented people in AO3 who shared their CSS and HTML codes, which I dutifully put together in one FrankenCSS that allowed this fanfic to be possible.

I could not find an instagram DMs code so I had to make that one up, which is why it is probably the one that looks the least realistic (lol), but it does its job. For the rest, in case you want to do the same thing, here are the links:

- Whatsapp conversations (scrollable and not): [Whatsapp Work Skin Template /Revamped](#) by worlds_end_valentine
- Online news article: [How to make a News Website Article skin on Ao3](#) by ElectricAlice
- Google search: [Google Search Suggestions Work Skin & Tutorial](#) by BookKeep

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!