

it's always been you

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by [canadienne_loon\(hey_dj\)](#)

Summary

Ilya left the Boston Raiders and joined the Ottawa Centaurs in search of something else. He just would have never imagined that after leaving his heart in Montreal after university, he would find it again in Ottawa, grocery shopping with a child and speaking Russian.

OR: Shane and Ilya meet and fall in love in university and get a second chance when Ilya comes to Ottawa, where Shane is the co-owner and head chef of a popular restaurant.

Chapter 1: Prologue

Present Day

No matter where he was, the food choices in Canada were always the same. Boring. The same old choices wherever he went. The entire aisle dedicated to protein bars were filled with two choices: chalky fudge or squirrel food. He opted for the squirrel food, as it seemed to have a good ratio of chocolate and nuts. Translation: the entire bar was coated in chocolate and there were mini chocolate chips inside as well. The chocolate really made it edible.

He could have bought them online and had it shipped to his place. In fact, that was probably the smartest option—there were always crazy fans somewhere. Even with a baseball cap and hoodie pulled over, Ilya was recognizable. His towering size always gave him away and his demeaning (so he's been told) alpha scent didn't help either.

But, Ilya was itching to get out. He wanted to get to know the place he was calling his home for the foreseeable future. Prior to this, he had only been in Ottawa for short periods of times for games. Thanks to those games, he knew the hotels and clubs in Ottawa well enough.

Dawdling through the aisles, Ilya perused the options he had available to him. He picked up some pasta and jarred sauce. The likelihood of him cooking at home was becoming smaller and smaller as practices were soon going to ramp up. He would probably be bone tired until playoffs. That is if their team even makes it close to the playoffs. It was a distant dream but it may be possible with Ilya on the team now. The Centaurs were good people and had a good foundation, they just needed some more guidance.

Just as Ilya was about to grab a jar of the most processed peanut butter imaginable, he heard it. At first, he thought his ears were fooling him—maybe he was too tired and his brain was automatically translating everything. But then, he heard it again. It was a little girl delightfully chatting in his mother tongue with someone Ilya could only assume was her father.

"Maybe I will be a chef just like you one day!"

"If that's what you want. You can be whatever you want, as long as you work for it."

The girl's accent and mannerisms were unmistakably Russian—born and raised in Russian. The man, however, Ilya could tell he had a bit of a foreign accent; he spoke fluently and his accent was near perfect, but there were definitely Western influences to the way that he spoke.

"Your papa really likes these. Shall we get some?"

"Yeah! Mama likes them too?"

Curiously, Ilya turned his head towards the voices. As much as he didn't want to admit it, there were times where his heart ached for his home, even if he knew that his country and his

people didn't love him the same way. The jar of peanut butter slipped out of Ilya's hand before he quickly caught it. Everything around him stopped. He could no longer hear the generic pop music playing in the grocery store.

"Shane." His name practically fell out of Ilya's mouth.

Shane Hollander stood at the end of the aisle, with a young girl with long black hair sitting in the main compartment of the shopping cart along with the rest of their groceries. He looked much older than when Ilya last saw him, shoulders broader, and face more mature but still clean shaven. His hair was longer now, styled so that it was parted in the middle and slightly tousled. But, in many ways, Shane was the same too: same freckles (god, Ilya loved those freckles), same seriousness plastered on his face, and same warm brown eyes.

A blush began to form on Shane's face, almost highlighting his freckles. "Ilya."

Ilya's mind began to race at a million miles per hour, though he should really get used to converting everything back to the metric system. Stupid Americans. Where had Shane been all these years? It had been six years since they last saw each other, since they... Based on her size, this child looked like she was around six, he guessed. No, that couldn't be.

Just like Ilya, Shane was frozen, feet glued to the floor. The only thing they could do was to stare at each other, watching a million emotions and thoughts race through.

The girl, suddenly sensing a shift in energy, followed Shane's eyes and turned around to look at Ilya. It did little to calm the storm going through Ilya's mind. She looked nothing Ilya... or Shane. She looked unmistakably Siberian.

"I..." Shane opened his mouth to speak but the words died on his tongue.

"My name Elena," the girl said in English thick with a Russian accent.

Shane shook out of his stupor. "My name *is* Elena," he gently corrected.

Elena turned around to, Ilya could only guess, flash Shane a grateful smile because Shane fondly smiled at her. She repeated his words slowly.

Somehow, Ilya's feet carried him closer towards them. "Hi Elena, my name is Ilya," he smiled, bending down to her level. It was always easy for him to be around children. They were kind and meant no harm—the exact opposite of the meathead jocks that dominated the ice. He could sense Shane's eyes on him but he fixed his attention to Elena.

"*You're Russian too?*" Elena gasped, hearing his accent.

"*Yes.* And you speak Russian?" Ilya cocked a brow at Shane. His heart was thumping in his chest. There was still so much that he wanted to know. Despite his unease, it was always impossible for Ilya not to tease Shane.

"A little," Shane replied, voice painfully shy.

"I heard you. I think is more than a little."

Shane cleared his throat before pulling his shoulders back, standing impossibly straighter than he already was. “Elena is my neighbour, and I’m just babysitting her while her parents are out on a date.”

Ilya tried his best not to let his relief show on his face or anywhere on his body, though he didn’t know if he had the right to feel relieved. Even if Elena was Shane’s daughter, it was Shane’s life, which Ilya had no part in. Shane made it very clear that he wanted nothing to do with Ilya. Silence was Shane’s answer to Ilya’s attempts to reaching out. So, Ilya did the only thing he could do: nod with a tight-lipped smile.

It was rude to impose, so Ilya turned away to leave. He had more things to buy and he didn’t want to bother Shane more than he already had.

“Ilya!” Shane exclaimed.

Ilya stopped in his tracks and turned around.

Shane took a deep breath. “Can we... can we talk?”

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Shane and Ilya meet in their first year English class, and Ilya is not at all what Shane expected.

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone,

I hope that you guys enjoyed the start of this fic! There's a couple of things to note before you progress further:

1. You'll notice that I've made the characters a little bit younger. There is no significance to this other than the fact that I did not want them to wait too long to have their second chance.
2. This fic is set in the A/B/O universe but it was deliberately written so that not everything was centred around the omegaverse. Their designations are important, but are not the central point of the story.
3. This author knows nothing about sports. Hopefully, this is not painfully obvious. However, any constructive criticism and feedback is welcome.

October 2014

The classroom was bustling with people, smells, sounds, and bright florescent lights. Shane hadn't anticipated that a mandatory first-year English class would be so full even by week four. Half of the class was made of the university's jocks, who were one here because they no doubt had to be if they wanted to continue to play. Shane always felt a tinge of jealousy hidden under his annoyance whenever the jocks stumbled into class late and rowdy.

"Alright class," Professor Hwang spoke firmly. "We are going to continue with our conversation from last class. Because the theme of this class is consumption and our book, *Restaurant Kid*, is centred around restaurant life, and therefore eating. I asked you to prepare a little paragraph about your favourite food growing up and it would be best if you could find a dish that is tied to your cultural heritage."

The class started to immediately rumble with talk.

“Before you guys start to do that, I would like to move you guys around,” she continued, earning a couple of groans and whispers. “When it comes to eating as a form of consumption, it is important that we not only share, but it is also important that you connect with others—especially those you have never met before. I am going to split you into different groups: one, two, three, and four. I would like those in group one to find someone from group three, and group two with group four. Do not try to work with someone you know. I’ve taught you guys for a month now, so I know who you are and who your friends are.”

The classroom erupted into a small fit of laughter as Professor Hwang walked through the rows, assigning each student a letter.

Shane shrivelled in his seat as he was put into group one. He didn’t want to talk to anyone, never mind someone entirely new. Though, he knew that no matter how small he made himself, he was still noticeable. Shane didn’t act his size—his 5’10 figure with an athletic build—but he still acted like his designation. As far as the world was concerned, he was just scentless beta. But Shane knew who he was and the world he left behind always tried to remind him of it. He was tall... for an omega. He was muscular... for an omega. He was fast... for an omega. According to the world, everything he did and excelled at was done so in spite of his designation.

“Okay, now everyone hold up your fingers to show what group you’re in.” Shane begrudgingly held up his pointer finger. “And please find a partner according to the pairings I made earlier.”

Shane sighed in his chair and didn’t dare move as people started to shuffle around. The chairs squeaked and everyone was talking far too loudly for his liking. Just as everyone settled down, Ilya Rozanov came into the classroom, only 12 minutes late, and sat next to Shane, who was at the front of the classroom and right by the door. Shane only knew him because everyone on campus knew the hockey player. It was hard not to know him when Ilya made himself very well known to half of the student population. A very specific half too.

“Mr. Rozanov, how nice of you to join us,” Professor Hwang said with no annoyance in her voice. “Since Mr. Hollander hasn’t been paired up yet, why don’t the two of you do the exercise together. I trust that both of you are prepared?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Shane said while Ilya just smiled at the professor before turning to Shane.

The scent coming off Ilya was strong and dizzying. He smelled of cheap locker room soap and whatever other alpha scents that Shane didn’t want to spend another second discerning. Ilya’s sandy curls were still damp. He must have just come from practice.

“We’re supposed to talk about our favourite childhood meals,” Shane said, a little too quietly apparently.

“What?” Ilya leaned in.

“We’re supposed to talk about our favourite childhood meals.”

“Ah so he has a voice,” Ilya smiled, thick accent rolling off of his tongue. He definitely heard Shane the first time, which only made Shane want to wipe that smile off of his face... with his own fist.

Shane’s knuckles turned white as he grabbed his notebook. He needed to calm down. He has never felt this violent before, even during the peak of his dead career. Slowly, Shane exorcised a deep sigh before starting. He wanted to get this over with as quickly as possible. “I’m half Japanese so the dish I chose is oyakodon.”

“So that’s what you are: Japanese.” Ilya’s amused eyes examined Shane much too thoroughly for his own comfort.

“Half,” he grumbled in return. “It’s a rice dish made with chicken, eggs, and onions. My mom used to make it for me all the time when I played...” It was two sources of protein all at once and lots of carbs, i.e. a great meal for a scrawny kid who was playing hard and trying to pack on a lot of weight and muscle.

He knew that the exercise required a lot more talking, but Shane couldn’t be bothered. He could live with disappointing Professor Hwang a little bit on a class exercise—it wasn’t graded after all. He needed to start preparing for his biology midterm, which was next week. According to his own schedule, he was behind. And if he was going to be a doctor as planned, he needed to be the best. Plus, with the way that Ilya was looking at him, Shane wasn’t sure he wanted to continue speaking.

“What about you, Mr. Rozanov?” Shane chirped, imitating their prof.

“*Ah so the kitten bites,*” Ilya smirked while saying something in Russian. Something he definitely knew Shane didn’t understand. “I like Russian Piroshkis. My mother always had them ready when I was done with hockey. Tastes like my home.”

“Cool.” Shane turned back to his own notebook but felt eyes on him. Professor Hwang was looking at him in anticipation, waiting for them to have more of a back and forth. Begrudgingly, Shane turned so that it at least looked like he was engaging with Ilya. Okay, maybe he wasn’t fine with disappointing her.

“You said you played,” Ilya said.

Shane nodded, not knowing what Ilya trying to say.

“Well, what did you play?”

“Oh um... hockey.” The tips of his ears felt hot.

Ilya seemingly inflated upon hearing his sport, somehow appearing bigger than he already was. “And your position?”

“Centre,” Shane mumbled, knowing that it was the same as Ilya’s.

“Only the best play that position.” Ilya winked and Shane wanted to die—he wanted to be anywhere but here. Ilya was so insufferably himself.

Could class end any time sooner? He did not want to be anywhere near Ilya Freaking Rozanov's radar. This class was already doing irreparable damage to Shane.

"You do not play anymore?" Ilya asked, somehow genuinely.

"No." The pit in Shane's chest grew and anchored him to his seat.

"That's too bad." He blew a raspberry. "Maybe in different world we could have played together, though you could not be centre. Only me."

Shane did not attempt to stop himself from rolling his eyes, which Ilya only mistook as Shane's attempt to be friendly. Though, something about the way that Ilya didn't take offence to any of Shane's bluntness shifted the way that Shane saw the hockey player. Maybe his rudeness just got lost in translation.

"Can I ask question?" Ilya said, face suddenly a little rosier than before, which Shane thought was odd. He was a man full of nothing but gravitas until this moment.

Shane hummed.

To Shane's surprise, Ilya picked up his bag and pulled out the book they were assigned. Certain pages had dog-ears on them, which Shane despised, while others had colourful tabs. Ilya carefully skimmed through the pages, and while doing so, Shane could tell that he had annotated on some of the pages. Great. The more Shane interacted with him, the more Ilya was proving that he wasn't the jerk/playboy that Shane thought he'd be. Shane was the jerk.

"What does this word mean? Compatible? The book says 'because we are no longer compatible.'"

Shane was a little taken aback, if he was honest. He didn't think that Ilya would be... so studious. Ilya always seemed like he cruised through classes because he was the star player of the school's team—that he didn't need to try because he would always somehow pass, one way or another. But that was Shane's own biases. After all, he was nothing like that when he was a player.

"It means that people or things can work well together. So, in the book, it means that she and Ethan are not good together as girlfriend and boyfriend."

Ilya quickly scribbles in the margins in Russian. "Thank you."

Shane always arrived to class at least five minutes early. He liked to give himself some extra time to settle down and remind himself of the contents that he'd prepared for class. Even if English wasn't his favourite class, he knew that he needed to try just as hard, if not even harder to make sure that his GPA was "stellar," as his advisor put it.

As he approached the classroom, Shane prayed to god or whatever being was out there that Ilya would not be around him. Sure, Ilya wasn't as horrific as Shane made him out to be, but they were by no means friends. Shane could have sworn that his jaw was on the floor by the time that he entered the classroom. Not only was Ilya early, but he was also sitting right beside the spot that Shane always liked to sit. Shane silently cracked his knuckles with his thumb. Surely the world was playing a cruel trick on him.

Before Shane could decide if he would sit in another spot, Ilya spotted him and waved him over. "I saved you a seat!"

Shane shuffled over and sat down. He would have been a dick if he outright ignored the school's star player. Plus, Ilya didn't really save him a seat. Does it count when everyone already had their unspoken designated spots? Plus, no one really liked to sit at the front anyway. Shane just liked to because as much as he didn't like to admit it, it was better for his eyes.

Taking deep breaths, Shane tried to steady himself as Ilya's scent evaded his nose. He smelled of coffee and cigarettes—those were the scents that Shane tried to ignore last class. Frequently, Shane wished that his blockers worked on his nose too. He himself didn't have a scent because of the blockers, but he still had to deal with the consequences of smelling everyone else's scents.

"I have another question for you. This word: heinous?" Ilya pointed to his book, where he had highlighted the word in neon pink.

"You know there is a thing called a dictionary?"

"Yeah, but is nice when I have a personal human dictionary." Ilya shrugged with a smile.

"Um kind of like very bad and kind of evil."

Once again, Ilya earnestly wrote down what Shane said in his book.

Shane began to unpack his backpack, setting down his copy of the novel, his pencil case, and his laptop. In his periphery, he knew that Ilya was watching with an amused look. He could practically hear the chuckle that was stuck in Ilya's throat.

"What?" Shane asked, bracing himself for the worst.

"Is nothing. You're just good student."

"I try," he shrugged. He really fucking tried.

Ilya continued to look at Shane with his sparkling hazel eyes. He had been nothing but nice to Shane but Shane was just being a brat. Shane let out a deep sigh. He should be nice to Ilya as well.

"Got any other words for me?" He asked.

Jumping on the offer, Ilya started to flip through his book.

Jesus, what did Shane just sign himself up for?

In every sense of the word, Shane despised the food at the dining hall. It was equal parts disgusting and unhealthy. Even the steamed vegetables were somehow doused in some kind of mystery oil. Shane prodded at his steamed cauliflower with his fork before ultimately setting it down. And the cleanliness... don't get him started on the cleanliness. He once saw one of the cooks directly sneeze into a fresh tray of fajitas before immediately serving them. Every table was covered in some sticky grim that couldn't be wiped away.

If it were up to him, he would cook every meal in his dorm's shared kitchenette with the instant pot that his mom had gotten him. However, his friend Rose pleaded him to meet up with her for lunch. His friend Rose who was running behind because apparently the drama club lost an entire costume that they needed immediately for a production they were putting on later this week.

Shane was fine with his solitude, directing his energy towards his biology flashcards, until someone sat down in front of him.

"Hey Rose, finally found-" He stopped himself. While there was a blonde girl sitting down in front of him, Shane had no idea who she was. She was conventionally attractive: bright blue eyes, pink lips, and wore what Shane supposed was a descent outfit (Rose has told him time and again that his fashion sense was not the strongest).

"Uh-hi. Did you need this table?" Shane asked before looking around to see plenty of other free tables.

The girl, seemingly oblivious to Shane's question, said "My name isn't Rose, but you can sure call me that if that's what you want."

"No, thank you. I'm just waiting for my friend." He busied himself with his flashcards again.

"What's your name?" The girl tried to reach her hand out to touch Shane but he retracted his arm before it could happen. He didn't even like people he knew touching him most times.

Shane must have looked at her like she was crazy because she stomped away before any other word was uttered between the two of them. The whole interaction was just odd, to say the least.

In the distance, Shane heard a hearty chuckle, one that he unfortunately recognized by now. To his own defence, he only recognized it because that bastard wouldn't stop sitting beside him for every English class. Before long, Ilya Rozanov plopped down in front of him, replacing the girl.

Shane was grateful that the greasy smells of the dining hall covered up Ilya's scent. He didn't need the entire hall to see what his scent did to him now that Shane's got seemingly everyone's attention.

"Wow, you are really bad. She..." He snapped his fingers, trying to find the right word. "She threw herself at you and you do not care?"

"She what?"

"I thought I was the one who didn't know English. You know, she wanted your attention."

"Yeah, seems like it," Shane grumbled.

"You do not care about them?"

It seemed to be a regular thing between the two of them. Ilya would ask a rather vague question and Shane would be all but clueless.

"Girls?"

Shane shrugged in response. "They're fine, I guess."

Ilya made himself comfortable in the seat, leaning back with his arm around another chair. He hummed in response as he carefully considered Shane's answer. "I like them."

"I think the whole campus knows that." A little smile had made its way onto Shane's face somehow. "I'm surprised she didn't *throw herself* at you."

"Girls like different things. I'm like dangerous and deadly jaguar. You are little, tiny kitten."

"Tiny kitten?" Shane asked incredulously.

"Yes, little feisty kitten." Ilya looked quite pleased with himself for saying this.

"Oh my goodness, Shane," Rose's familiar voice sang as she approached Shane. "I have to catch you up with—oh hi there, Ilya."

"Rose." Ilya nodded at her.

"You two know each other?" Shane asked.

"Who doesn't know Ilya Rozanov? I know of him, but this is my first time meeting him."

"Same," Ilya replied. "Hockey team is big fan of drama club." Right, because they were mostly girls who could sing and dance at the same time, which Shane supposed that guys would find attractive.

"Okay, I'm going to grab some food and we will talk. Be right back." As she walked away, Rose mouthed to Shane: *Ilya Rozanov? Tell me everything!*

Still, Ilya stayed put in his seat. This time, however, it looked like there was a question buzzing in his mind. “So you are not interested in other girls because you have Rose?” he finally asked after a few quiet moments.

“It’s not like that.” Shane suddenly found his cauliflower captivating as he played with his food. “We’re friends.”

“Right, friends.”

“What was the first word that I defined for you?” Shane huffed, leaning back in his chair.

“Compatible? So... you and Rose are not compatible?”

“In the ways that count,” Shane supplemented. “We’re just friends.”

Shane didn’t know why he needed to make it so abundantly clear to Ilya that he was not dating Rose. His dating life, however nonexistent it may be, was not a concern to anyone but himself.

A wide grin appeared on Ilya’s face, one that Shane found that he wanted to wipe off his face again. He should not look so smug all the time, and he was always smug when he was with Shane.

He wasn’t even sure why Ilya was so occupied with him. Shane could see the remainder of the freshman hockey players on the other side of the dining hall, where they drew a large crowd of girls who wanted to be with them and guy who wished they could be them. Surely, Ilya “star player” Rozanov had better things to do than to annoy Shane.

“Did you need something?” Shane asked.

“No, just wanted to see you,” he replied before ultimately rejoining his teammates.

All but two minutes later, Rose joined Shane, sitting where Ilya was moments again. Contrary to her name, Rose smelt like lavender. Her smell and presence were both soothing for Shane, usually. There were occasions where Rose would force Shane to do something he wouldn’t like just for the sake of trying, or times like now where Rose just needed to gossip with Shane.

“What was that?” Her blue eyes were wide with anticipation.

“What was what?” Shane asked, finally havind had smushed the cauliflower into mush.

“You can fool other people, but you cannot fool me Shane Hollander. You were talking with Ilya Rozanov!”

Shane took a deep breath. He knew where this conversation was going. Rose was the only person at university who *knew* Shane. When it came to Rose Landry, Shane Hollander was completely transparent.

“We were just talking. There’s nothing to it.”

“Noth-nothing to it?” Rose interrupted herself to lower the volume of her own voice.

“He’s in my English class and we talk sometimes.” That was all. There was nothing else.

Rose squinted her eyes at him in an interrogative way. “How dare you hide this crucial information from me?”

Shane gently brushed his foot against hers, hoping that it would send a message to her. He was acutely aware of the fact that so many eyes were already on him from the first incident, and then even more because of the Ilya incident. The last thing that Shane wanted was to be noticed and seen.

“I’m sorry, you’re right. I got ahead of myself. I’m just really excited for you and want what’s best for you.”

Shane raised his eyebrow.

“He’s not as bad as you might think.”

Unfortunately, Shane knew that Rose was right.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Ilya becomes a little bit obsessed with Shane Hollander, and Shane's past begins to haunt him.

February 2015

Shane Hollander, as it turns out, was everywhere and nowhere all at once. Ilya even enlisted the help of his friend Svetlana, who is an expert with social media. Svetlana had no trouble finding secondary, even tertiary instagram accounts. Shane did not have any social media accounts, that was the only possible conclusion that Ilya and Svetlana could come to. But, Svetlana found websites and videos of Shane's hockey playing days. He was much younger, donning a bright red, blue, and white jersey with the number and a C plastered on his chest. Ilya couldn't help but watch a few videos with Svetlana. Shane was an excellent player. Svetlana remarked that Shane was a better player than Ilya was at fourteen, and Svetlana was right. Shane was much faster, much dexterous on the ice than Ilya has ever been. Shane, without a doubt, could have been drafted, and he probably would have been picked first.

There weren't many videos of Shane on the ice. In fact, the ones they found were grainy and glitchy, but the videos suddenly stopped mid-season in 2010. It was odd. More than odd. The two of them could only come to the conclusion that that was the time when Shane ended his career, which only raised more questions for Ilya. He wanted answers from Shane—Ilya just wanted to know him a little more, but he just needed to catch him somehow.

Now that a new semester had started, Ilya didn't have an excuse to see him anymore. He didn't know that not seeing someone could possibly affect him like this. His father would probably call it pathetic, but Ilya practically looked for Shane in every room he was in. Alexei would have outright called Ilya some kind of slur. But they didn't bother Ilya, not anymore. He didn't come to a foreign country to still be tormented by the likes of them.

It saddened Ilya that he couldn't rely on his sense of smell to find Shane. At worst, Shane smelt like nothing, and at best, Shane smelt like a very, very muted fall day. Ilya only knew this because there was one day Shane "accidentally" ran into Ilya's chest while rushing to class. In reality, Ilya had all but put himself in front of Shane's path. Ilya didn't know of any betas who had a slight scent, but there was always a first for everything.

Ilya had to admit it was maybe a little bit pathetic how much he tried just to see Shane. But, Shane was the first person who didn't laugh at Ilya for not knowing English as fluently as he'd like; who used 110% of his attention and energy no matter how small the task; who had freckles that Ilya wanted to kiss and trace with his fingers.

But now that he knew that Shane was good friends with Rose, he knew that there would be good chance that he could catch Shane around one of Rose's functions. Ilya knew that Shane wasn't a party person; Shane had never told Ilya this explicitly but it didn't take a genius to guess. After all, Ilya had never seen Shane at a party and Ilya had been to almost every party possible since the school year began. Rose, however, seemed like the kind of person who would drag Shane out for his own good. Ilya was really counting on the fact that Rose would be that kind of person.

Based on the few American films that he watched to prepare himself for life in Canada (there weren't very many good Canadian films), he expected the theatre kids to burst out into song and dance, to be a little nerdy and geeky, and perhaps a little queer. He didn't have any confirmation on the latter, and he now knew that the High School Musical franchise was a very poor introduction into North American youths' lives. Since McGill did not have any Fine Arts faculties aside from music, the students who were into theatre and drama created their own club. These students partied in ways that Ilya didn't know was possible. They had a theme for every single party. Tonight's theme was Shakespeare. Ilya thought it was going to be boring with people in curly wigs and fake moustaches, but he was delightfully proven wrong. There were corsets, gowns, and tight outfits everywhere. None of the outfits were appropriate for the winter weather, but no one seemed to care. Ilya was also sure none of this was accurate to what Shakespeare's plays were either.

Ilya was in tight slacks and a loose button up that was half open. The chill air prickled against his exposed chest. His hair was slightly styled but it took him so much more time than he would have liked to admit. Nursing a near lukewarm beer in his hand, Ilya scoured through the crowds and paid no attention to the overwhelming pheromones and scents. While he mostly appreciated his height and stature most during games and practice, it also gave him a good vantage point for trying to spot a certain someone. Since there was no sight of a brooding Shane Hollander feeling out of place in his costume, Ilya shifted his focus to Rose. She should be a walk in the park to find compared to Shane. At least that's what Ilya thought what the expression was. His English was getting better thanks to Shane's help last semester.

Unlike Shane, Ilya was not oblivious to the attention that he was getting from women. His teammates called women who like to sleep with hockey players "puck bunnies," but Ilya did not think it was neither a nice nor appropriate name. A slender and tall woman with cascading brown hair started to stride towards Ilya, dark eyes dead set on him. Her maroon corset and short black skirt accentuated her curves. She smelled strongly of sweet vanilla and alcohol. Ilya took a sip of his watery beer—the alcohol in Canada was like water compared to the alcohol in Russia. Babies could drink it, though they should not.

"Hi alpha captain." She smiled, eyes wide with anticipation.

"Am not captain." Ilya looked in her eyes, wishing he were looking at doe-eyes framed with furrowed brows and freckles.

“Future captain then.” She stepped towards him and Ilya stepped back with her, leaving space between them.

“Not tonight.”

Don’t get Ilya wrong. Typically, this would have worked on him. Typically, he would have charmed her right back and enjoyed it. But his mind was being stupid and thinking about a stupid half-Japanese boy who wouldn’t even come to his best friend’s party.

When it’s too late or early, Ilya still doesn’t know how to describe time when it’s for a party, the party starts to calm down a little bit. It was probably around two in the morning. The house was noticeably emptier and quieter. There were still a couple of insistent partiers, trying to maintain the same level of energy deep into the night (or morning?).

Ilya found Rose a bit ago. She wore an ethereal (a new word he learned from Shane) green corseted dress that accentuated her curled red hair. Very pretty. She was having plenty of fun, drinking, dancing, and singing her heart out with her friends and fellow party goers. But there were no Shane. Maybe at the next party.

Now, Ilya was herding some of his teammates, trying to make sure they didn’t get lost in a bush or puke out their guts before they got home. Canadians really couldn’t handle their watery alcohol. Wilson was a wandering drunk, so Ilya held onto him by the collar as they walked. LeBlanc was a mopey drunk, and held onto an empty tequila bottle as if it were his baby while he lagged behind Ilya. Ladies and gentlemen, McGill Redbird’s left defence and goalie.

By the time Ilya finally wrestled Wilson to leave the party (he wrangled himself out of Ilya’s grasp twice), a flash of black quickly walked through the front door, followed by a squeaky “Shanneeee.” Rose was sitting on the stairs of the house, outreaching her arms towards Shane, who was clearly tired but tried to wrangle Rose into a long winter parka. It was no doubt Shane’s parka, as it was much too large for Rose—it engulfed her. Shane wore a black puffer and jeans, and his hair was tousled and covered his forehead. Ilya tried to ignore what this image of Shane did to him.

“Thank you so much for picking me up, Shaney. I love you so much,” Rose slurred loudly as Shane slowly guided her to her feet. “And it means so much to me that you’d come when you have a midterm on Monday. That’s two days away, and that’s practically tomorrow for you!” She pressed a kiss to Shane’s temple, leaving a lipstick stain.

“It’s fine, Rose. It’s what friends are for.”

“No. You, Shane Hollander, are an excellent friend,” she replied, pointedly pressing her finger on his chest with each word.

Ilya slipped the tequila bottle out of LeBlanc’s arms and instead guided Wilson into his arms. “This is your baby now,” he instructed to LeBlanc. “Hold him tightly and do not let go, yes?”

“Yessirrrr,” LeBlanc mumbled back while Wilson seemingly let out a snore.

“Need some help?” Ilya asked Shane, who was slightly struggling to keep Rose on her feet. He couldn’t help but notice the way that Shane’s eyes scanned his figure.

“It looks like your hands are full, too.”

“Bah, they are meatheads. They can take care of themselves. I am a gentleman and I do not leave ladies in need of help.”

“Ilyaaaa,” Rose sung, “that’s so sweet of you. Shane you should say yes to him. I would not object to have two handsome men escort me home. You’d like that too, wouldn’t you?”

Even in the dimmer lighting, it was very noticeable that a blush bloomed across Shane’s face. “It’s fine. I’ve got it.” In one swift motion, Shane picked up Rose and started to carry her bridal style as if she weighed nothing.

Of course Shane would refuse any help. He was just as resistant to giving Ilya any help in the first place. But Ilya liked a challenge. He didn’t get to where he was without facing some obstacles. Just as the two turned to leave, Ilya did the only thing he could think of doing.

“Wait, Shane. We have home game next Friday. Will you come?”

Shane stopped, seemingly considering Ilya’s invitation.

“Is after your midterm so you don’t have an excuse.”

“Maybe.”

Ilya liked the sound of maybe.

Shane did not want to go to the game. He wasn’t ready to return to the hockey world yet, especially not after it betrayed him. But, he had to admit, he was curious to see Ilya play. After their first encounter, he couldn’t help but search up some of Ilya’s plays online. Ilya was a great player, just as cocky as he was off-ice, but his inflated ego was well-earned. He was fast and decisive on the ice, able to easily slip through other teams’ lines of defence.

Ilya was born for the ice.

It would be a shame for Shane not to attend at least one game in person. It was a crucial university experience. At least that’s what he was telling himself.

It had been a long while since Shane stepped into a stadium. Just a little bit over three years, he calculated. He let that settle in. It had been just over three years since the trajectory of his entire life changed. Taking a deep breath, Shane assured himself that he would be okay. No one was holding him here at gunpoint—he could leave at any given time.

He positioned himself close to the opposing team's net. The Redbirds were playing against the Royal Military College of Canada's Paladins, so it was a sure win. The Redbirds have historically decimated that team every single time. There was just no competition. Shane was sure that this side of the rink was going to get plenty of action.

As he sat, watching the teams warm up on the ice, the familiar chill of the rink settled in Shane's body. It was bittersweet to be on this side of the boards, but he was glad—he was sure he was glad—that he no longer participated in a sport that upheld so many backward ideals. He'd already heard some chirps about players being cocksuckers or weak omegas. Still, Shane braced himself for the worst the same way he would've braced his body to be checked.

An added bonus of being on this side of the boards was that the cold and the plastic dulled some of the raging pheromones, which Shane would have never thought about but was still grateful for.

With warmups ending, Ilya, with his bright red jersey, seemed to be scanning the crowds. As his eyes landed on Shane's, Ilya perked up and waved to Shane with a gloved hand, even daring to blow him a kiss. Shane sat still and rolled his eyes. He hoped that Ilya could see how unimpressed he was from where he sat. The Russian smirked and blew another kiss, so Shane sent a clearer message: he flipped Ilya off and mouthed "fuck off."

Shane really couldn't understand the dynamics between him and Ilya. Ilya has always been cheeky and somewhat nice to him, but why? What kind of ulterior motives did he have for being so chummy with Shane? It wasn't like Shane was some popular kid who knew where all the good parties were at. Maybe Rose? No, that couldn't be it. Aside from their quick interaction at the dining hall and Ilya's offer to help her home, Ilya had never mentioned her in the many, many times that Shane has bumped into him.

Ultimately, Shane just had to come to the conclusion that Ilya was odd but benign.

The Redbirds were decimating the Paladins, with the score currently being 6-1. It was clear that because the Paladins were at a disadvantage with their skill level, they were playing dirty. Their players were clearing tripping the Redbirds, even checking them harder than needed. The sportsmanship just wasn't there. By the start of the third period, both teams looked rough, more tousled than usual. Helmets were askew and jerseys were wrinkled.

Shane shuffled in his seat as his eyes landed on Tremblay, number twenty-two and right wing for the Redbirds. He was no doubt the smallest player for the team. While he made up for his thinner stature with his speed, it seemed that the Paladins were targeting him relentlessly. They had already checked him a couple of times. His nose was dripping and his speed was noticeably slower.

Shane's chest felt tight as his heart rattled against his ribs. Tremblay skated right past him, dodging the Paladins as he passed the puck to Ilya. Right as the puck left Tremblay's possession, he was knocked into the boards, helmet crashing into the plastic shields first. Shane couldn't help but wince. The Paladin, who was much larger than Tremblay, started

ripping off his gloves and throwing punches. Tremblay fought back, gloved fist making contact with the Paladin's nose. Somehow, Tremblay's helmet came off in the squabble and his blood sprayed onto the boards.

This was too much. Shane jumped up from his seat, earning several groans and shouts from those behind him who were trying to watch the fight unfold. His feet carried him as he caught sight of Ilya pulling the Paladin off of Tremblay.

You cock-fucking bitch. You're no captain. You're not our captain.

Shane wasn't sure if he was breathing until the sharp winter air filled his sinuses. His hands were shaking—his entire body was shaking like a leaf.

You're worse than a traitor. You're an omega—nothing.

Collapsing on a bench cleared of snow, Shane could still feel the ghosts of his teammates fists on his body. He didn't know what hurt more: the memory of the fight or the fight itself. His breath came out in puffs of steam as he breathed deeply. He tried to let the cold invade his body, letting his muscles soak up the bitter cold, and while it helped calm his body, it did little to placate his mind.

Burying his face in his hands, he chastised himself for coming to the game in the first place. Who was he kidding? He wasn't ready to be immersed in this world again. Shane wasn't sure he would ever be ready.

Leave before we do much worse.

Somehow, Shane managed to compose himself enough to grab his cellphone. His fingers trembled as he found his mom's contact. But he just couldn't bring himself to click the call button.

If there was anyone who loved hockey as much as Shane, it would be Yuna Hollander. She was the one who really pushed Shane to pursue and excel in hockey. Of course his dad was encouraging of Shane's hockey career, having played for McGill himself, but all of Shane's success was due to his mom's efforts. And Shane let her down by walking away from it all. All of her blood, sweat, tears, and endless hours spent taking Shane to practice and hockey camps were gone. Utterly wasted.

She said she wasn't disappointed when Shane came out of the locker room all busted up. She had said it multiple times since then. But Shane knew, deep down, he'd let her down.

Somehow, his phone started buzzing. Shane panicked—had he called her by mistake? Looking down, he was receiving a call from his mom.

"Hi, sweetheart. How are you doing? Not studying on a Friday night, I hope?" His mother's voice rang clear in his ear. In the background, his dad shouted a greeting.

"Hi, mom. No, I'm just outside right now."

“Outside? Are you wearing a jacket and boots? Gloves? Scarf? It’s minus five degrees, Shane.”

“Yes, I am,” he lied. His jacket was unzipped. He didn’t bother with gloves and a scarf these days, though his body was shivering in protest.

“Okay, good. How did your biology midterm go?”

Shane settled on the bench, feeling some of the tension melt away. “Good. It was much easier than I thought.”

“See I told you! You had nothing to worry about.”

A small smile tugged at his lips but he pulled them into a straight line.

“I was just calling to let you know that your father most definitely just cheated in a round of Scrabble. He used the word ‘cachexia,’ Shane. Have you ever heard of such a word?”

“No, Mom.” He stifled a laugh.

“Well, he’s cheating,” she replied at the same time David said: “I did not cheat! It’s a medical condition that I read about.”

Yuna paid no attention to her husband. “Yes, exactly. He’s cheating by reading those boring New Yorker articles all the time. You know no one but him can read through those without falling asleep. Promise me you won’t read them. I still need one person in the world who will play Scrabble *fairly* with me.”

Slowly, Shane’s chest began to feel lighter and the air didn’t feel so cold anymore.

“Since you’re outside, I won’t bother you any longer. Have fun, Shane,” she said, more like a command than a wish. “I love you.”

“Love you, bud,” David supplemented.

“Love you, too.”

Shane stared at his phone. Its bright white screen lit up the night. The arena behind him erupted in to cheers, no doubt the game just ended. He reminded himself that now was probably a good time to leave. People were probably going to start flooding through the doors in no time. Shane didn’t want to get caught up in the crowds, but he also didn’t want to go back to his dorm room. He had a feeling that if he went back now, he would wallow.

Instead, Shane peeled himself off of the cold bench and started wandering. It was a rare occurrence for him to be out on campus so late. There were occasional nights where he got too carried away with studying at the library, but most nights he studied in his room. He walked under the warm lights of the street lamps, feet crunching in the fresh snowfall. Instead of listening to the distant voices in his mind, he looked at the contrast between the old, brick buildings and the sleek, modern buildings.

When the faces of his old teammates started to pop up in his mind, teeth snarled and gritted, Shane tried to come up with anything else that he could think of. Somehow, his mind wandered to a Russian with curls and an obnoxious smirk. Shane still needed to remind himself to go easier on Ilya—he was just projecting his past onto Ilya. He had caught a glimpse of the way Ilya carefully herded his teammates at the drama club's Shakespeare party. Yes, he did grab his teammate by the collar, but it was done in a way where he couldn't face plant into the cement on Ilya's watch. Yes, he was an alpha but he never once gave Shane a reason to believe that his designation was a threat to Shane.

Shane cleared his throat, interrupting his train of thought.

By the sounds of it, people were leaving the arena, funnelling through the doors. Shane carried on with his walk.

Shane smelled him before he saw him. He noted the scent of the cheap shampoo and soap before he turned around to find Ilya chasing after him, gym bag slung around his shoulder. Did Ilya not have a celebratory party with his team?

"You left early," Ilya said, joining him. His wet hair was creating wisps of steam.

"The violence is a bit much for me." Shane continued to look at the path before him. He didn't want to trip on the snow and eat shit.

"Yes. They were not being fair to Tremblay today. Picked on him for no reason."

"He's the smallest player on your team," Shane said pointedly.

"Yes, but he is also one of our better players. He can out skate any of those buttheads even on his worst day," Ilya exclaimed before mumbling something in Russian. "*Those sons of bitches think that he's an omega. He's not, but what if he is?* Does not matter. They got what they deserved."

"Yeah, you guys destroyed them."

Ilya flashed Shane a bright smile, not catching onto Shane's glum mood. His lip was red and split, no doubt from pulling the Paladins off of Tremblay. "You miss it? Hockey?"

Shane wanted to talk about anything but that. He didn't want to think about hockey for the rest of his life, if he could help it. But, his lips moved before his brain could stop them. "Not anymore."

"I think if I suddenly could not play anymore, I would not be so sad either," Ilya sincerely confessed.

"What do you mean? You're so good at it."

"Ah, you think I'm good?"

Shane shoved Ilya but he didn't budge. Ilya was sturdy like a tree trunk.

"I've been told I'm good at hockey my whole life. People say I'm good at hockey, then I do hockey. Is simple. But if I stopped, I think I would maybe miss it but not be sad about it. No more pressure."

Shane stopped in his tracks and looked at Ilya who was nonchalant despite the gravity of his words. Why was it so easy for Ilya to reveal such private parts of himself—parts that Shane wasn't even able to show to his parents? Maybe one day he could do that for himself but for now, the thought of doing so was too terrifying.

"Yeah, the pressure is not fun." It was the only thing Shane could think of saying without shutting Ilya down entirely. "Don't you have a party or something to go to? You guys just won."

"Is no big deal. Everyone and their mother knew we were going to win tonight."

Shane coughed out a laugh. "Who taught you that saying?"

Ilya shrugged. "Are you worried that I have another English tutor? Trust me, I don't. The first one set too high of a bar."

"Are you sure? Your English is getting pretty good."

"Shane Hollander." Ilya suddenly turned serious, placing his hand over his heart. "I would not cheat on you."

"Oh fuck off." Shane stormed ahead, a smile worming its way onto his face.

They kept walking together, talking to one another. Even in moments of silence, it didn't feel too awkward, which surprised Shane since he was always socially awkward in some way or another. Ilya continued to be bright with happiness, though he always seemed to be such a state when he talked to Shane. He was just a social butterfly.

As they started to climb the hill that Shane's residence was on, it dawned upon Shane that Ilya had walked with him this entire time and Shane didn't even bother to ask where Ilya was going. "Oh um I'm walking to McConnell Hall. What about you?" His face was warm.

"Molson Hall. Don't worry, I was not keeping you company. I was going home too."

They were neighbours then. Their dormitories were right next to one another this entire time—not that Shane was wondering where Ilya lived.

Approaching McConnell Hall, Shane turned to Ilya. "Thanks for keeping me company and... good game."

"Thanks for coming," Ilya smiled, though it was not his usual loud and proud smile. It was more... timid, though Shane could never imagine Ilya Rozanov being timid.

Shane waited for the “but...” in Ilya’s voice, but it never came. He never bashed Shane for not staying until the very end to watch his team win. For that, Shane was grateful.

“Well, good night and see you-”

“Shane. What is your phone number?”

“Why?” His phone felt like dead weight in his pocket and his fingers curled around it.

“You have phone? Give.” He held out his phone with an expectant hand.

Begrudgingly, Shane found himself setting his phone into Ilya’s hands. While Ilya typed away, Shane’s eyes scanned him. His hair was always more curly fresh out of the shower, though it dried more fluffy when he didn’t use products in it. Shane noted that Ilya never styled his hair after practice, probably because he rushed to English class afterwards. It was rude to stare, Shane suddenly reminded himself, prying his eyes away.

As Ilya passed his phone back to Shane, his warm hand brushed against Shane’s. Shane froze, trying to stop the shiver that was about to travel down his spine. He looked down at what Ilya had typed, it was a message from Shane sent to Ilya’s number: *Ilya is best hockey player.*

“Asshole,” Shane grumbled as he shoved his phone back into his pocket. “It’s ‘Ilya is *the* best hockey player.’”

“Wow, wow. Two compliments from Shane in one night?” His eyes were sparkling with amusement.

Shane couldn’t believe that he fell for Ilya’s trap. What’s more, Shane couldn’t believe that he thought Ilya was timid moments ago. “At least be grammatically correct,” he continued to mumble.

“I think my English tutor needs to do a better job then.”

Wordlessly, Shane pivoted on his feet and started walking towards his building, leaving Ilya behind.

“Good night, Shane!”

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

It's St. Patrick's Day and Ilya was going to make sure that Shane had a good time, and who knows? They might even kiss a little.

March 2015

Shane didn't understand why St. Patrick's Day was so big in Montreal, or why it was so big to the non-Irish at all. It was just another excuse for people to drink, and university students would take any chance at all to get drunk out of their minds. Tonight, Rose was taking him out to party. It was supposed to be a full out pub crawl, with students first meeting at one of the frat houses to pre-game. Shane was able to negotiate with Rose; he was only going to go to the pre-game party. Then, he was going to go home to study for his chemistry midterm.

Rose mumbled to herself as she rifled through Shane's closet and wardrobe in her emerald sequinned dress. She was growing increasingly frustrated with his clothes. Since he lived and breathed hockey for so much of his life, most of his clothes were still athletic wear. "Shane, my best friend. You are ripped. You are so hot. You should show your body off more and maybe not wear polyester for once. Who knows? Maybe you'll attract a cute guy or something at the party. But, you will not be able to do that if you wear anything from your closet. We are going to go to Miles's place."

Great. Rose was going to take him to a secondary location before the party.

Miles was everything that Shane was not. Even though they had the same designation and preferences, Miles was loud and proud about who he was. Right now, he was wearing a tight neon green crop top. Later, both he and Rose were going to paint clovers on their faces. Miles didn't even bother with blockers either, so his scent of fresh citrus was always apparent. It had taken a lot of work but Shane had finally accepted who he was. He just wasn't particularly loud or proud about it, though he was happy that Miles was.

Shane was sure that Miles wasn't aware of Shane's... identity. The only people who knew were his parents, Rose, and the entirety of his old hockey team, the latter of whom found out by mistake. He'd never told Miles explicitly but never shut down any time Miles or Rose used he/him pronouns when talking about his romantic preferences either.

Trying not to dwell on the past, he turned to the mini fashion show that Rose and Miles were putting on for him. They were pulling out articles of clothing to show Shane, most of which Shane didn't feel comfortable wearing. It was either too itchy, too revealing, too shiny, or too much.

“Shane, if I had arms like yours, I would show them off every day,” Miles said candidly as he held a knitted vest that he and Rose expected Shane to wear with nothing else underneath.

Shane felt very warm. He wasn’t used to being complimented.

“Come on, Shane. Something has to work. I would be a terrible friend if I let you to a party with a white t-shirt and jeans.” Rose looked at him sternly, holding another option.

Shane didn’t have the ego to be offended, but he was comfortable in what he was wearing. Comfort was extremely important to Shane. He couldn’t stand scratchy materials or even tags and seams. As they continued to rummage through Miles’s clothes, Shane’s phone vibrated in his pocket.

Ilya: u r coming to pub crawl?

Shane: Unfortunately.

Shane: Just to the Sigma Chi party.

Ilya: XD

“Rose, what does this mean? XD?” Shane looked up from his phone.

Miles gave Rose a very pointed look, one she returned.

“My sweet baby boy,” Rose deeply sighed. “I am never letting you skip a party again. If you do not know what ‘XD’ means, you are hopeless. It’s just a face, like an excited face.”

Shane contemplated what to respond back and fiddled his fingers, giving Miles ample time to take a glance at who Shane was texting.

“Ilya Rozanov?! Since when were you friends with him?”

“They’re only best friends,” Rose said, dramatically rolling her eyes. “Shane mentions him every single time I see him, and he’s constantly texting him too. He’s blatantly replacing me.”

“I don’t do that...” Shane weakly said, face only getting warmer. Okay, maybe he did but that was because Ilya was always texting him first. It would be rude not to respond.

“Okay, boo. Go get ‘em.” Miles clapped for Shane.

“It’s not like that. We’re just friends.”

Once again, Miles and Rose gave each other a knowing look, one which Shane deliberately ignored. He typed a smily face before deleting it. Ilya’s text didn’t really need a response.

“I think I found the one.” Rose grinned.

Shane felt wildly uncomfortable. He got away with not wearing green, but neither Rose or Miles completely let him off the hook. They dressed him up in a black satin button up, with the sleeves rolled up. Shane was a bit wider than Miles, so the sleeves were quite tight around his biceps. They threatened that if he didn't wear a gold chain, they were going to paint clovers on his face, so the chain it was. They also fought over how many buttons to keep open. They compromised and kept it open enough so that the chain was visible at all times. It showed a bit of his hairless chest but Shane couldn't win every battle, no matter how uncomfortable some losses were.

Now they were walking towards the Sigma Chi house. Shane was trailing behind Rose and Miles, smelling both their lavender and orange scents to calm down. In his hand, he clutched onto a granola bar, which he forced himself to eat. It was too sugary for his preference, but he knew he had to eat. He promised them both that he would have one drink and Shane knew better than to drink on an empty stomach. He's seen what that did to Rose first hand.

He could hear the frat house even before it came to view. Sounds were one of the reasons he didn't like to party—they were way too overstimulating. Shane remembered how the house buzzed with sound when he came to pick up Rose last month. The sound made him irritable even though he knew that realistically parties would be much louder.

The moment they step inside, Shane tries to adjust to the different smells of everyone and the visuals of an already raging party. It was only seven o'clock—too early to be partying like this. Granted, it was already dark outside, but was there any appropriate time for Shane to be partying? He supposed not. Miles and Rose, however, immediately forced him to finish his granola bar and replaced the wrapper with a bottle of beer. Shane tried his best to hide the grimace on his face.

“Drink up and then we're dancing,” Rose commanded with a red solo cup in her hand. Shane was grateful that he was given a beer. He didn't think he could handle whatever jungle juice was in her cup. It probably would destroy him in a sip.

Obediently, Shane quickly drank his beer. Even though he was not particularly fond of parties, he was always appreciative of Rose's attempts to get him to socialize. He would be so lost without her and university probably wouldn't be half as fun either. By himself, university was just sleep, study, and work out.

“Where do I put this?” Shane gestured to his empty bottle. He tried to not think about the bitter taste in his mouth.

Rose took the bottle and absentmindedly placed it by the couch along with her empty cup. Wordlessly, she took Shane by the wrist and dragged him towards the crowd of people dancing in the living room. He shot Rose a nervous look. She knew full well that off-ice, Shane was as graceful as a fish out of water. With a smile, she took both of Shane's hands and placed them on her waist while she hooked her arms around his neck. They both slowly moved to the music, much more slowly than was appropriate for the music.

Shane looked into her blue eyes, trying to focus on his best friend's presence rather than how the bass of the booming music settled in his chest. Rose looked back gleefully, resting her forehead on his shoulder.

"Thank you for coming," she said before pressing a kiss to his cheek.

Shane smiled at her. "Only for you."

Their moment was suddenly interrupted by the loud cheers that erupted. They both looked up to find the entire Redbirds team had entered the house. They were large and commanding. Somehow, Shane immediately locked eyes with Ilya, who was staring at him and Rose. Shane couldn't read Ilya's expression.

"Go get your man," Rose whispered into his ear.

"He's not my man." Shane was quick to retort.

Rose shot him another knowing look. But what he said was true. He didn't know what to call him and Ilya. Were they friends? Maybe by definition. For all he knew, Shane was just Ilya's unofficial, unpaid English tutor.

Before Shane could speak, someone tumbled into the two of them, barking "watch where you're going!"

"You bumped into us!" Rose exclaimed.

Despite Shane's own thumping heart, he held Rose closer and wedged himself between Rose and the guy. He looked like he was a football player, most definitely alpha. He smelled of nothing but alcohol, sweat, and raging pheromones.

Jackson Smith, McGill's star quarterback, had just practically fell on top of both Rose and Shane, and glared at them as if it was their fault. Smith was 6'4 and two hundred pounds of sheer brawn and ego with a mop of dark hair. Ilya watched it from a distance, glued to his spot because he was too mesmerized by what Shane was wearing. He had never seen Shane wear something so... suave. That seemed like the correct word to use. Under the pulsing lights of the frat house, Ilya was painfully aware of the tight muscles under Shane's shirt. So that was what Shane was hiding under his hoodies and sweaters. Ilya felt a little stupid wearing his bright green t-shirt now.

He shook his head. He had just come from drinking with his teammates, maybe that was why he was so ready to pounce on Shane.

Before Ilya stepped further into the house, Shane stepped forward, holding Rose to his side. "Let's move on now, okay?"

“Move on? You guys could’ve caused me to twist my ankle. You guys could have ended my career? How would you feel if your careers were ended by a bunch of nobodies?” Smith prodded his finger into Shane’s chest as he spoke.

Shane stood still, eyes fiercely staring back and clearly unaffected by Smith’s bravado. It was hot and Ilya didn’t have the guts to admit that he was getting a rush from watching this. Was this what Shane was like when he played hockey? Loyal to his teammates and unwavering?

By now, the music had turned down just as the talking had hushed. There was a fight brewing and everyone seemed to be zeroing in on what was unfolding before them.

“Jackson, come on buddy.” One of his friends tried to pull him away but he didn’t budge.

Ilya was sure Smith was just overreacting like this because he was embarrassed that he tripped and fell in front of so many people.

“Say. You’re. Sorry.”

“What for? You fell,” Shane said seriously, completely unbothered by the fact that Smith had several more inches and pounds on him. “You should be apologizing to us. You almost hurt a woman.”

Jackson barked out a laugh. “I don’t have to do shit. Come on. I’m waiting.”

“Sorry to say that you won’t be getting shit from us either.”

Ilya couldn’t make out what Rose said in Shane’s ear but the two of them turned to leave. Before they could take a few steps, Smith laughed, exclaiming, “Yeah, listen to your bitch!”

It happened so fast that Ilya almost missed it. Shane decked Jackson Smith—Redbirds’ quarterback Jackson Smith—so hard that he was on the floor, seemingly passed out or dazed by the contact. Jackson’s buddies swarmed around his body while Rose led Shane away.

“What the fuck,” Tremblay muttered beside Ilya. He was recovering well, though still not at one hundred percent yet.

Ilya needed to go—he needed to move or something. He found himself watching the events unfold with too much enjoyment. This was not good.

Without giving it much thought, Ilya found himself scooping a bunch of ice from the punch bowl into a cup and wandering outside, party long forgotten. He wasn’t sure if the party could recover from something so embarrassing for the football team—this was their frat house after all.

Outside, he found Shane and Rose huddled underneath a street lamp. Rose was talking to Shane while inspecting his hand. “You really didn’t have to do that for me, but it was really hot having a guy protect and fight for me. Still, do not do that again. You just made yourself public enemy number one at your first party!”

Ilya winced. Were Shane and Rose more than friends? He had already seen Rose kiss Shane twice in the three times that Ilya had seen them together. It didn't really matter. All he wanted to do was spend more time with Shane.

"I did have to do that," Shane replied matter of factly, face a little pink from shock. "He was being a dick."

"Most guys are dicks." Rose spotted Ilya approaching them and smiled. "Isn't that right, Ilya? *Most* guys are dicks."

"Huge dicks," Ilya agreed, earning a stifled chuckle from the two. "For your hand." He passed the cup to Shane, whose knuckles were a raging red.

Shane mumbled a "thank you" while Rose continued: "See Ilya is not a dick. Such a sweetheart for bringing you ice."

This only made Ilya more confused. Never in his life had he been so confused over a girl and guy before. Even when he found out that he was bisexual, he was just curious about guys and followed that curiosity with his coach's son. Boom. Bisexual. He easily accepted that he was into both. Ilya was not interested in Rose, though she was beautiful. The only interest he had in her was whether she and Shane were together.

"And for saving me, I will not force you to go back into the party," Rose said.

"Are you sure you should be going back in there?" Shane asked. "You were also involved."

"Are you kidding me? I'd never let a man ruin my night, and I did not get all dressed up for nothing. Plus, I have Miles. He'll protect me."

Shane looked at Rose, brows knitted with concern. Once again, he looked like a fierce kitten.

"I'll be fine," Rose assured. "If not, I'll call so my hero can save me again."

Shane rolled his eyes at her, which made Ilya's stomach flutter. It was the same kind of eye roll that he gave Ilya, which could only mean that Shane liked Ilya more than he had thought.

"Okay fine, go. Call me if you need anything."

"Thank you. I'll text you when I get home. Would you please look after him, Ilya? Make sure he doesn't get into any more fights?"

Ilya gave her a salute as Rose slipped back into the party. His stomach still didn't settle now that it was just the two of them. "Is ice helping?"

"Yeah, thanks." Shane's face was still a pink, which could only mean that he was a bit buzzed. Ilya guessed that Shane's limit was probably one beer, which was so endearing. Such a big man and such a low tolerance.

"You could go back to the party too, you know?" Shane looked up at Ilya. "You don't have to stick around."

“No can do. I was given strict order to keep party animal contained.”

“No, you were told to make sure that I didn’t get into any fights,” Shane rebutted with a smile tugging at his lips.

“Same difference. So what, you box now too?”

“No. I mean I did a little bit of karate when I was little, before I really got into hockey. But no, I don’t box. I just don’t like seeing people picking on others for no reason. It’s not fair. It’s just needlessly cruel.” Shane absentmindedly started sipping from the cup that Ilya gave him, no longer icing his knuckles.

Ilya wasn’t sure if Shane had ever talked about himself for this long before. He was most definitely tipsy, and Ilya liked this less guarded version of Shane. Still, none of Shane’s words were slurred. He spoke with perfect pronunciation.

“It is. Smith is not only dick but also big bully. That’s why he’s quarterback. He would be much better on the offensive line but he bullied the team into being quarterback. Very impressive that you stood up to him.”

Shane sat down on the curb, legs suddenly giving out. “Now I’ve got the whole football team coming for me, don’t I?”

“Is okay. Hockey team will protect you.”

“You will?” Shane looked up, eyes wide. God, Ilya just wanted to kiss the freckles on his face.

Ilya couldn’t help but mutter, “*Very pretty.*”

“You know I can’t understand you when you speak Russian, Ilya. English? Got it. French? Fluent. Japanese. I don’t know, maybe, I guess. Depends on how fast you talk.” Shane Hollander was now pouting on the side of the road.

A chuckle left Ilya’s lips as he joined Shane on the curb. Maybe the adrenaline was wearing off and the combination of Shane being exhausted and tipsy was making him loose lipped. It was amusing to see the different sides of Shane in such a short period of time. Ilya would have to be lying if said it didn’t turn him on a little bit.

“I said you’re very pretty,” he admitted. He was too sober to be having this conversation. Sure, he was a little buzzed, but not buzzed enough. But it was very likely that Shane wouldn’t remember this by tomorrow. Even if he did, Ilya supposed that he didn’t mind either.

“Fuck off, Ilya. I’m not pretty.”

“You are. Very beautiful.” Ilya pressed his hands between his legs for fear that he would reach out and trace Shane’s freckles. He also found out that Shane had a couple of faded scars along his brow and jaw—he wanted to erase them with kisses and fight whoever did that to Shane.

Shane didn't answer, just glared at Ilya.

"How many drinks did you have?" Ilya asked.

"Just the one, but I've only eaten one granola bar today. I'm not usually this big of a lightweight."

"One granola bar for entire day?" That answered many questions in Ilya's head while also ringing alarm bells. "Shane, that's not healthy."

"It's fine. I was studying anyways. It's not like I was training hard or anything. I don't need to eat like I used to."

"Shane, you are training your brain. Even if you aren't exercising, you still need to eat. Come on, stand up. We're going to get food now." Ilya took the cup from Shane. He didn't need Shane to keep sipping on it. It was mostly ice but since it came from the punch bowl, there was still some alcohol in there.

Ilya brought Shane to a little burger joint close to campus. He figured that Shane would probably need something greasy and calorically dense to help soak up the alcohol in his stomach. The entire place was suspiciously empty. It was just them and the cashier. Maybe everyone was out celebrating and partying. While Shane sat in a booth, Ilya ordered for the both of them. Ilya has seen first hand how picky Shane can be with his food, so he ordered a plain, double-patty hamburger combo for Shane and a double cheeseburger combo for himself.

Selfishly, Ilya sat beside Shane instead of sitting in front of him when he came back with the food. From here, he could smell a bit of Shane's warm scent. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't put his finger on exactly what Shane smelled like. Yes, a fall day, but it was much sweeter than that. Much more appealing too.

Shane went for the pop first, instantly smiling after taking a sip. "You got me ginger ale."

"I think you drink that more than you drink water." It was a lie, of course. Ilya has only seen Shane drink it twice.

Ilya dug in but noticed that Shane hadn't started eating. "You should eat even if you're not hungry. Not good to be hungover tomorrow."

"It's not that. I just don't really eat burgers."

"Shane Hollander," Ilya said flatly. "Are you telling me you do not eat hamburgers?"

Shane replied with a blank stare.

"Eat. One will not kill you. In fact, it will be healthier for your body if you do eat it. Your big muscles will atrophy if you do not eat."

"Atrophy. Wow." There were those doe eyes again. But that seemed to satisfy Shane, who took a hearty bite of his burger and groaned in satisfaction. "This is so much better than the

food I normally eat.”

“Yes, I’ve seen the food you eat. Is like bird food,” Ilya chuckled.

“Wait.” Shane put his hand on Ilya’s forearm. “You have sauce on your face.”

Before Ilya had time to react, Shane’s soft lips were on the corner of his own mouth, warm tongue gliding over where Ilya could only guess had the sauce. As Shane pulled away, Ilya hoped Shane didn’t notice how Ilya had to palm at his own crotch to prevent any movement down there. Shane did not need to see what he just did Ilya. No one needed to. Ilya fidgeted in his own seat, trying to picture his father and his disappointed scowl. He hoped that if his father could only do one good thing for Ilya in his life, it would be to help Ilya stop his boner right now.

Blissfully unfazed, Shane started to work through his fries. His face was still a little flushed from being buzzed. Ilya didn’t know how he could be so nonchalant after doing *that*.

Only after the coast was clear did Ilya begin eating again. He couldn’t bring himself to even glance at Shane. Instead, he just pretended that he was eating the best burger in the world, so good that it needed his undivided attention.

They didn’t talk much after that, even when they started to walk back to their dormitories. Shane seemed to perk up a little bit, though Ilya caught sight of the his hand and how it was starting to bloom with purple. He probably needed to remind Shane to ice it before he went to sleep tonight. Ilya tried not to tease Shane too much, but it was much more for Ilya’s sanity rather than Shane’s ego. He didn’t want to lead his heart down the wrong path. Ilya was already “down bad,” as his teammates called it. They didn’t know that he’s was obsessing over Shane—all they knew was that he was obsessively texting someone, probably a girl. Ilya didn’t want to go further downwards. Still, he was buzzing as if he had just scored a goal during overtime.

Ilya wasn’t too proud to admit to himself that maybe he was a little bit scared by his emotions. He had never felt like this about anyone before. Not Sasha, not even Svetlana. But just as terrifying as it was, it was also... good. Since he met Shane, his mind wasn’t as occupied with his father or Alexei, the expectations from his coach and team seemed a little lighter, and he felt happy. He could hold his head up higher, shoulders less burdened.

Shane was good for him.

Once again, they started to climb the hill their residences were on. This time, they were not taking the main path, so their walk was more concealed by greenery. Even though Shane was probably no longer tipsy, Ilya kept an eye on Shane in his periphery. Just in case.

“Hey, Ilya?” Shane asked quietly, suddenly breaking up their silence.

Ilya stopped walking and looked at Shane. He sounded serious.

“I just realized I never asked you what you were studying.”

This never occurred to Ilya either. He supposed he was so eager to get to know Shane that he never revealed parts of himself. “Commerce. Is good for getting permanent residency.”

The truth was that he couldn’t have left Russia faster and he’s never looked back since. It was only his brother and father who kept parts of Ilya tethered to his motherland. Ever since his mother passed, Russia meant nothing to Ilya.

Suddenly, the cross around his neck felt heavy.

“Do you like studying it?”

Ilya shrugged. “I have never liked studying. Unless it’s watching hockey to see how to destroy my opponents. Then I love studying.”

Shane laughed before falling silent again. “Can I tell you a secret?”

Ilya nodded, awaiting whatever Shane felt safe enough to confess.

“I don’t like studying either. I just want to be good at something, and I’ll do whatever it takes to get there.”

His words almost knocked the wind out of Ilya. He didn’t realize that Shane saw so little of himself. What wasn’t Shane Hollander good at? Self-awareness, apparently.

“Is not true. You are good at many things. English, for one.”

The quiet of the night settled upon them. Shane looked into Ilya’s eyes, searching for sincerity, with an almost defeated gaze. Even with the joke added at the end, Ilya was only telling the truth. It didn’t take a genius to tell that Shane Hollander excelled at everything he attempted.

“You do know you don’t always have to be so nice to me, right? First you-”

Ilya couldn’t take this anymore. With both hands, he grabbed the collar of Shane’s shirt and gently pulled him close. Ilya’s lips met Shane’s frozen ones, though it only took a second for Shane to open his mouth, eagerly letting his tongue drag along Ilya’s lips for entry. It was intoxicating for Ilya to be kissing Shane like this, and even more so to have Shane be so excited to kiss Ilya back.

“You ask too many questions,” Ilya said as they pulled away to breathe.

“Sorry.” Under the dim night light, it was clear that Shane’s face was glowing with pink.

Ilya finally let himself brush his thumb along Shane’s freckles. His skin was so soft, just like Ilya anticipated. Shane closed his eyes underneath Ilya’s touch.

God, Ilya was really “down bad.”

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Shane freaks out over the events of St. Patrick's Day and realizes that no matter how hard he tries to deny himself a certain hockey player, he just can't.

Shane was a man of routine. Every morning, he woke up at five am to run around campus, regardless of sun rain, or snow. Every other day, he then went to the gym. On days he wasn't at the gym, he did yoga in his tiny dorm room in the too-small space between his desk and bed. Even though he wasn't training for anything in particular anymore, he liked having routine and predictability. The added bonus was that all of this exercise didn't make him look like the pathetic omega he felt like.

This morning, Shane's routine went out the window, as did an entire night of sleep. He tossed and turned in his twin bed for the first few hours. He was wide awake when he received a text message from Rose at 1:12 am, notifying him that she had gotten home safely with Miles. Then he decided that his mind was being too loud with worry and diverted his attention to preparing his midterm. Still, as he tried to review the different principles of atomic structure, his mind was elsewhere. He already hated his studies but as far as his brain was concerned, Shane was still outside with his lips pressed against Ilya's.

What was worse was that he also couldn't stop thinking about the burger joint either, or the fact that Ilya had called Shane "pretty." *Very pretty*. His mind was flipping through different scenarios he had with Ilya. It was all just Ilya—it was only Ilya.

Shane was definitely not tipsy when he licked the sauce off of Ilya's mouth. That was the problem, and it scared Shane to no end. He acted so uncharacteristically himself. So brash and thoughtless. They were out in public and anyone could have seen them. It wasn't Shane who kissed Ilya. It was definitely some sex-crazed demon who took over Shane's body who did it. A demon who was drunk on Ilya's scent the entire night.

It was a well-known fact that Shane didn't drink coffee. Never had. He was always a green tea person. But, the moment he smelled Ilya for the first time, he might as well have turned into a coffee connoisseur. The moment Ilya joined them outside of the frat house, Shane could smell him. Ilya was radiating with his warm scent, with no smells of cheap soap and cigarettes discernible. It was abundantly clear that Ilya's scent was heightened with concern, only making it nearly dizzying for Shane.

Maybe he was a little tipsy from the beer he chugged on a near-empty stomach, but it was definitely Ilya who made Shane drunk.

This was not normal. At least, Shane thought, he had a semblance of normalcy after they kissed. He was normal right?

Shane couldn't breathe as he pulled away. Ilya's hazel eyes were looking directly into his own, rife with emotions that Shane couldn't read. He just hoped that disgust wasn't one of the emotions. Something about the sudden intensity of Ilya's scent told him that was not the case.

"That's one more thing that you're good at," Ilya spoke, voice suddenly lower and gravely.

Pulling his head back, Shane arched his eyebrow. He practically had to peel his eyes away from Ilya's lips, which were glistening with Shane's spit. Ilya Rozanov had just kissed him so fiercely that Shane couldn't form a thought and process what was just said. He just wanted Ilya to kiss him again. Nothing else mattered. Shane didn't even care about who he was or where they were at the moment. All he knew was that he wanted to feel the warmth of Ilya's lips against his own again.

A hearty chuckle escaped Ilya's lips, and Shane's heart fluttered. "Want me to remind you?"

This time, it was Shane who reached out first. His fingers wrapped around the soft curls of Ilya's sandy hair as he pulled Ilya in for another kiss. A low groan rumbled through Ilya's throat, which Shane practically drank up. Slowly, Ilya's warm hands traversed around Shane's body, feeling almost every muscle and curve underneath his clothes. Shane writhed underneath his touch, wanting more and less at the same time. He knew that if Ilya touched him like this for longer, Shane wouldn't be able to control himself. Much to his dismay, Shane could already feel how wet he was getting.

It was alarming how much Shane was letting himself enjoy Ilya. No, it was terrifying. In his life, Shane had never let himself be this restrained. Everything was planned and prepared for to a T. He always prioritized structure over everything else.

At the same time, Shane had also never wanted something so badly, aside from hockey. And that failed spectacularly and blew up in his face. The world of hockey made sure that Shane would never be able to step on the ice again.

Before Shane could further spiral, Ilya was pressing a trail of kisses against the side of Shane's face, eventually stopping at his scent gland. Thank god Shane's knees were locked, or else he would have melted when Ilya delicately licked over his scent gland. The sensation was so overwhelming that Shane made a noise dangerously close to purring. As Ilya continued to work on Shane's jugular, Shane suddenly caught a whiff of his own scent. It was dull but if he could notice it, there was no way Ilya didn't notice it.

Reality crashed upon Shane like a tsunami.

They couldn't keep doing this. They had to stop.

“Ilya,” he managed to choke out. Shane even patted him on the back for his attention.

Instantly, Ilya withdrew his head, though he kept his arms wrapped around Shane. It seemed like he wasn’t ready to let go yet. Once again, his eyes settled on Shane’s. This time they were pooling with worry, as if he were worried that he had hurt Shane some how.

“What is it?” His voice was rife with concern.

“Not here.” Shane shook his head. “Not now.”

Without any further thought, Ilya released his grasp around Shane. The absence of Ilya’s warmth was immediately palpable. Shane wanted him back, but he knew that he couldn’t have Ilya.

Even though they kept to themselves as they continued their trek, Shane couldn’t help but notice that Ilya was walking closer to him—much closer than he was used to. Shane didn’t say anything about it; he liked it. His mind was still a little woozy but he knew that he had done the right thing. He and Ilya could not be doing that, especially not out in public.

Once in front of McConnell Hall, Ilya looped a finger around the gold chain that Shane was wearing and leaned dangerously close. “You are going to kill me, Shane.”

Just like that, Ilya walked to his own dorm by himself.

When Shane reached his room, his phone lit up with a text from Ilya.

Ilya: ice your hand

Ilya: no swelling allowed

Shane’s phone buzzed, snapping him out of his thoughts. It was Ilya. Shane fought with himself, not wanting to reply right away to not seem too desperate, but also not wanting to take too long to not seem distant. It was the latter thought that won, though there was also a part of himself that begged him to check so that he could make sure that Ilya wasn’t repulsed by the thought of Shane by now.

Ilya: u awake? hungover?

A warm feeling started to grow in Shane's chest. His hand ached as he typed. He didn't ice his hand as instructed because he was too occupied with losing his mind over the one who was doing the instructing.

Shane: No, thanks to your burger I'm not.

Ilya: not thanks to burger.

Ilya: thanks to me. i got 4 u ;)

Shane: Thank you, Ilya :)

This was dangerous. Shane could not be so consumed by a boy that he blatantly ignores his own rules. First, he ignored his food rules. Then, he tossed his rules for romance and sexuality right out of the window. His old team made it abundantly clear that the world would never accept him as he was. A gay omega was only a nuisance. But then there was Ilya, who didn't care who Shane was. He only wanted Shane for Shane.

A little voice in Shane's mind said that Ilya only liked Shane so much because he had no idea who Shane was. Shane argued back that it was as clear as day that Ilya was fine with Shane being gay. It was now Shane who was confused about Ilya's sexuality but it was fine. Ilya liked Shane, end of story. The real question was that would Ilya think of Shane any differently if he *knew* Shane?

It was all Shane's fault for being so secretive. Everything was a mess because of him.

Shane practically threw himself onto his bed. He blamed his stupid omega hormones for all of this. He was genetically disposed to want an alpha like Ilya. Shane couldn't have hated his designation more.

The guilt and shame didn't settle in Shane's chest for long. Shane learned very quickly that when it came to Ilya Rozanov, he was near shameless. It was nearly laughable. All of the walls and rules that Shane had made were crumbling just for a boy.

Shane first noticed this change in behaviour when he walked past Ilya on campus one day. He was busy, trying to book it to his chemistry class. His biology class ended on time but Shane stayed back to ask his professor if there were any opportunities for him to participate in any lab meetings with graduate students. Ilya, on the other hand, was walking with some of his teammates as Shane passed by. Mid-conversation, Ilya winked at Shane. Even in his fervour, Shane could still feel his face burning. It was embarrassing how easily he blushed.

The next time, it was Shane who acted. He even surprised himself—his body moved before his brain could generate the idea. Ilya was standing outside a classroom, leaning against the wall with boredom in his eyes, no doubt waiting for the previous to class to empty out before

entering. Having just come out of his own classroom, Shane walked dangerously close past Ilya, letting his shoulder graze Ilya's. Shane didn't have the courage to look back to see what Ilya's reaction was. Somehow, he was confident that Ilya knew it was Shane who walked by and was left with a smile on his face—the small, nearly concealed kind of smile that Ilya had when he was truly content.

And then Shane ended up in Ilya Rozanov's bed.

April 2015

After weeks of arduous waiting, Shane finally got his chemistry midterm back. 79/100. He was one point away from an A minus. In Shane's books, an A minus was another label for not good enough. A B plus? That meant that Shane had failed. Utterly tanked. A B plus was not going to get him into medical school. He had to do more. He had to be better.

Upon receiving the midterm, Shane marched himself to the library and planned to stay put until he understood everything he had gotten wrong, or until the security guards kicked him out. Whichever came first. He was not going to fail on the next midterm, which was just next week.

Settling down in a musty, windowless corner of the Redpath Library Building, Shane neatly arranged his laptop, notebook, pencil case, index cards, failed midterm, and water bottle on the desk so that everything he needed for the next while would be readily at his disposal. His seat wasn't the most comfortable, it squeaked with every movement and didn't provide enough back support, but Shane was going to suck it up and deal with it. He had dealt with much more uncomfortable things before.

While reviewing the principles of atomic structure again—he knew he didn't study it thoroughly enough the first time—Shane's eyes began to hurt, throb even. He begrudgingly pulled out his glasses. Ever since he joined university, he noticed that his eyes easily fatigued. Books suddenly became blurry. Screens were hard to read. Sure, in small doses, Shane could see things close up just fine. But after a while, he needed his glasses. Rose said they made him look "cute," but as far as Rose was concerned, Shane could wear a garbage bag and still look cute. Presentable, however... Rose would do anything to ensure that Shane looked presentable when they went out together to social gatherings, just like she did on St. Patrick's Day.

Shane slapped his face, trying to prevent his mind from wandering to what happened that day. Chemistry. He needed to focus on scientific chemistry and not whatever chemical and biological reactions happened to Shane's body when he was around a certain Russian alpha.

By the time he moved onto the next topic, Shane's brain already felt somewhat fried. This was not good. He needed to focus but his stomach gurgled. Knowing that he already ate his

last emergency granola bar, Shane took a swig of water before looking at the angry red Xs on his midterm to see where he went wrong with radiation chemistry. He wanted to scream.

Shane really meant it when he told Ilya that he didn't like studying. Of course, there were certain things that Shane wanted to know everything about—for things like that, like hockey, Shane could easily lose himself in the topic and find himself in rabbit holes that most people haven't even heard of. But when it came to school, Shane felt like he was continuously running into wall after wall. With the current war path he was on, he was looking at three more years of undergrad, four years of med school, and then several years in residency. Shane would probably be in his thirties by the time he officially became a doctor. His insides turned at the thought of that, though it could easily just be the hunger churning in his stomach.

Becoming a doctor felt right for Shane, even if the arduous task of becoming one seemed unappealing at best. After his hockey career was snatched out of his hands, Shane decided he wanted to become something respectable and doctor seemed to fit that requirement. He knew he had the tenacity and had seen enough blood, gore, and injuries in his life to know that he could stomach it. However, Shane lacked the one thing people needed to become a doctor: the desire to become one.

Overwhelmed with frustration, Shane rubbed his eyes. If he weren't in a public library, he probably would have a mini freak out. But he promised himself that he wouldn't leave until he mastered everything that he had gotten wrong on his midterm.

Before the war Shane wagered with himself could continue, Shane picked up the smell of coffee and cigarettes. Instantly, he froze in his spot. He must be imagining things. Absentmindedly flipping through his midterm booklet, Shane could swear the the aroma was becoming more pungent. His heartbeat quickened and his hands became... clammy. This had never happened to Shane before. His body has never reacted so viscerally to something or someone before.

Someone plopped into the seat next to Shane, but Shane was too scared to look up. He pretended as if the periodic number for thallium was the most riveting thing he'd ever seen before. Still, Shane found himself taking a little peak over the top of his paper. Right beside him, Ilya sat in a leather jacket with a large Tim Horton's paper bag.

"You wear glasses," Ilya nonchalantly said.

"You're not supposed to eat in a library." Shane immediately took off his glasses.

Ilya shot Shane a look. There were several people eating in the library as they spoke. Some eating fruit or granola bars, while others were eating full on meals. Ilya opened the bag and took out two sandwiches, potato wedges, and timbits. He took one of the sandwiches and plopped it right in front of Shane. "Eat."

It was Shane's turn to shoot Ilya a look now. "I'm busy."

"Yes, and this is for your brain training session." Ilya began unwrapping his sandwich.

Shane did have to admit that the food smelled good. He couldn't remember the last time he had Tim Hortons. When he played hockey, his teammates' moms frequently brought Timmies after practices.

"Is turkey club. No bacon. Light mayonnaise." Ilya had already demolished half of his sandwich by now and was moving onto the potato wedges.

Shane couldn't help but smile. The fact that Ilya had been so attuned to Shane's own dietary preferences and limitations warmed his heart. "Thank you," Shane said before taking a bite. "What are you doing here, by the way? Do I have my personal food delivery guy now?"

"This is library, yes? I'm here to study." Ilya grabbed his backpack and pulled out a textbook just to show Shane.

After eating, Shane's senses had finally returned to him. Hunger, as it turns out, was a big obstacle for his brain. Suddenly, concepts were easier to understand and everything just seemed to fall into place. While Shane studied, it was clear that Ilya wasn't doing the same. For one, he was on the same page that he had started on nearly an hour ago. Sure, English wasn't his first language but Ilya and Shane were in the same English class, so Shane knew Ilya's proficiency and how it was getting better every single day. Plus, Shane could see that Ilya was sneaking glances at him every so often.

"Study," Shane had said to Ilya upon catching him staring. He gave the hockey player a playful shove.

Ilya smiled. "I am."

"Study your textbook."

"You should put your glasses back on." Ilya tapped his own cheekbone. "You are struggling to read. You squint when you read."

"Stalker," Shane huffed before putting his glasses back on. "Happy now?"

Ilya said nothing, just turned back to his textbook again.

By the time Shane was testing himself on the material that he had just reviewed, Ilya had fallen asleep. Maybe. Shane wasn't one hundred percent sure. He looked like he was still reading. He was on a new page now, eyes half open.

Shane held back the urge to laugh. Instead, he first waved his hand in front of Ilya, making sure that he wasn't awake. When he was sure that his study partner was fast asleep, Shane may have taken a picture or two. It was just too good to not capture. After putting his phone away, Shane decided that even though he hadn't completely mastered everything—he was a lot more confident about his knowledge—he wouldn't hold Ilya hostage anymore.

Loudly, Shane closed his laptop with a thud. Ilya shook awake and muttered something in Russian under his breath, but Shane pretended not to notice. Shane diverted his attention to

putting his possessions away instead. In the corner of his eye, he could see Ilya pretending to finish reading a sentence before putting his textbook away too. Shane feigned ignorance.

“Thank you for studying with me. You were a great study partner,” Shane said with an air of amusement.

“It is true that I am a great study partner. I am also great at many other things.”

Shane looked at Ilya blankly, though he was secretly humoured, as he always was, by Ilya. “Come on, let’s go.”

Night time had cloaked the sky. It seemed that anytime Shane was outside with Ilya, it was dark out, which Shane preferred. The campus was still somewhat lively, with some students just finishing their classes, others just congregating around on campus grounds. It was oddly quiet though. Shane just focused on their silent footsteps.

“You sure study a lot for someone who doesn’t like it,” Ilya chirped.

Shane sighed deeply. “I have to... and it’s not that bad.”

“Hmm yes because the periodic table is so exciting.”

“How about you, mister? What did you learn today?”

“Many things. You will learn about my studies later.”

Cocking his head to the side, Shane had no idea what Ilya meant.

Ilya, however, was very pleased with himself for having said this. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his leather jacket and quickened his pace, leaving Shane behind in his confusion.

As if on a mission, Ilya continued with his fast pace the entire walk back to their dorms. Shane didn’t know that having what seemed like five inches of difference between their height would make such a difference in their strides. While Ilya was leisurely walking in a fast pace, Shane felt like he was almost jogging. It wasn’t that Shane couldn’t keep up—he just wasn’t used to walking so quickly.

He briefly considered just walking, leaving Ilya to his own devices. But if Ilya could tough it out for several hours in the library for Shane, then Shane would be a little sticky with sweat for Ilya.

“There’s something in my room I want to show you,” Ilya suddenly said as McConnell Hall came into view.

“Ilya, I am sure that your room looks exactly the same as mine,” Shane replied, heartbeat thumping from the brisk walk. “The university isn’t exactly creative when it comes to interior design.”

“Is not furniture I want to show you.”

Shane's mouth formed into an O shape. Was this it? Was it finally happening? Shane didn't know if he was going to throw up from fear or if his heart was going to burst from excitement.

"Shane. Talk to me. What are you thinking?"

"No, it's fine. I'll come to your room." Shane nodded. He was sure that his face was bright red, first from exertion and now from his overactive imagination.

Ilya stepped towards Shane, hands open. "You don't have to, but I did want to show you what I was studying and brainstorming."

Shane swallowed. Now that Ilya was so close, his scent was making it harder for Shane to think. "No, I want to come."

Ilya hummed an okay before leading Shane into his dorm.

Shane couldn't focus on anything, the lobby and stairs were all a blur. He was sure that it was pretty much exactly the same as his own building's. His mind was only buzzing with the thoughts of what was going to happen and it was quickly clouding with fear too. But it was fine. Students had their friends over all the time. It was normal and completely unsuspecting.

Ilya's dorm room was clean and well kept. There weren't any posters or possessions that screamed Ilya, though the scent of the room was undeniably Ilya's. There was, however, a packet of cigarettes and a lighter on top of Ilya's wardrobe. Shane would chide him about it later.

Now, Ilya closed the door behind Shane. Shane could only stand still like a scarecrow.

"So, what did you study that you wanted to show me?" Shane asked, voice awfully quiet.

Setting his backpack down, Ilya walked towards Shane, backing him up against the door. Ilya's warm and slightly calloused hand found its way to Shane's chin, and his hazel eyes looked at Shane's own with so much emotion and anticipation. His other hand lightly brushed against Shane's cheeks, tracing what Shane could only assume was his freckles. This was a lot for Shane to take in, who almost melted under Ilya's touch.

"If I could, I would kiss every freckle on your face."

Shane could feel the ghost of Ilya's lips against his face. He nearly shivered from feeling Ilya's hot breath against his skin.

While Shane was usually composed and patient, he just couldn't take this anymore. He craned his face just enough so that his lips hovered over Ilya's. "Then do it."

That seemed to wake Ilya up. Two gentle kisses were pressed on either side of Shane's face before Ilya kissed Shane with fierce devotion. So much for kissing every freckle. But Shane liked it this way. He couldn't wait any longer, eager to have Ilya all to himself.

Just like last time, their hands were quick to find each other's bodies. This time, they could peel off each other's clothes. Ilya's leather jacket came off first, revealing a sleeveless shirt underneath. Shane used the time in between their kisses to appreciate the musculature of Ilya's broad arms. Shane's hoodie and shirt both came off in one swift tug.

Ilya muttered something in Russian the moment Shane was topless, followed by his hands running all over Shane's torso. Shane's body felt like a live wire underneath Ilya's touch, every point of contact sent him reeling.

Soon, with tumbling steps, they made their way towards Ilya's bed without breaking contact. Ilya sat down at the edge, pulling Shane onto his lap. Shane nearly let out a groan from just feeling how hard Ilya was underneath him. Instinctively, Shane started moving his hips and instantly began to drink up the sounds coming from Ilya's mouth. In response, Ilya's hands fumbled with the button of Shane's jeans. A loud moan escaped Shane's mouth as Ilya's hand wrapped around Shane's member and started to move. Instinctively, Shane nudged Ilya's scent gland with his nose, causing a momentary pause in Ilya's movements.

Shane started pawing at Ilya's waistband, mumbling "more" underneath his breath.

In one swift movement, Ilya pinned Shane on his bed with his weight. Pants, underwear, and socks were torn off with little regard. Ilya climbed back on top of Shane, his weight feeling soothing and electric at the same time.

"You still want?" Ilya's breath fanned over face. His hazel eyes looked dead into Shane's.

Shane smiled unabashedly, holding his gaze. "I still want."

Ilya was as patient and gentle with Shane as he was anytime they were together. He pressed a trail of adoring kisses down Shane's body, starting at his cheeks and ending with peppering pecks on Shane's inner thighs.

It was undeniable that Shane was nervous. He had never gone this far with someone before. The last time he was intimate with a guy, his entire world shattered before him. Imploded in seconds. But, it was Ilya he was with. Ilya, who never showed Ilya nothing but kindness and passion.

As Ilya's tongue found its way to Shane's entrance, Shane's entire body froze. He wanted to enjoy this—he had dreamed of this, even if he denied himself of the images of Ilya that he had conjured in his mind.

"Relax," Ilya said, hands firmly holding onto Shane's thighs. "Breathe."

Shane took a deep breath and tried to focus on nothing but the way Ilya's tongue worked on his hole.

Then what happened between the two of them was like magic. Ilya had opened up Shane so much that he was senselessly using cliches. Shane was on both suppressors and blockers, but they still used a condom. That was the only way that Shane would be able to enjoy himself without losing his mind. But that night, Ilya had shown Shane that his sexuality wasn't the

demon that Shane (or his teammates) had made it out to be. Shane enjoyed the way that Ilya had made him feel and it would be a lie if Shane didn't admit that it terrified him.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Time goes on, but they stay connected with each other.

May 2015

Shane: Are you staying for the summer?

Ilya: have to go back to Russia

Ilya: business calls :(

Ilya: u?

Shane: Yup. I'm taking summer courses and volunteering at the hospital.

Shane: I have to get ahead.

Ilya: :P

Ilya: boring

Shane: Shut up.

Shane: It's a practical thing to do.

Shane: Hopefully all goes well in Russia.

Ilya: probably not.

Ilya: have fun at hospital. try not to think about germs.

Shane: Asshole. >:(

September 2015

Ilya: u still live on campus?

Shane: Yes! I'm rooming with Rose and her friend Miles now.

Ilya: her friend Miles?

Shane: Yeah, they're in the same major and are both in the drama club.

Ilya: okay.

Shane: What about you?

Ilya: got an apartment with my teammate downtown

Shane: Oh cool! I've always heard the apartments downtown have a great view.

Ilya: Mr. Real Estate

Shane: ...

Ilya: want to see the view?

Shane: Not so much anymore.

Ilya: no shaneeee

Ilya: come see view

Shane: Maybe.

Ilya: 191-1221 24 ave

Shane: Fine.

Shane: See you later.

October 2015

Ilya: drama club halloween party

Shane: ???

Ilya: u coming?

Shane: Unfortunately.

Ilya: XD

Shane: Rose is making me dress up.

Shane: She says that stressed nerd is not an acceptable costume...

Ilya: rose is right

Ilya: what is ur costume?

Shane: Promise not to laugh?

Ilya: maybe

Shane: Ilya.

Ilya: Shane.

Ilya: what is costume?

Shane: Milo Thatch from Atlantis (animated film)

Shane: You?

Ilya: u will have to come and find out ;)

Ilya had no idea who this Milo was but he wanted to personally thank every person who had ever worked on that *Atlantis* film when his eyes landed on Shane. Flowers for Rose seemed appropriate because she definitely played a part in Shane's appearance. He was in a tight white muscle tank, loose cargo pants, and a leather belt. Every muscle in Shane's upper body was visible, and Ilya knew that it was going to be near impossible to keep his hands to himself all night. Above all, his hair was styled so it had more of a swept style and he wore his glasses. Those goddamn glasses. Ilya had been so occupied with Shane that fateful night in April that he had forgotten about all of the things he had planned to do to a bespectacled Shane while they were in the library. Still, the night had played out better than anything that Ilya could have ever thought of. Now, the universe gave Ilya a second chance on a golden platter. A redemption arc.

Ilya himself had dressed up as a gladiator, with a breastplate, leather skirt, cape, and plastic sword. He thought the entire idea of Halloween was a little stupid, but he saw how excited all of his teammates were to be dressed up as characters he had never heard of, so he wanted to join in on the fun. And surprisingly, he did find it somewhat fun. It was just a little different from when he dressed up for special occasions. Ilya decided that he would tolerate Halloween from now on.

Maybe it was the fact that it had been a few months—more than a few months—since Ilya had seen Shane, but he was thrumming with excitement. He felt giddy with excitement, which was more than he had felt in a long time. Summer in Russia was horrible, as it always

was. Ilya hadn't even planned to go back but he had to. His father was diagnosed with dementia and Ilya needed to help get things in order. "Getting things in order" was more so Alexei demanding things of him, leveraging Ilya's future career as a professional hockey player to ensure that he and their father would be well taken care of. If things went according to Alexei's plans, the only things that would get taken care of would be Alexei's nose and liver. Then September hit. Ilya's schoolwork was always what it was: boring and confusing. But it was Shane who was too busy with courses, labs, and volunteering, so they didn't get the chance to see each other until now.

But nothing else mattered now. Ilya had his eyes set on his target and nothing was going to get in his way now.

"Rozanov! Great goal last night!"

Ilya wasn't sure who talked to him, even if they try to greet him with a handshake. He muttered a quick thanks and kept his eyes on Shane, who was awkwardly greeting others (clearly Rose's friends) as he and Rose came in. Rose was in a tight purple dress with lime green scarf. It was reference to something Ilya didn't know.

It made Ilya strangely happy to see that Shane and Rose weren't in matching costumes. He had never watched *Atlantis* before, but there was no way that the purple dressed character Rose dressed as belonged to the same universe. Yes, Shane and Rose were friends, but Ilya and Svetlana were friends too—friends who fucked and loved each other deeply in a way that went against most conventions. He still wondered if they had the same kind of dynamic, but the differing costumes were a good sign that they were probably not.

Only a few feet away now, Shane seemed to have spotted Ilya and instantly started to flush with colour. Ilya certainly didn't miss the way that Shane's eyes moved up and down, scanning every inch of Ilya's body. Seeing Shane like this only made Ilya remember all of the ideas that he had conjured up in the library. Most ideas involved them being naked with Shane having nothing but his glasses on. Maybe they would even fog up a little bit.

"Hi Rose," Ilya said, pointedly ignoring Shane to rile him up.

"Hello, Mr. Gladiator. You're looking mighty handsome." Rose pulled him into a light hug, which Ilya reciprocated if not only to continue to tease Shane.

"You have a great eye." Ilya winked. "And you are?"

"Oh Daphne Blake from Scooby Doo. Miles is supposed to be my Fred Jones, but he'll be joining us later."

Ilya nodded as if he knew what she meant.

"And Shane looks super handsome, right?" Rose grabbed onto Shane's arm. "It took a bit, but I finally got his hair to cooperate with me."

Rose was good. She was being a perfect wingwoman, but she didn't know that Shane didn't need any support. Shane had already caught Ilya, hook, line, and sinker.

“Looks nice,” Ilya agreed, watching as Shane turned progressively more pink.

If Shane said the word, Ilya would leave the party right now. In fact, Ilya wholeheartedly knew that Shane would rather be anywhere but here—probably preferring to be back in his own room than a rowdy party. But, Ilya knew that if he played his cards right, he would be able to get Shane dripping with want. Only then would Ilya invite Shane back to his place to do all the things that he had imagined.

Ilya stood with them for a while before Rose slipped away to get them some drinks, no doubt with the motive to give Shane and Ilya some time together.

“Where’s your sword, gladiator?” Shane asked, still visibly pink.

Ilya pulled out his sword, which had been concealed by his cape. “You’re already asking for my sword? You just got here.”

“Fuck off.” Shane shoved Ilya, which Ilya didn’t mind at all since he was able to watch the way that Shane’s muscles flexed with the movement.

“I think you meant ‘fuck me,’” Ilya pouted.

Shane meant to stare daggers at Ilya, but all Ilya saw was an incredibly cute kitten in front of him. Ilya couldn’t wait to eat him out later.

Ilya leaned in, lips nearly grazing Shane’s ear. “We will stay at this weird halloween party for an hour. You will have a drink or two with Rose. I will try to get at least a little tipsy on shitty, watery Canadian alcohol. And then, we will meet outside and I will take you to my place.”

Shane licked his lips, saliva wetting his perfectly pink lips.

Ilya tried to ignore how he could smell hints of Shane’s sweet scent. “Deal?”

It seemed that Shane could only stiffly nod in response.

Ilya wanted to laugh at how endearing Shane looked but kept it locked inside his chest. People didn’t need to know how much he liked Shane. Hell, Shane didn’t even need to know how much Ilya liked him, even if Ilya was consumed by the thought of him.

Though it killed him a little, Ilya purposely met Shane a few minutes after the time he had arranged. Delayed gratification, or whatever it was they learned in class a while ago. Shane stood under a towering tree, which slightly concealed him. Still, Ilya could see that Shane was looking around, searching for him, while he fidgeted with his hands.

“You’re late,” were the first things Shane said.

The tips of Shane’s ears were red and his face was still pink. Ilya could only assume that Shane had obediently but disdainfully completed the assignment that Ilya had given him.

“And you’re still here,” Ilya played along. “Let’s go.”

The journey to Ilya's apartment was filled with charged silence. Ilya was also a man true to his words and had a cup or two of whatever alcoholic juice was made for the party. Still, the alcohol did nothing to dull his senses. He had waited to see Shane for months, and there he was, silently walking alongside Ilya like a lost puppy.

"Tremblay is out playing D&D tonight. He told me to 'not wait up' because they were going to play until the witching hour," Ilya said the moment they entered his apartment. He expected Shane would be worried about any unexpected company. What Ilya did not expect, however, was the speed in which Shane practically threw himself at Ilya.

Soft lips on Ilya's mouth and soft but firm tugs at Ilya's hair. Ilya thought that if he died right in this moment, he would die in a state of pure bliss. He had reached peak happiness right now.

Shane's glasses awkwardly pressed against both of their faces during their open-mouthed kisses. Even if it wasn't the most comfortable, Ilya wouldn't have it any other way. Ilya interfered any and all of Shane's attempts to remove the glasses, even letting out a growl at one point.

Ilya lifted Shane off of his feet, welcoming the embrace of Shane's legs wrapped around his waist. Slowly, he trudged over to his bedroom and then gently placed Shane onto his bed. Ilya suddenly found his costume to be too stupid—he couldn't remove things fast enough. The breastplate was suddenly too stiff for him to reach around and take off. Wordlessly, Shane rose to his feet and swiftly helped Ilya take off his clothes. Ilya wanted to kiss the little crease that formed in between Shane's eyebrows as he focused on unbuckling Ilya's cape. Luckily for both of them, Ilya had no more restraint tonight and freely used his lips to smooth out said crease.

"Ilya," Shane lightly chuckled, pressing his hand against Ilya's mouth. "Stop, I'm trying to help."

"And I'm trying to move things along," Ilya mumbled against Shane's hand.

As Ilya's garments landed onto the floor with a soft thud, Ilya was quick to unbuckle Shane's belt and also remove his shirt too. The moment Shane's skin was revealed, Ilya couldn't help but run his hands over the planes of smooth muscles that he had been thirsting over the entire night.

Ilya pressed Shane into his mattress and could have sworn that Shane had mumbled something to the effect of "alpha," but Ilya pretended not to hear. He just tried to focus on the happiness that bubbled within him because Shane was here and with him.

Their second time together was even better than their first because this time, Ilya knew that Shane liked to have free and easy access to Ilya's scent gland, just as Ilya liked to draw out however much of Shane's scent as he could. Ilya also knew that Shane liked to explore with his hands, particularly favouring digging his nails into Ilya's skin. The biggest lesson that Ilya learned, however, was that each time he saw Shane Hollander he was falling deeper and deeper into something that he wasn't quite ready to admit to himself yet.

And yes, Shane's glasses did stay on the entire time.

December 2015

Ilya: good luck with exams

Ilya: u can do this

Ilya: no need to be cramming at night

Ilya: u already know everything. could be prof.

Shane: Thanks! Good luck with your exams too!

Shane: You don't know that I know everything already. You're just saying things.

Ilya: no i know so

Ilya: is the truth

Shane: Okay, weirdo :]

Ilya: go to sleep

Shane: I will soon. Just one more chapter to go.

Ilya: Go. To. Sleep.

Shane: Goodnight, Ilya.

Ilya: u did not say if u will go to sleep

Shane: 10 more minutes.

Ilya: fine

Ilya: goodnight Shane

December 2015

Shane: Thank you for your reminder to go to sleep earlier the other night.

Shane: I am happy to report that I got 92/100 on that exam.

Ilya: all thanks to me

Shane: That's what I was going to say but I guess not anymore since you're being so cocky...

Iya: i knew u could do it

Shane: :)

January 2016

Shane: Merry Christmas!

Ilya: it is january no?

Ilya: u did not get any presents and want?

Shane: Yes, but I heard Russian Orthodox Christmas is January 7th. Did I get it wrong?

Ilya: no u r right

Ilya: thank you.

March 2016

Ilya: happy anniversary

Shane: ???

Shane: Did I miss something important?

Ilya: very important

Ilya: cant believe u do not remember

Shane: I'm sorry :'(

Ilya: anniversary of u beating the shit out of Jackson Smith XD

Shane: Would you like me to add you to the list too?

Ilya: what list

Shane: Wouldn't you like to know?

Ilya: What list, Shane?

Ilya: Please :)

Ilya: I even used perfect capitalization and grammar for you, Shane!

Shane: Okay, since you asked so nicely.

Shane: The list of people that I've beaten up.

Ilya: i was not already on the list already?

Ilya: would not stopped getting teased by my teammates after what u did to me on halloween

Ilya: they said my back was mostly scratch marks and only part skin

Ilya: like i fought a bear

Shane: ILYA ROZANOV!

Shane: Stop.

Ilya: is not what you said that night.

Shane: Please.

Ilya: thats more like it.

Shane: I don't know why I bother talking to you anymore.

Ilya: u luv meeeee

Shane: >:(

March 2016

Ilya: what r u doing tn?

Shane: Studying.

Ilya: boring

Ilya: as always

Shane: Do you not have any midterms to study for? Or any assignments for that matter?

Ilya: eh i do them later

Shane: You athletes and your study habits :(

Ilya: u do not complain about me being an athlete when I'm pounding into you

Shane: Oh my god

Shane: I'm ending this discussion now.

May 2016

"Ilya, I can feel your eyes on me."

"Is not true."

They were studying at the dining table of Shane's apartment, sitting across from one another. There was no good time for the two of them to meet up, though it was primarily Shane's fault. He couldn't catch a break between his studies and it was only going to continue to ramp up from now on. They reached a compromise and agreed that they would study together, at least Shane did. Ilya, however, seemed to be up to no good.

"Okay, then tell me what you were doing?" Shane looked up to see that Ilya had his textbook open but just like the time they studied in the library, Ilya was still on the same page he started on.

"I'm studying my formulas."

"Ilya," Shane deadpanned.

"Shane," he mimicked.

"That's your commerce textbook. What formulas could there be in there?"

"Formulas for how to make sure there are no HR violations for companies."

Shane hummed, completely unconvinced, though his foot found Ilya's underneath the table. Shane tried to continue studying—organic chemistry was notoriously hard—but Ilya's foot started to brush up against Shane's calf, gradually traveling upwards. Ilya feigned ignorance,

using his pointer finger to help him read. With gritted teeth, Shane returned to his own textbook. Right as his eyes began to skim over bond polarity, Ilya's foot made contact with Shane's crotch, applying light pressure. Still, Ilya pretended as if nothing was happening. In retaliation, Shane did the same.

While Shane was sure that he was slowly hardening under Ilya's touch, Shane found Ilya already half-hard. Shane tried his best not to let the thought of already Ilya's half-hard member go to his head. They continued, both adding more pressure and movement while pretending not to acknowledge what was going on underneath the table.

It was just a matter of a battle of wills now. Who was going to give in first or were they going to both finish where Shane usually ate his lunches and dinners? Just the thought of that alone made Shane cave in.

"Rose and Miles may return any moment. We have to be quick." Shane jumped to his feet and started to walk towards his bedroom.

"They can listen. It will be very hot."

"Ilya," Shane exclaimed, finding no amusement in Ilya's joke. "Come on."

June 2016

Shane: What are your summer plans this summer?

Shane: I'm volunteering again this summer.

Shane: I need to make sure that my med school application stands out.

Shane: But, I'll be heading up to my parents cottage for a few weeks in July.

Ilya: no Russia :D

Shane: Oh, congratulations?

Ilya: yes is great

Ilya: lots of training tho :P

Shane: Go get 'em! You'll do great.

Ilya: ;)

Ilya: have fun at cottage

September 2016

Shane: Congratulations, Captain ;)

Ilya: thank u, was not hard to become captain

Ilya: just had to wait until the old guard were too old to play

Shane: You worked hard for this! Don't sell yourself short.

Ilya: will you give me proper congratulations?

Shane: Is that seriously what you're thinking about?

Ilya: yes

Shane: Maybe.

Shane: Here!

Ilya: coming

Ilya: thats what well both be doing shortly

December 2016

Ilya: Merry Christmas

Ilya: Happy Birthday to the little baby Jesus

Shane: He learned how to use capital letters!

Shane: Hurray!

Shane: I always knew you could do it :) So proud of you.

Ilya: i have always known how

Ilya: did not just to bother you

Shane: Why do I try with you?

January 2017

Shane: Merry Christmas, Ilya

Shane: С Рождеством

Ilya: Google translate?

Shane: Obviously. I was trying to do something nice for you :(

Ilya: Thank you <3

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

It's finally graduation time! Shane knows that no matter how dreamlike university was, real life was a nightmare and it's time for him to wake up.

Chapter Notes

Slight trigger warning for eating disorders and disordered patterns of eating in this chapter. Please take care.

January 2018

Their texts were now few and far between. There was an unbelievable amount of pressure on Ilya's shoulders now. Not only was he captain of the Redbirds but it was also confirmed that he would be a part of the Boston Raiders immediately after graduation. He just needed to make sure that maintained his stats and grades, then it was off to Boston. Not to mention that Shane was incredibly busy as well. Last Ilya heard, Shane had been applying to medical school after medical school, petrified that no one would accept him. Ilya was confident that Shane would make it—there wasn't anything that Shane couldn't do.

Ilya's mouse hovered over the button, the one that spelled out "Apply for Graduation" in innocuous white letters. It was happening. The dream that Ilya had left Russia with was finally coming into fruition... but he couldn't feel more empty on the inside. What would any of this mean if Ilya had to walk across the stage alone while his mama's grave stood overrun with wildflowers and weeds? Ilya fiddled with his necklace as he clicked the button.

So what? Ilya could go alone. He will walk across the stage in a stupid cap and gown and get a stupid piece of paper that says he worked hard for four years. He left his country alone with nothing but a suitcase, so he should be able to do this no problem.

But maybe... maybe Svetlana could come. She had her own graduation ceremony to attend in Boston, but Ilya could buy her a plane ticket and she could come over for just the day. He could pay it off with his signing bonus without making a dent. Svetlana probably had her father and mother in attendance for her own convocation, but Ilya would go in a heartbeat if she asked.

Ilya: Svetlana

Sveta: You're alive.

Ilya: i've been busy

Sveta: Yeah, busy on not working on your backhand.

Sveta: You could have easily had that goal last week.

Ilya: i did not ask for this

Ilya: maybe i will not ask you to come to my graduation anymore

Sveta: Ilya! Of course I will come <3

Sveta: I'm buying plane tickets right now. I'm booking the whole week off.

Ilya: u don't even know when it is

Sveta: I have the internet, Ilya.

Sveta: Not all of us are dumb jocks who don't have hand-eye coordination.

Илья: я тебя люблю (*I love you*)

Sveta: я тоже тебя люблю (*I love you too*)

Ilya knew that he had one more ticket left. His mind could not help but wander to the person that he had spent most of his degree trying to get to know. He knew Shane intimately now—far more intimately than anyone could guess—but in many ways, there were still several ways in which Ilya did not know Shane. Just like how Shane didn't know Ilya either. Ilya got as close to Shane without burning himself.

Ilya: u r still alive, yes?

Shane: Yes, just submitted my last application yesterday night.

Ilya: good.

Shane: Did you need something?

Ilya: Would you like to attend my graduation?

Ilya: You do not have to.

Ilya: Just wondering.

Shane: I would be honoured to :)

Shane: Thank you for inviting me.

Heartbeat faster than he'd like to admit, Ilya stared at his phone with a dumb smile on his face. He was fucked.

June 2018

Shane stood in front of a white tent where crooked lines of students awaited to pick up their gowns and other graduation regalia. He shifted his weight between his feet, stomach churning, as he scanned through the crowds. A flash of sandy brown peeped through, standing a head taller than most of the student body. Suddenly, the weight of the bouquet of flowers and teddy bear Shane got for Ilya felt like deadweight in his hands. Maybe it was stupid to get Ilya these gifts, but Rose had assured him they were perfectly fine and normal to gift a new graduate. Rose had also assured him that wearing a full suit was perfect normal, too.

The moment Ilya came out of the tent, he spotted Shane and ran over with an exuberant smile on his face and fully dressed up for graduation. Shane's heart twisted. His mind had been ravaged by so many thoughts over the past few days and they mostly had to do with the man running towards him.

"These are for you," Shane said.

Before acknowledging his gifts, Ilya immediately wrapped Shane in a tight hug, nearly lifting Shane off of the ground. "Thank you."

Shane hoped that his face wasn't flushed. They had never been so openly affectionate before. Gently, Ilya took his gifts and even adjusted the tassel of the graduation cap that his teddy bear was wearing.

"I can take these back for now," Shane offered.

It was like Shane had shot a baby deer right in front of them. Ilya looked so caught off guard.

"So you have hands to take your diploma later," Shane supplemented. "You will get them back later."

"Okay, but maybe later." His hold was still tight around the flowers and teddy bear.

Ilya looked around, eyes searching for someone. Maybe his father or brother was coming. They had never talked about their family, but Shane knew that since every graduate got two

tickets, that someone else would probably be coming for Ilya. Shane's parents were going to attend his convocation, which was in two days. He just never expected that the person who came for Ilya would be a gorgeous woman with tanned skin and tight auburn curls. They hugged tightly and she pressed a big kiss against Ilya's cheek, leaving a slight lipstick stain.

"Shane, this is my childhood friend, Svetlana," Ilya said, hand tight around her waist.

Svetlana whispered something into Ilya's ear and Shane couldn't help but notice the light flush that gradually spread across Ilya's face. The sick feeling in Shane's stomach only started to grow but he tried to push it down. After all, he didn't eat breakfast or lunch so it must just be hunger. He had been too stressed about the numerous waitlisted admissions on his laptop and his future with Ilya to eat.

Somehow, Shane mustered a smile. "Nice to meet you."

"I just told Ilya that you are beautiful." Svetlana smiled, perhaps sensing Shane's discomfort. "Much more beautiful than he described. I always knew that Ilya was bad with words, but he really did your image a huge injustice."

It was Shane's turn to blush now. Ilya had talked about him before?

"Very cute, too," Svetlana continued.

Shane was sure he was as red as a tomato now.

"You are going to kill him, Svetlana," Ilya laughed.

"I try." Svetlana winked at Shane. "Now let's take some pictures, shall we? I want to remember this day forever."

They magically found a quiet corner by the library to take pictures. At first, Shane and Svetlana both took pictures of Ilya with a proud smile and the flowers and teddy bear that Shane had gifted him. It was rare to see Ilya so overcome with happiness. Yes, he was often happy when he was with Shane, but Shane had never seen him so jubilant. Secretly, Shane was happy to have captured Ilya in this state on his own phone.

Suddenly, Svetlana was shoving Shane towards Ilya. "Go take pictures together."

"Really?" Shane stood between Svetlana and Ilya. "Do you want that?"

Ilya rolled his eyes, fond smile suddenly gone and replaced by a deadpanned expression. "No, Shane. I do not want photos with you. Of course, I do. I did not invite you for nothing!"

"Oh. Okay."

As if it were the most natural thing in the world, Ilya's hand found its way onto Shane's waist, just as he did for Svetlana moments ago. Shane tried not to pay too much attention to Ilya's warm scent engulfing him, and tried to relax and enjoy the moment. He wanted to remember this day forever too. This may be the last time that he would ever see Ilya before Ilya got swept away in the NHL. The thought of that only made the weight of Shane's

unspoken truths—who Shane fundamentally was—more and more unbearable with each passing second.

Shane then took pictures of Ilya and Svetlana together. Ilya was just as happy. They also got a passerby to take pictures of the three of them together.

Soon, Shane and Svetlana were sat in the sports complex together, waiting for the ceremony to begin. Shane bounced his leg up and down while Svetlana sat calmly.

“Thank you for taking such good care of Ilyusha all these years,” Svetlana said. Her eyes were filled with endearment.

“I-I didn’t do anything.”

“You made him happy. That’s more than anyone could do.”

Their conversation, however short it was, was making Shane sick to his stomach.

Aside from Rose and Miles, Ilya was the only person that Shane had made an effort to know at university. Ilya was the only person who Shane had let into his heart and yet, Shane hid everything from Ilya. Ilya, who had such a bright future and great reputation, risked everything to be around Shane all the time. Shane was just a nobody—a nerd who was too omega and not enough to pursue his dreams—who could contaminate Ilya’s potential with his homosexuality. At least one of them should make it big in the NHL.

Each time they were together, Shane had thought about revealing more of himself to Ilya but Shane selfishly wanted to enjoy himself and the alpha who was pouring nothing but adoration for Shane. Each time, it was harder for Shane to speak.

Their fairytale-like arrangement was too good to be true and it was only possible because Shane hid everything.

Now, Shane was facing the consequences of his actions.

As Ilya Grigoryevich Rozanov’s name was called, hot tears started to well in Shane’s eyes. A hurricane of happiness, sadness, and overwhelming of guilt swirled inside him. Shane was almost dizzy from overwhelm. Deep down, Shane knew that Ilya would want to continue to their friendship—or whatever it was they had between the two of them. But, he had hidden too much from Ilya and he had to pull the brakes before he ruined Ilya. Even if it killed Shane.

Shane was used to ruining things and being ruined. What was one more thing?

The three of them had a celebratory dinner at a steakhouse of Svetlana’s choosing. Ilya mentioned that Svetlana always knew the best places to go and eat at. Shane picked at his steak and steamed vegetables while trying to stay on track with the conversation. It was clear that Svetlana and Ilya were true childhood friends by the way they bickered and eventually fought over the bill. They were free to be themselves with each other the way that Shane had never been able to.

Svetlana retreated to her hotel nearby, while Ilya took Shane back to his place. Ilya's apartment was all but packed away. It was nearly empty, save for the bed and a few boxes and Ilya's scent was fading. He would be flying out the next morning, with his brand new life awaiting for him.

"You've been quiet all night," Ilya said, closing the door behind him.

"Yeah," Shane tried to speak over the lump in his throat.

"Boston is not so far away from Montreal. I will visit and you can visit too." Ilya's hand found its way onto Shane's cheek. Shane instinctively nuzzled into his touch.

Ilya was so unbelievably happy, and Shane was going to shatter it all. Shane was going to betray Ilya but it was for his own good, even if Shane couldn't see how that was the case yet. He just needed to rip off the bandaid.

Wounds always healed. This wound, too, shall heal. Shane just knew it was going to leave a scar.

Shane let himself indulge in one more kiss with Ilya. He tried to ingrain the feeling of Ilya's hands against his body, his tongue on his, and Ilya's firm body pressed against his own. He soaked up the beautiful sounds that came out of Ilya's mouth and deeply inhaled Ilya's warm scent which only became stronger as each second passed by. Ultimately, Shane tried to take note of how he felt on the inside—how utterly happy and foolishly in love he was right now.

"Ilya," Shane whispered. His lips throbbed, as did his heart.

I'm sorry, Ilya, Shane thought. This is my way of taking care of you.

Ilya leaned down, trying to kiss Shane again but Shane took a step back. Immediately, confusion flashed across Ilya's face. Shane tried to not let this affect him too much—he had to do it.

"Ilya," he said more firmly. "I can't do this anymore."

"Why?" Ilya's face contorted with pain and his voice was raw, nearing broken.

Shane took a deep albeit shaky breath to brace himself. He had to finish what he had started, recite what he had already practiced time and again in his room. "I've hidden things from you. I'm an omega."

"Shane—"

"Ilya, please. Please don't make this harder than it already is." He couldn't feel his face now. This entire experience felt like an out of body experience—a complete nightmare.

"Shane," Ilya choked out. A tear fell down his cheek.

"I have enjoyed our time together but we have to stop. I know I was wrong to lead you on and let you enjoy your time with me, but this was just a fling."

“Why are you telling me this now?”

“Imagine if word got out that you had been close to a male *omega* this entire time, Ilya. Imagine what that would do to your career. Sure, if you were hanging out with a male beta, people could think we were just friends. But I’ve been publicly outed, Ilya, by the very people that you will be playing with. What people hate more than omegas are gays. You would never be able to step on the ice again. I can’t let you do that to yourself.”

“That doesn’t matter, Shane. I like *you*.” Ilya stepped forward to close the space between them.

Shane stood still, ignoring the warmth near him. “You don’t like me. You like the idea of me. Goodbye, Ilya.”

Shane slipped out of Ilya’s apartment, pointedly ignoring the tears streaming down his face and his buzzing phone. He did the right thing.

June 2018

Shane woke up with his mouth as dry as the Sahara desert. There was an incessant beeping in the background and people were mumbling around him. When his eyes finally adjusted to the bright white lights, he found his parents sitting at the edge of his bed. He was in a hospital room with an IV drip in his hand.

“Mom? Dad?” he croaked.

His dad instantly stood up, no doubt to get the doctor to alert them that Shane had woken up.

“Shane, honey, you’re awake! You fainted at your convocation,” his mom answered his question before Shane could even utter it. “When was the last time you ate? You look significantly thinner than when your father and I last saw you.”

Shane knew that the answer was the steakhouse two days prior but he wasn’t going to tell his worrying mother that.

Thankfully, the doctor, a petite Asian woman came through Shane’s door with his father before he could respond. “Mr. Hollander, I’m so glad to see that you’re awake. I’m Dr. Kim. If I may, Mr. and Mrs. Hollander, could I please have a private word with him?”

His parents quietly left, leaving Shane with the doctor. She flipped through his charts quickly before addressing him.

“Do you remember what happened?” she asked, standing at the foot of his bed.

“My mom said that I fainted at my convocation,” Shane said with his mouth feeling as though it were stuffed with cotton. He didn’t remember it happening himself. He did, however, remember walking across the stage and then taking a few pictures with his parents afterwards.

Dr. Kim wordlessly passed him a cup of water from his table, which Shane gratefully took and sipped. “That’s correct. It seemed that you fainted due to dehydration and extreme hormone fluctuation. The hormone fluctuation could be due to a variety of factors, stress is definitely one and I have no doubt that a recent graduate would be under an undue amount of stress. But Mr. Hollander-”

“Shane is fine,” he croaked.

“Well, Shane, there are two other things that I’m concerned about. I see that you’re on a high dose of suppressors and scent blockers and you have been since you were 11. When was the last time you’ve had your heat?”

Despite sipping on the water, Shane’s mouth still felt dry. “When I was 11. I’ve only ever had one.”

“Shane, I won’t give you a huge lecture but I won’t give you any bullshit either. Because you haven’t allowed yourself to have heats, your hormones have been compromised. Some hormones are astronomically high while others are near nonexistent. This is extremely dangerous and could severely impact both your health and fertility in the long run. I am recommending you as a doctor to stop your blockers and suppressors for a little bit and let your body do its thing.”

“I can’t do that.” Fear started to seep in.

“You have to. You can discuss slowly reintroducing suppressors with your family doctor, but for now, you need to at least have one natural heat. Let your body heal.”

Shane let her words sink in. He was terrified and his heart monitor showed it. Its pace quickened. Now, he would have to face the very side of himself that he had pushed away the moment he discovered it.

“Now, there’s another reason why your charts may be so abnormal. Have you heard of mate rejection, Shane?”

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Both Shane and Ilya find out that grief is a never-ending, vicious cycle that they just can't move on from.

July 2018

Shane's first heat was worse than anyone could have predicted. His parents dropped him off at their family cottage with more supplies than anyone could ever need. It passed by in a feverish blur, with Shane passed out for the most part. But when he was awake, there was an undeniable feeling that he couldn't shake off. The pit of longing that had made a home in his chest had grown into a debilitating vacuum. All Shane wanted was Ilya. He wanted him in every single way possible but there was nothing left of Ilya that Shane could have. Shane had made sure of that the night he left Ilya's apartment.

November 2018

As much as Ilya wanted to deny it, he was miserable. On paper, he had it all: a great starting career, a great team, girls throwing themselves at his feet, a beautiful apartment, and wealth beyond what he could have ever imagined. He partied often with his teammates, drank fancy imported Russian vodka, and slept with beautiful women too. But all he could think of was a beautiful, freckled man who wanted nothing to do with Ilya anymore. All of their memories, no matter how sacred they were for Ilya, were now just a distant dream that often morphed into nightmares about the future they were never able to have together.

So Ilya kept scoring goals, kept drinking vodka, and kept bringing those girls home with him.

December 2018

Shane was bone tired but he finally allowed himself to rest at his parents' house. It was Christmas break now, so he allowed himself some relaxation. While he struggled with intensity of his classes and the breadth of information he had to consume and memorize at

first, he was finally getting a hang of things. His life couldn't be more perfect: he was a first year med student at the University of Toronto. Shane had finally accomplished what he had set out to do all those years ago.

As his father set a pot of spaghetti on the dining table, his mom stared at Shane with a kind of intensity that he knew all too well. She had something on her mind and Shane was going to be stuck in his chair until he heard every single word that she had to say.

"Shane, your father and I are worried about you," she said, no bullshit and no sugar in her words. "We love you and we are so, so proud of you, but we cannot stand by and watch you destroy yourself as you pursue your degree."

Shane couldn't look her in the eye and could only manage to look at the way that her mouth was curved into a concerned frown. "I'm fine, Mom. Really."

She sighed deeply but it was his father who spoke: "what your mom means is that we only want what's best for you. We've noticed that every time we see you, you're..."

"More tired. Thinner. Gaunt, even," his mom said firmly. "You're going to become a patient before you even become a doctor. You have to take care of yourself." She placed her hand over Shane's, engulfed his fist with her warmth.

In a world of chaos, Shane's body was the only thing he could control. By extension, food was something that he could control too. The more chaotic his life became, the more restrictive Shane became to himself. He couldn't say any of that. He couldn't stand to watch the hurt unfold on his parents' face.

"We're here for you, Shane," his father said.

October 2019

It was on a fall day in Vancouver when Ilya discovered what Shane's scent was. He was only in the city for an away game, playing against the city's increasingly failing team. The streets glowed with a muted orange and a sweet, fragrant smell floated with the wind. The moment the aroma filled Ilya's nose, he stopped in his tracks and tears started to well in his eyes. Without thinking, he ran up to the closest people nearby, which happened to be a couple walking their shaggy poodle.

"What smell is this?"

The couple were taken aback and their poodle instantly stuck its snout onto Ilya's leg, inspecting him. Ilya didn't care how crazy he had just appeared. He needed to know.

"The sweet smell," Ilya continued. "Where is it coming from?"

“Oh, um I think it’s the trees,” the man said, still wildly confused by the interaction.

“If I remember correctly, they’re Japanese trees?” The woman guessed. “They’re called cat-sa trees or something?”

“Thank you. You have cute dog, by the way,” Ilya replied before running off.

A quick google search told Ilya that the trees were in fact called Katsura trees, which were known for its heart-shaped leaves and sweet, almost caramel or cotton candy like scent. Ilya didn’t care what food the tree smelled like. All he knew was that the entire city smelled like Shane and it pulled his heart in a million different directions. He never knew that he could smell Shane so intensely. Not having the person in front of Ilya only killed him.

Maybe Ilya’s father was correct—Ilya was destined for a life of mediocrity and isolation.

Despite his feelings, Vancouver suddenly became one of Ilya’s favourite cities.

October 2019

Despite the sunshine seeping through the sides of his blackout curtains, Shane’s room was dark and the air was stiflingly stale. He didn’t know what day it was anymore. Downstairs, he could hear his parents rustle around in the kitchen, cutlery clattering and feet shuffling, as they made their breakfast before rushing to work.

Since September, Shane had been holed up in his childhood bedroom, which he hadn’t lived in since moving out at 18. Sure, he didn’t mind the outdated furniture and ghosts of his previous hobbies whenever he came back for winter break. But now that he was going to be living here for the foreseeable future, his room stood as a haunting prison of Shane’s failures. First he was a failed hockey player. Now, he was a medical school drop out and failed doctor wannabe.

Shane Hollander was synonymous with failure.

A knock rapped against his door. “Honey, get dressed. Your father will be dropping you off at therapy on his way to work.”

It shouldn’t be hard, but it felt like Shane had to wager multiple wars to get himself out of bed. He warred on with his mind (the one who wanted to get better and the even louder one who wanted to drag him down to the depths of hell), his body, and the potential of failing his parents again. Eventually, Shane peeled off his duvet and crawled onto his feet. All of his clothes were much too big now, so he settled with the clothes that he had worn as a teenager.

He breathed deeply before settling his hand around the cool doorknob. *Today is a new day. The past is in the past. All I can work on is doing better today.*

Therapy only made it abundantly clear that Shane had made the right choice. Even if Shane hadn't broken it off, there was no way that Ilya could stay with someone like him. Shane was broken beyond words, and Ilya was too good for broken goods. Ilya deserved better.

His therapist recommended for him to start a hobby that didn't involve food or his body. Shane had spent too much time focusing on the limits of his own body that he didn't know anything else. It was now time to just enjoy, and maybe learn to appreciate how amazingly fast the brain adapts to trying something new.

Somehow, Shane settled on learning Russian. He learned Russian in secret when his parents were at work. At night, he would watch videos in Russian on YouTube when he couldn't sleep.

If he couldn't have Ilya, maybe Shane could somehow preserve him in his heart this way.

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Ilya and Shane finally talk and clear up some of the lingering questions that Ilya has had all these years.

Chapter Notes

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

Present Day

Ilya found himself in front of an older apartment building. It stood quite a few stories shorter than the newer complexes around the city but seemed much more homey than the modern prison-like structures. His hand shook ever so slightly as he buzzed for Shane's apartment. Ilya credited the shaking to overexertion. He only had time to come talk to Shane after his practice, which was shit since Ilya couldn't focus on anything but their morning encounter. The Centaurs, however, had a good, hearty laugh about his atrocious performance. *I guess even the pros have performance anxiety*, Wyatt Hayes had laughed.

"Hello?" Shane's voice rang.

"It's Ilya."

"Okay, just give me a second."

It was strange that they could behave so naturally as if they didn't have a storied past. Here Ilya was, coming up to Shane's apartment as if they were good friends or something.

Honest to god, Ilya didn't know why he came. Of course he wanted to talk to Shane—to get answers that have haunted his brain for the past several years—but he didn't know what he wanted to get out of this. Did he truly want closure? That sounded nice, but then what? What was the point of all of this? When it came to Shane Hollander, Ilya's plan used to be to get as close to him as possible. Then it all came crashing down. Ilya didn't know if he was like Icarus and flew too close to Shane, or if he was Tantalus and his fruit was always out of reach. It didn't matter who specifically Ilya identified with—he was just a walking tragedy.

The elevator had opened to reveal Elena and her parents. Elena was all but too happy to see Ilya again. Her parents, on the other hand, had the familiar look of starstruck recognition on their faces.

"*Papa, this is the man I saw with Shane at the grocery store today!*" Elena squealed in Russian.

“You are Ilya Rozanov...” Her father blankly stared at Ilya.

Elena’s mother, who Elena looked like a carbon copy of, slapped her partner’s arm, bringing him out of his stupor. *“It is very nice to meet you Mr. Rozanov. Elena was super excited to have met you today, though I admit that she didn’t know who you were.”*

Ilya smiled brightly at them. He didn’t care if people recognized him—couldn’t give two shits. The only time that he cared about his name being screamed was when the fans of opposing teams shouted out his name as if it were a curse. Only then, did Ilya care about recognition. Nothing riled him up more than proving others wrong.

“I had a great time meeting Elena, too,” Ilya replied.

“We’ll let you get on with your day then,” Elena’s mother replied.

“Goodbye, Mr. Rozanov!” Elena exclaimed as they walked out of the building.

When Ilya was left to his own devices on the elevator, he tried to collect himself once more. Maybe he should just hear what Shane had to say before Ilya started to plan. There was always a large part of Ilya that wondered if he had pushed Shane away with his intensity; maybe he had come on too strong too fast. His mother had once said that she loved Ilya’s fierceness when it came to love, but he knew that it wasn’t everyone’s cup of tea.

Shane was quick to open his door, as if he were anxiously awaiting Ilya’s presence. “Um, come in. Shoes off please.” He was wearing a tight black shirt and jeans, a little different than what Ilya saw him wear earlier.

Ilya did as he was told, though he was going to anyway.

Inside, Ilya was instantly hit with the smell he was denied all these years—the natural scent of Shane Hollander. It wasn’t particularly strong, but it was overwhelming to have so much of Shane all at once. Shane didn’t have very many decorations in his modestly sized apartment. He only had a few pictures of him and his parents (Ilya assumed), him and Rose, and him and another man, both of them chef’s jackets. If Ilya hadn’t met Rose all those years ago, he would have been stunned to find the A-list actress so casually posed in photos with Shane.

It was clear that most of the attention had went into the kitchen. There was a magnetic strip of knives on the wall. Pots and pans also hung from the ceiling. Shane was moving around in the kitchen a lot. Ilya had probably interrupted him during dinner, but it was Shane who invited him at this time.

“Are you hungry?” Shane asked, opening a refrigerator that had everything neatly organized and labeled in separate clear deli containers. Of course Shane’s fridge would look like that.

“I could eat.” Ilya sat at the bar stool in front of the kitchen island.

Ilya had heard from Elena that Shane was a chef, but it was still mind boggling to see Shane in his element in a kitchen. The Shane that Ilya had known years ago was afraid of food in

every sense of the word; that Shane only ate “clean” and organic foods and would have a near panic attack if he had to eat any food that was purchased and prepared outside. He most definitely would have had a fit if he saw butter and saturated fats in his kitchen. This Shane was sautéing cubes of chicken thigh in oil and a little knob of butter while another pot simmered on the stove. Shane skilfully sliced an onion with one of his many knives and also beat eggs with chopsticks.

Maybe mind boggling wasn’t the right word to use. It was *thrilling* to see Shane so comfortable in the kitchen.

“So what are you making me, Chef?” Ilya hoped that he didn’t sound as nervous as he felt.

“Oyakodon.”

Shane still hadn’t looked Ilya in the eyes yet. This didn’t surprise Ilya much, as Shane was never one to look directly into anyone’s eyes. But, Shane hadn’t even made an effort to look at Ilya or his lips, which Shane used to do instead of making eye contact. Ilya reassured himself that this was just Shane’s nerves getting the best of him. He had, after all, invited Ilya over and was making him dinner as they spoke infrequently.

“Is that fine with you?”

“You mean, is you making your childhood favourite dish okay with me?”

Finally, his eyes found Ilya’s. There was his a struggle of emotions in his eyes, but Ilya was just glad that he could finally gaze into those large, doe eyes.

“The answer is yes, by the way,” Ilya clarified. “I am okay with eating that.”

“Good. Because that’s all you’re getting.”

Shane continued to cook away and Ilya couldn’t help but watch. It was mostly because Shane was mesmerizing, but it was also because Ilya couldn’t believe that Shane was in front of him. Ilya wondered if he would eventually wake up and figure out that the world was just playing cruel tricks on him.

Eventually, Shane presented Ilya with a bowl of steaming white rice topped with a sheet of silky eggs and chicken. There were thinly sliced green onions and sesame seeds on top as well. This was the dish that Shane’s mother had made for him whenever he finished his hockey practices, and now Shane was making it for Ilya after his practice. Painfully, Ilya tried not to think about this too hard. After all, as heart-wrenching as Shane’s words were after Ilya’s convocation, he was right. Ilya would not have been able to make it out this far in the NHL if anyone knew that he was not straight and had a previous entanglement with a male omega, even if that was all that he wanted.

Ilya, begrudgingly, did have to thank Shane for that, no matter how much he hated it.

Shane’s eyes carefully watched Ilya as he took a bite with chopsticks. He had offered Ilya a spoon too, but Ilya had had his fair share of sushi and other Asian foods so he knew his way

around chopsticks.

It was the best food that Ilya had eaten in a long, long time. He didn't have the proper vocabulary or knowledge to describe what in particular made the food so excellent, but it tasted like home, not Ilya's home of course (Ilya's real home tasted more like borscht and piroshkis) but *a* home that had lots of love and care. The oyakodon was rich and savoury while having a tinge of sweetness to it. Ilya could almost cry. Ilya wasn't a bad cook by any means, maybe descent at best, but Shane's cooking made his looked like a heap of steaming, hot garbage.

Only once Shane was sure that Ilya was enjoying his food did Shane himself eat. He didn't gingerly eat like Ilya was used to. He dug in and savoured each bite, which made Ilya happy.

"I'm sorry," Shane said once they were done eating.

This was it. This was the moment that Ilya had both looked forward to and dreaded since Shane stormed out of his apartment in Montreal. The table had been cleared and it was just Shane and Ilya now. There was no hiding behind food now.

"I shouldn't have bombarded all of that information on you and on your convocation day. I'm sorry if I forever ruined that day for you—that was your day and it should have been all about you but I made it about myself. And I'm sorry that I made such a big decision for the both of us without ever consulting you. I completely blindsided you and that was not right of me. I don't expect you to forgive me, but I do hope that maybe you could hear me out as to why I did it."

Ilya slowly blinked, trying to process all of that information, which was said at incredible speeds. His English was good now—he still frequently dropped nouns and articles because he thought they were useless and his English made perfect sense without them most of the time—but maybe it wasn't *that* good yet. All he knew was that Shane was sorry and had been thinking about this for a long time.

"And then maybe... we could take things from there?" Shane said, much slower and quieter this time.

"Okay. Let's hear it. I'm ready."

Shane visibly relaxed, shoulder faltering slightly from his impeccable posture. "Thank you. Do you want a drink or something? I think this might take a long time and I'd ideally like to be a little bit buzzed to get through this," he said with an air of amusement.

"I'd like that. I think I need a little bit of alcohol too," Ilya truthfully replied, chest feeling slightly lighter.

Shane poured them each a glass of vodka in glasses meant for whiskey. Shot glasses seemed insufficient and inappropriate. It was some fancy Russian-imported vodka too. They both gingerly took a few sips before Shane began to speak.

“I think I need to start with hockey. I know I’ve told you that I’ve played hockey but I don’t know if you are aware of the extent at which I played.”

Ilya knew and was well aware. He watched the videos of Shane on the ice more than he’d like to admit. Since graduating, he found himself gravitating towards those videos to quell the ache that he often felt in his chest. Every time he watched the videos, he knew that his initial thoughts about Shane’s hockey skills were true: Shane should have been on the ice with Ilya this entire time. They could have been great teammates or rivals with an infamous rivalry.

“I was pretty good at hockey,” Shane continued, and Ilya resisted the urge to laugh at Shane’s attempt at modesty. “I lived and breathed hockey. It was mine and my parents’ dream to become pro ever since I could lace up my own skates. My mom’s favourite team was the Montreal Voyageurs and she always wanted me to play for them. I wanted that too, but... But I was outed, both as gay and omega in one fell swoop. I always had to hide the fact that I was an omega, I mean being an omega in the NHL is unheard of, and you know the kind of narratives that go around on the rink about omegas.”

Ilya knew it all too well. He could still picture Tremblay being beaten to a pulp on the ice all those years ago for just seeming like an omega. He could still see the dark red splatters of ice against the plastic barriers. Still, Ilya didn’t speak. He just nodded and urged for Shane to continue. Though, Ilya could not ignore the sense of dread that was bubbling up into his throat—he knew that whatever Shane had to say could not be good. Nothing career-ending could be good.

“And so I hid. I practiced and trained harder than anyone on my team just to prove that I was just as good as them. My mom used to make me extra large oyakodons after practice so that I could bulk up fast. I had to eat so much that I was almost sick all the time. Anyways, then there was a boy. I won’t go into too much detail about that but all you need to know is that he was the coach’s son and one of our teammates found us behind the rink after practice one day. We weren’t doing anything too improper, just kissing.”

Ilya instantly thought of how lucky he was with Sasha, who was also his coach’s son. They were both dumb, young, and curious in a country that forbade anyone even glance at the same gender in any way that wasn’t platonic. And yet, they still got away with it and were able to carry each other’s secrets to this day.

He looked at Shane, whose eyes looked distant and were rimmed with pain as he recounted his youth. Ilya took another sip.

“My coach’s son instantly pushed me against the building and outed me on both counts in front of our teammate. He said that I was forcing myself upon him. Next thing I knew, our entire team was behind the rink.” Shane stopped himself to take a deep breath. His hand was clenched into a fist on the tabletop. Ilya had no doubt that Shane’s nails were painfully digging into his palms. “And they started to beat me up. They renounced me as their captain and said every slur you could imagine. I didn’t force myself on him, by the way.” Shane’s eyes met Ilya’s. It pained Ilya that Shane thought that he needed to make this clarification. Of course Ilya didn’t think that, and he placed his hand on top of Shane’s closed fist to show that.

“We were both interested in each other. You know, at first it was sneaky glances and then we were grazing past each other, secretly touching whenever we could. It was mutual. I guess he was too scared to be discovered and needed to drag someone else down with him. And he was successful because no one batted an eye at him and I became the enemy. My mom was furious when she found out what they did to me. There was an entire legal battle and stuff that I don’t want to get into, but the short of it was that I could never play hockey because of who I fundamentally was. I went through that when I wasn’t even well-known in the hockey world and... I just didn’t want to do what my coach’s son did and drag you down with me. I’m sorry, Ilya. I’m sorry for the way that I acted and the way that I suddenly shut you out. It was the only way solution I could think of for one of us to make it in the NHL, but I was unnecessarily cruel to you—to the both of us.”

“I...” Ilya couldn’t find the right words to say. He wasn’t even sure he would be able to articulate what he’d wanted to say in Russian. There was a raging storm of emotions in mind; he felt so sorry, angry, understanding, and frustrated with Shane, with hockey, with the world, and with himself too. “Thank you... for trusting me enough to tell me this.”

“I mean it was the least I could do. Thank you for listening to me and for coming here too.”

“I’m sorry that that happened to you. It was not fair and should not have happened at all.”

“No, but I’ve made my peace with it. It’s taken a lot of work, but I’m happy where I am now.”

“And where are you now?” Ilya asked, taking a sip and letting the vodka wash over his fading worries.

A small but fond smile grew on Shane’s face. Once again, Ilya found himself mesmerized by Shane’s eyes and freckles but tried not to focus on them too hard. They were here to make nice only—to get answers for Ilya’s hundreds of questions.

“I opened a restaurant with my partner and it’s going really well.”

Ilya tried really not to think too hard at the word “partner.” He both understood and hated the use of that word. While it was a great word to describe the depth of someone’s relationship or hide someone’s queerness, it was doing fuck all for his nosey ass right now. Still, Ilya’s eyes inevitably drifted to the framed picture by Shane’s sofa. A brown-haired, blue-eyed man had his arm around an impossibly happy Shane. Even Ilya only got to see Shane that happy only a rare handful of times. Ilya took another sip of his vodka.

“For some reason, the restaurant has become really popular online recently, and so we’ve been getting more customers than usual.”

“And you’re not a doctor?” Ilya asked, still trying to block out the thoughts that were forming in his mind. For the entire time that Ilya knew Shane, that was Shane’s dream. Whatever had happened to Shane since undergrad could not have been easy for him to have such a drastic career change.

“No, not a doctor,” Shane answered with nonchalance. “I got into U of T and studied for a year before dropping out. It was stupid for me to force myself into that profession. Anyway, I think I have spoken more than I have ever have in my entire lifetime. What are you thinking?”

What a loaded question. Ilya still hadn’t made sense of the feelings buzzing inside him, so he could only answer with the thing that he’d thought of the most all these years: “I missed you. A lot.”

“Me too. Also a lot.” Shane fiddled with his thumbs as he admitted this.

Ilya wanted to supplement his statement with “more than you could imagine” but he couldn’t bring himself to say that. This has been a lot. It was clear that Shane had done a lot of reflection and growth in the past few years—more than Ilya could have ever done for himself. Ilya was still trying to process everything, though he still had more questions that he wasn’t entirely ready to face tonight.

All Ilya could think of right now was the picture of himself much younger and scrolling through his old cellphone, staring at all of his unacknowledged texts from Shane. But it didn’t matter anymore. As much as it still hurt, he was here now. Ilya was successful, was friendly with his new team, and was once again in the same city as Shane Hollander. Maybe the pain could start to ease and the void could be filled.

Though it was painfully obvious that they were not who they once were, Shane and Ilya continued to talk. Shane still had some of his walls up, as did Ilya (more than he’d like to admit), but they were talking once again. And they would continue to talk until their second refills of vodka were empty and the sun set.

But the problem was, Ilya thought, where did they go from here? Was there even a “them” after this?

Chapter End Notes

Shane's POV at the beginning of the chapter: If I move fast enough, my anxiety won't be able to catch up o.O

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Shane and Ilya's worlds collide. Ilya can't help but feel jealous. Shane thinks that he's finally made some progress with himself.

Chapter Notes

I hope that you guys are still enjoying this fic! I've been having a blast writing it. Thank you to those of you who commented, your comments about Shane's word choice made me laugh a lot.

From now on, the fic will take place in present day unless otherwise specified.

Before practice started this morning, Wiebe announced that he wanted the entire team to bond outside of the rink. Team bonding for the sake of a better performance this season. Harris suggested that they go to this restaurant that has been blowing up lately for having two extremely hot chefs and promptly made a reservation when the team agreed. Ilya quickly thought of how Shane mentioned that his own restaurant had become popular recently but thought nothing of it. Even if they went to Shane's restaurant, he and Shane were fine. Shane would probably be in the kitchen anyways.

Now, they were all freshly showered and a little loopy from exhaustion. Despite the gruelling practice, they were all in a good mood and shuffled inside a restaurant named Leaf + Sake. It was definitely a high-end restaurant just from the optics of it all. The exterior was sleek, painted almost entirely black. The name of the restaurant itself was written in white and simple and classic cursive. As Ilya walked inside, he couldn't help but notice a few pride flag stickers neatly stuck onto the glass door. They heavily contrasted with the aesthetics of the restaurant but looked like they belonged nonetheless. The interior was just as classy as the exterior. The entire restaurant was lit with dim but warm lighting. Furniture was sleek and modern but accented with dark wood and greenery. The bar was backlit with glowing shelves of colourful and expensive bottles of imported liquors.

The hostess led them to a large table where Ilya was sandwiched between Harris and Barrett. While he liked both of them, Ilya would have preferred if he weren't sitting in the middle so that he wouldn't have to continuously catch stray heart eyes that Harris and Barrett were obviously giving each other. Still, Ilya knew he was in good company so he didn't mind it too much.

They ordered food without much of a fuss, though the team saw that one of the dishes was named “Childhood Tastes” (some dish that was basically glorified poutine) and Bood remarked that there was finally something on the menu that Haas could eat. Haas took the joke like a champ with a slight blush on his face. The kid still had a long way to go before he could let his hair down with the team, but Ilya liked him. Haas had so much potential and was sure going to help the team win some games. Ilya ordered something French with beef in it that Harris assured that he would probably like.

While waiting for food, Wiebe lightly tapped onto his glass with a knife to get everyone’s attention. “As part of today’s team building initiative, I am going to task all of you to not talk about hockey tonight. We have a lot of fresh meat on our team this year, so try to get to know each other!” Wiebe ignored the wave of groans that he received. Hockey players not talk about hockey? Doable but very hard. “Talk about your interests outside of hockey! Family and friends! Girls! I don’t know, anything that isn’t hockey. The hockey ban is only lifted after we leave this building. Dismissed.”

Hobbies outside of hockey... right. Back in Boston, Ilya used to love luxury cars: buying cars, admiring cars he could buy, and storing cars in his huge garage. But now, he found them to be pointless and his interests towards them just vanished. He had sold all but one of those cars from his collection. Even then, he wanted to sell his remaining car: a bright orange Ferrari F80. Ilya mulled his mind over what he could talk about with Harris and Barrett. While he didn’t particularly want to participate, he would try because Wiebe was a good man whom Ilya respected.

“My family has an apple orchard,” Harris happily spoke. “We’re nearing apple season right now, so I’m preparing myself to do all things apple for the coming months. Brace yourselves because I will smell like nothing but apple cider for a long time.”

That made a lot of sense to Ilya, since he already thought that Harris smelt like a warm apple pie. It seemed that apples ran deep in Harris’s blood in every sense of the word.

“Our orchard also has lots of dogs,” Harris continued, sensing that neither Ilya nor Barrett had much to add.

“Dogs?” Ilya perked up. He had always wanted a dog.

“I’ve lost count of how many dogs my family has had, but I love them. People seem to think that our orchard is the best place to dump their dogs. It’s incredibly stupid and dangerous, but I’m glad that the dogs are dumped at our orchard and not anywhere else. Maybe I can bring my dog Chiron around the rink sometime and you can meet him.”

“Harris, please do,” Ilya said, suddenly giddy from picturing a dog at the rink. “I would love nothing more than to have fluffy щенок [*puppy*] at the rink.”

“What about you, Troy. Do you like dogs?” Harris asked.

“Yeah, they’re fine,” Barrett replied quietly.

Before the silence could settle upon them, their food had arrived. Servers set down their plates in tandem, making sure that everyone was served at the exact same moment. Ilya's dish was a hearty serving of seared steak, red wine sauce, and the smoothest mashed potato that Ilya had ever had. Harris was right, Ilya did like stuff like this, and this dish in particular was amazing. Ilya spared no time and started demolishing it while appearing polite and presentable. He could probably eat a couple of plates of this and still want more.

"How are you guys liking the food? Is everything okay?" The hostess asked when they were a couple of bites into their meal.

"Please send our compliments to the chef," Wiebe sighed with satisfaction.

"If you would like, I can bring him out here. I'm sure he would be honoured to be serving the Ottawa Centaurs."

"There's no need to trouble him."

"No, it's not a problem at all." The hostess immediately slipped back into the kitchen before coming out with a brown-haired and blue-eyed man in a white chef's jacket—the very man that Ilya saw in Shane's photo. Now this was going to get very interesting. Ilya naturally sat up straighter in his seat.

"Yo Pike, what's up?!" Wyatt stood up from his seat and gave "Pike" a friendly hug, which was immediately reciprocated. "Guys, this is Hayden Pike. We used to play hockey together back in the day. So what, you like own a restaurant now? That's awesome man!"

Ilya could see how Pike could have been a(n average) hockey player in a previous lifetime. He was half a head shorter than Hazy and had a somewhat athletic build.

"So nice to see you, Wyatt! Yeah, I'm doing the whole restaurant thing. I'm thrilled to have you guys here." Pike was unbelievably friendly but Ilya didn't like him for some reason.

"Don't kill me but I'm more of a Montreal Voyageurs fan myself."

And Ilya found his reason. The rest of his team laughed at his bad attempt at a joke.

"Ah there's our head chef. Shane get over here!"

Shane, who was looking at the reservation book at the hostess's stand, looked like a deer caught in the headlights, completely frozen in place. He wiped his hands on the towel hanging from his apron before ultimately trudging over. It was hard not to stare at him as he wore a black short-sleeved chef's jacket that exposed much of muscular forearms. Shane and his looks were half of the reason (though Ilya thought "main reason" was more apt) why their restaurant became so popular.

Harris turned to Ilya and whispered: "the posts were definitely right. The chefs are very hot."

Ilya tried to smile at Harris to show that he had heard what was said, but Ilya couldn't help but focus on the way that Shane's eyes darted between him and Pike. Clearly, Shane had

never been more caught off guard. Ilya tried very hard to suppress the shit-eating grin that was forming on his face. He was getting too amused at Shane's demise.

"Shane is the head chef to my executive chef. He's the Sake in Leaf + Sake. He's my partner in crime," Pike said proudly, though Ilya thought he was being too sappy with his words. "I wouldn't be able to do any of this without him."

There was that word again. Partner. Ilya had to remind himself that he had no right being so sensitive to that word when he and Shane were still decidedly undecided on where they stood. In fact, he shouldn't be so outrightly negative to someone who he had never met before, but it was unbelievably easy to shit on Pike. And unbelievably fun too.

"Uh, hi everyone," Shane chirped, still shell-shocked. "I hope that you guys enjoyed our food."

"It's amazing," Wiebe reiterated, which the team all loudly agreed with.

"Shane here," Pike spoke with a hand over Shane's chest, "created most of the menu. Credit for the tastes and ideas all go to him. He's absolutely brilliant in the kitchen."

"Dude, you gotta let me shake your hand," Bood pointedly said to Shane before excitedly doing what he had threatened to do. Poor Shane looked like his arm was going to fall off from how energetically Bood shook it. "This is the best food that I have eaten. Ever. You will be seeing a lot of me from now on. I can't believe that I've only come here now. You've earned yourself a regular."

The tips of Shane's ears turned red while the team hummed in agreement. "Thank you," Shane replied, but the upturned lilt in his voice made his gratitude sound like a question.

Shane was probably dying on the inside from the amount of attention that he was getting—attention that was a complete surprise so he had no way to mentally prepare beforehand. Ilya really shouldn't be having so much fun watching this unfold, but he was having the most fun he's had in a long time. Sue him. He had the money anyways.

Suddenly, Ilya felt Harris elbow his side. Harris's eyes shone with knowing, having zeroed in on what was going on with Ilya and potentially Shane too. Clearly, Ilya wasn't being subtle about his amusement. Thankfully, however, Harris didn't press any further. Ilya did know better and knew that Harris would eventually ask him about this, not in a demanding way but in a way that a friend would want to know more about another friend.

Ilya turned to his food again. He needed to calm down and be normal about this.

"How crazy was that, man?" Hayden asked Shane after they had just seen the Centaurs off.

Shane was both shocked and embarrassed that he was suddenly entertaining the entire team, but there was also this other feeling that nagged at him. He was practically submerged into the world of hockey and Shane felt... nothing. He wasn't scared that these huge hockey players were going to jump him, and he wasn't spiralling into regret and sadness of what his life could have looked like. Shane wasn't even jealous of the NHL players before him. He was just happy that there was a large group of people who were enjoying his food.

Years ago, his therapist told Shane that he would know what healing looked like to him when it hit him all at once. And suddenly, Shane felt like he was somewhat healed. He was no longer standing in the shadows of his failed career. Rather, hockey was just a passing figure in his life.

"Hey, Hayden, do you ever regret not going pro?" Shane asked while busying himself with cleanup. It wasn't really his job to do cleanup but he liked to keep himself busy in the kitchen.

Like Shane, Hayden also had a promising career in hockey. He didn't have a tragic end or anything. Instead, after years of playing for University of Ottawa's Gee-Gee's as a forward, Hayden graduated and married his high school sweetheart. Now, they had four beautiful children together, and potentially even more if they didn't slow down.

"Absolutely not. I love this job, man. I get to do what I love all day long and then the best part? I get to go home to my beautiful wife and my beautiful kids, even if they do drive me up the wall sometimes. If I had gone pro, I wouldn't have nearly as much time with them."

"You would have as many kids either," Shane joked back.

"Shane. Bud. Have you seen some of the hockey players out there? Some of them have enough kids to create their own hockey team."

"Yeah, and you're not far either," Shane laughed.

"What do you have against my kids? They call you Uncle Shane!"

"Nothing! I'm just worried about Jackie."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," Hayden said as he left to sign off on a shipment of beef they just received.

As Shane started preparing the kitchen for the late dinner rush, sorting through wildflowers for the desserts' garnish, he couldn't help but recall what Ilya had said to him many years ago: *if I stopped, I think I would maybe miss it but not be sad about it. No more pressure.* Despite how nonchalantly he said it, his words carried so much weight. While Shane didn't understand what Ilya meant before, he think he finally understood it—embodied it too. It just took Shane a couple of years to do so.

Shane would be lying if he said he wasn't beyond nervous to see Ilya so soon after their talk. Shane had said so much in so little time—it was embarrassing how much he had to say. It was as if he was monologuing the entire time Ilya was at his place. But, Ilya seemed to have

receive everything well. He quietly sat through Shane's words, nodding in understanding as he listened. Ilya, at one point, even had his hand on top of Shane's. Shane had forgotten how warm he was and it took plenty of self-restraint to not lean into Ilya's touch.

He had to go slow. First was reconciliation and the rest was for much later. The rest was truly what terrified Shane the most because while he was nowhere close to being in the same headspace as he was in university, his younger self definitely was right. The NHL was still as homophobic as it was before, and there was no way they were going to accept going to accept a queer player. Plus, Ilya's reputation wasn't exactly the best right now. He was still just as famous but no one, not even Shane, understood why Ilya had taken such an astronomical pay cut to go to a team that almost nobody cheered for. The Centaurs were a great team of people, but were horribly ranked. At worst, fans hated him with a searing passion. At best, fans were confused.

If Ilya struck up any relations with Shane that was not platonic, that might just tank his entire career. But this wasn't up to Shane to decide. He'd already made that mistake before. Wherever he and Ilya were going in the future, that was up to them to decide together. That is, if Ilya even wanted that.

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Shane is surprised with Ilya's presence on his run. Shane seems to be finally in control of his thoughts, while Ilya seems to be spiralling out of control.

Chapter Notes

Slight trigger warning for this chapter: there will be brief descriptions of Ilya finding his mother.

Shane didn't work out nearly as much or intensely as he did before, which was a good thing. He already spent 10+ hours, five days a week in the kitchen, which was tiring enough on its own. Still, he often did short workout routines before work, and on his days off (usually Sunday and Monday), Shane would run around the city one day and do yoga on the other day. Today was his running day.

Shane always preferred to run early in the morning, before everyone in the city woke up. He preferred morning runs even more so now that the late summer heat was insufferable, even in the morning. The sun always seemed to rise with a raging fury and the humidity certainly did not help.

Running along the Ottawa River, Shane tried to soak up the calm of his surroundings and made a point to only focus on the present. No thoughts about work were allowed. No worrying and ruminating allowed either. Shane found the kitchen to be calm too—the entire restaurant was now a well-oiled machine—but the noises and fast-paced environment almost always left Shane as satisfied as he was drained. Shane breathed in the warm air and tried to take in the greenery before him. It wouldn't be long until the trees turned into fiery bursts of yellow, orange, and red. He listened the slow splashes of the river while trying not to think too hard about the smells it emanated.

As Shane ran, he tried to be mindful of people around him by listening to the crunching of footsteps against the trail. He always ran at a brisk pace, but there were always some highly motivated people he met on his runs that wanted to speed past him. In those cases, he always tried to stick to the sides of the trail to make sure he wasn't inconveniencing anyone.

It wasn't long before Shane heard someone approaching him from behind. Their footprints were heavy and fast. Automatically, Shane moved further to the side of the trail. He waited for the runner to overtake him but, to his surprise, they slowed down once they approached

Shane. Looking to his side, he found Ilya running by his side in a sleeveless black hoodie and running shorts. Of course. Ilya was a professional athlete, so it would be highly probable for him to also be working out on a very public and popular trail.

“You don’t run with music?” Ilya lightly panted, taking his earphones out.

“No?”

Hayden had relentlessly made fun of Shane for doing this at first, so Shane knew this was not a normal thing to do.

Ilya shot Shane a look, one that Shane knew all too well.

“What? You’re too scared to call me boring to my face now?”

Ilya shot him a dazzling smile before wordlessly speeding up. There was no way that Shane was going to let him run faster.

Somehow, the two fully-grown men started racing each other, trying to outcompete one another as the city slowly woke up. Shane found himself bursting out in fits of laughter as they tried to push past each other, fighting to be the fastest. He was not going to let Ilya win if he had anything to do about it.

By the end of their run, they were both gasping for air, sweat dripping down the sides of their faces. Ilya was bent over, hands on his knees as he heaved for air while Shane slowly walked around with wobbly legs and hands over his head, also struggling to breathe. They decided that the race ended with a draw, as both of them exited the park at the same time, both almost collapsing from exhaustion.

Perhaps that wasn’t the smartest way to start their Sunday morning—Shane was definitely going to feel it everywhere in a few hours—but it was sure an unexpected but exhilarating start.

“Woo!” Ilya exclaimed, having nearly caught his breath. “Need some caffeine after that. My treat?”

Shane sat outside of the cafe they found nearby. They both weakly walked over, though they were both too proud to admit that they overdid their run and still tried to have a secondary race. It was a slow and pathetic race, but Ilya still looked at Shane with so much triumphant exuberance when he made it to the cafe first.

Ilya didn’t say anything and slipped into the cafe, giving Shane a look as he went in, signalling that Shane needed to stay put where he was. If Shane’s memory served him correctly, Ilya had two modes when it came to coffee: he was either guzzling black coffee by the pot, or he got the creamiest, sweetest drink alive that had barely a drop of coffee in it. There was no in-between and Ilya only selected his drink based off what mood he was in that day, not his energy level. Between the two of them, Ilya seemed to have a never-ending well of energy.

Ilya came out of the cafe with an extra large cup in one hand and a medium cup that had a tea bag dangling from the rim in the other. Ilya had gone for “guzzling coffee by the pot” today, and he had also remembered Shane’s caffeine preferences.

“Thank you,” Shane said, smelling the nutty steam of his roasted green tea. “You really didn’t have to.”

“Is consolation prize for you.” Ilya winked, face still rosy from their races.

Shane didn’t even try to stop his eyes from rolling. Of course Ilya was still the same smug asshole after all these years. Shane didn’t miss the looks that Ilya gave him when the entire Centaurs team came to his restaurant either. Shane was ready to flip Ilya off, but at least one of them had to maintain some sense of professionalism. It sure wasn’t going to be Ilya and his sly smile.

“How does your loser tea taste, Shane?”

Shane tried to ignore the way that Ilya leaned closer to him as he taunted Shane. He certainly wasn’t dizzy from the strong scents that came off of Ilya. Shane was sure that his natural scent was coming off too. Ever since his undergraduate graduation, Shane had to significantly decrease the dosage of his suppressors and ditch the scent blockers entirely. If Shane wanted to live a healthy life, then he would never be able to go back to his highly medicated state.

Suddenly, Shane wondered if Ilya had ever smelled the real him prior to them reconciling recently. He hoped that his scent wasn’t repulsive to Ilya, though he quickly pushed that thought away. Shane shouldn’t concern himself with such thoughts.

“It tastes fine. You’re such a poor winner.”

“Still a winner.” Ilya shrugged, cockily smiling as he sipped his coffee.

Quiet fell upon them as they continued to drink their beverages. Shane wondered if it was okay for Ilya to be out in a public place for so long. Would it be dangerous for Ilya to be associated with the likes of Shane? Granted, it was still early (just barely 7 o’clock) so most people weren’t fully awake to register that they were in the presence of a hockey legend. Shane tried to soothe his worries by reminding himself that it was Ilya’s choice to be outside and stay with Shane.

“What are your plans for the rest of the day, Chef?”

Shane didn’t want to acknowledge what it did to him to hear “chef” spoken so deliberately slow in a thick Russian accent. “Nothing much. Today and tomorrow are my days off so I’ll probably just relax and do some chores today.”

That was another rule that Shane had to make for himself: he had to make sure that there was at least one entire day of his entire week where work was completely off limits. He had to set boundaries for himself to prevent such a horrible burnout again. Shane never wanted to see his parents so sick with worry about his health again. It nearly destroyed him to see his parents so distraught at the foot of his hospital bed when he collapsed a second time.

“Just chores? By yourself?” Ilya asked.

“I mean, yeah, don’t you do your chores by yourself too?” Shane didn’t get where Ilya was going with this. It was very uncharacteristically Ilya to be so interested in the mundane.

“Your partner does not help you with chores?” Ilya’s brows were furrowed with confusion.

“No...?” What partner? Did Ilya think that Shane had a boyfriend based off of the insides of his apartment?

“So you and Hayden...”

A fit of laughter overcame Shane. He laughed so suddenly and so powerfully that it almost sounded like a bark at first—he sounded utterly ridiculous. Shane was going to be the first to admit that he regretted using the odd word choice of him and “his partner” opening a restaurant together without specifying they were business partners to Ilya. But, he could not have ever imagined that Ilya thought that he and Hayden were romantically involved.

“No! Hayden and I met at culinary school at Le Cordon Bleu. We bonded over liking hockey and both being one of the older students. God, Ilya, I can’t believe that you thought I was dating *him*.” Shane nearly had tears in his eyes and his stomach ached from laughter.

The starting of a blush bloomed on Ilya’s face.

”He’s a literal brother to me, not to mention that Hayden is happily married to a woman. The guy is as straight as an arrow.”

“Okay.”

“But thank you for thinking that I was in a relationship with someone like him,” Shane joked. He loved Hayden but just like how Shane and Rose were not compatible, Shane and Hayden were not romantically compatible in the slightest, even if Hayden were gay.

“Oh believe me, I know your type.”

Six years ago, Shane would have furiously blushed at Ilya’s comment. But now, Shane was a little braver and a lot more comfortable in his skin. Plus, he couldn’t let Ilya have all the fun, so he said, “and what exactly is my type?”

Ilya raised his brows, clearly sensing the challenge that Shane was bringing. “Brown hair. Blue eyes. Boring. Not very good looking. Skinny legs. So exactly like Hayden.”

Shane fought back the urge to laugh again, keeping his face void of emotion. “That’s exactly it. I love the feeling of having chopstick legs wrap around me.”

Shane internally made an apology to Hayden, but as his closest friend and business partner, Shane thought it was more than fair to make fun of him. If Hayden could make fun of Shane’s music-less exercise routines, then Shane could make fun of Hayden in some way too. Maybe Shane wasn’t making fun of Hayden on the same level, but he had always told

Hayden to focus on his legs too whenever they worked out together. It was more or less Hayden's fault for not listening to Shane all these years.

It was Ilya who broke first, lightly chuckling at the image that Shane had conjured. Shane found it easy to mirror his expression. The image was beyond ridiculous and Shane didn't want to linger on it for too long. Obviously, Shane's type was sitting right in front of him, whether he'd like to admit it or not. Even if Ilya knew this to be true, there was no chance that Shane was ever going to voice this to a living soul. He wasn't ready yet.

"So do you like it here—Ottawa?" What Shane really wanted to ask was why Ilya here at all? On paper, he had it all in Boston, but based on his own experience, Shane knew that pages didn't tell the full story.

"I like it okay."

"Just okay?" Shane hoped that this would invite more transparency between them, but wouldn't be disappointed if nothing more than small talk transpired. Baby steps.

"It is Canada, Shane. Everything here is just okay."

"Hey, some of us were born and raised here!"

"And that is why you are the way you are: boring."

"Wow, low blow, Ilya."

"Is not a low blow if it is truth. But maybe you're not all that boring now since you know Russian. Still mostly boring though."

Right. Ilya had stumbled upon him and Elena speaking in Russian that day. Shane was beyond embarrassed. Russian was notoriously hard and Shane had never really spoken Russian with anyone before. He was confident that his pronunciation was horrendous. It was just his little secret hobby until it suddenly wasn't anymore.

"Talk to me. In Russian."

"Absolutely not." Shane hid behind his cup as he drank his tea, his face flushed with embarrassment.

"You were going on and on in grocery store. I heard."

"And that's all you're going to hear."

"Okay." Ilya bounced his leg up and down as he looked at their surroundings with no distinguishable emotion on his face.

Shane looked at Ilya in surprise. He was expecting much more of a back-and-forth with Ilya. He had never known Ilya to given in so easily on anything. Looking at the man before him—the man whose curls were far more defined with sweat—Shane couldn't help but wonder if everything was okay, as in if Ilya was okay, if things between them were okay, if... Shane

forcefully reminded himself that this was his rest day. He should not be so ridden with worry because there was surely a logical reason for Ilya's actions that he just couldn't see yet. There was no point in worrying over things he had no control over.

They sat around, finishing their beverages for a few more minutes, before Shane got up to leave. While it was true that he didn't have anything plans with other people, he had set a schedule for himself that he wanted to comply to. According to his schedule, he was already behind, having missed breakfast and his morning shower. Shane didn't particularly mind, however, as this change in schedule was a pleasant surprise. But, he would mind if his plans for the entire day was completely altered, which would happen if he didn't go home now.

"Thank you for the tea," Shane said, before boldly adding, "*Goodbye, Ilyusha.*"

Ilya wobbled into the arena. Everything still hurt despite the ice bath he took. He definitely overdid it for his run with Shane, but it was fun while it lasted.

The locker room was deafeningly quiet as Ilya sat down. He was extremely early, but he couldn't bear being at his house anymore. Being woken up to sound of pattering feet, Ilya's mind somehow misconstrued the sound for his mother being home—his mother, who had been dead since he was twelve. He shot out of bed, expecting her to be in his kitchen preparing breakfast and humming to her favourite song. Instead, all he found was a kitchen littered with last night's takeout that he hadn't bothered to clean up. The sound came from a pair of Baltimore orioles playing the gutters outside his bedroom.

Ilya couldn't understand why his brain made him think of something so foolish as his mother cooking in his kitchen. His brain made him have hope, which was worse than anything else in the world.

Hunched over on his bench, Ilya fiddled with her necklace as his body trembled. It was hard to not picture her blue lips and pale skin. Ilya could only muster enough energy to cradle his head with his hands as he continued to shake. His face was covered with a sheen of cold sweat as he continued to picture her brown curls cascading over the edge of her bed.

"Hi there, stranger!" A voice snapped Ilya out of his torment. It was Harris, who strolled in gleefully with his phone in hand. The pride pins on his denim jacket clinked as he walked and glistened underneath the light of the locker room. "Didn't expect anyone to come here so early on a Monday."

"Hi." Ilya's voice was a ghostly whisper.

"I just came in here to get a shot of the empty locker room for a reel that I'm posting later, but I can leave if you want to have a moment alone."

Alone. Ilya didn't think he should be alone right now.

“No. It’s fine. I’ll get up.” With shaky knees, Ilya walked behind Harris so that he could get a sweeping shot of the room.

Harris always seemed to be very happy. Even as he pressed record, a slight smile tugged at the corner of his lips. Ilya thought about how he had been happier lately, especially now that he and Shane were connected once again, but he didn’t know if he was happy like Harris—Ilya didn’t know if that kind of happiness could be possible for him.

“Okay, all done! Thanks, Ilya.” Harris flashed a bright smile and Ilya tried to smile back. “I’d be remiss if I didn’t ask this but what’s going on between you and the chef?”

“Me and Pike?” Ilya asked, obviously knowing that Harris meant him and Shane. He knew that Harris was a safe person and only meant well. Ilya just didn’t know if he was ready to talk about it yet. “I just met him for the first time. Same as you.”

“And what about the other Chef? Shane—I think his name was?” Harris was still as happy as ever. In fact, he was probably becoming more and more happy as they dove into Ilya’s personal life. He practically glowed with sunshine and rainbows.

“Um... it’s nothing.”

Harris immediately inflated with further interest. Ilya was never one to fumble with his words. Even if he didn’t have the right vocabulary, he would still bulldoze through his words until he got to the right word or until someone provided him with the word he was looking for.

Even though Ilya towered over Harris, Ilya couldn’t feel smaller right now. He wanted to disappear and not think about this.

“That’s definitely not ‘nothing!’” Harris imitated Ilya’s accent.

The tips of Ilya ears felt warm as he remembered just how sweet Shane smelled on their run. He just hoped that his brain wouldn’t linger on how his nickname sounded coming from Shane’s mouth in Russian. It did unspeakable things to his body when he initially heard it.

“Oh my god, Ilya! You’re absolutely blushing right now. I can’t believe this—I got Ilya freaking Rozanov to blush!”

“I am not blushing. Russians do not blush.”

“Uh-huh.” Harris had a smug smirk. “So tell me, what are you thinking about that’s making you feel so hot and bothered? It’s definitely not Shane and how hot he is, right?”

Ilya took a deep breath, trying to calm down the supposed raging heat in his face. He had never talked about being bisexual to anyone before, not even Svetlana, though she was well aware. Harris most definitely didn’t know about Ilya’s preferences. For all he and the rest of the world knew, Ilya Rozanov was a raging man-whore who plowed through women in every town he went to, which was not completely untrue. Harris was probably just joking around, though Ilya was confident that if he did tell Harris, he would be very accepting.

“We were classmates. McGill.”

“That’s so sweet. Oh right, I forgot that you went to school in Montreal,” said Harris, thankfully changing the subject. “Did you pick up any French while you were there? Parlez-vous français?”

“No. French is a stupid language. English is already hard enough.”

Harris burst out into a hearty fit of laughter. Ilya knew that Harris was fluent in both English and French, as he frequently posted about the Centaurs in both languages. Still, what Ilya said about French was true. He stood by his statement.

“If I get a clip of you saying that, you might get a mini riot on your hands, Ilya—from your own fans.”

Did Ilya have fans in Ottawa? Would anyone cheer for him now that he had betrayed the very team that drafted him? Harris surely seemed to think that Ilya had more than a couple. Ilya just didn’t know if Harris was being truthful or just being plain, Canadian “nice.”

Practice was still a nightmare every time it happened. Every drill they did made it painfully obvious that they weren’t going to do so well this season. Playoffs were definitely out of the question. Ilya wasn’t in a right state of mind; Troy was too in his own head, playing for himself rather than their team; Haas was too afraid to take the shots he clearly had. And, the team wasn’t prepared for Wiebe’s gentle approach either. They were all far too used to having berating words shouted at them from across the rink.

Ilya began to wonder if he had made a mistake. Even he wasn’t entirely sure why he left Boston. All he knew was that he woke up one morning in his Boston home and felt it wasn’t right. He looked at his mansion, glistening trophy room, packed garage, and his team and just felt nothing. Just indifferent. Suddenly, nothing mattered to him.

Then, as an attempt to ease the emptiness that Ilya felt, he decided to go through a deep cleaning of his house. He went up into his attic, closet, and pantry to get rid of anything and everything that made him feel negative in any sort of way. In the attic, under a mountain of PR packages he never bothered to open, Ilya found a crumpled cardboard box. In it, were the few belongings that Ilya had taken with him from Montreal. In it, was Ilya’s undergraduate diploma and a little teddy bear with a few other things. Its fur was a little matted with age and dust, but it was still soft underneath his touch. Ilya thought of how he was happier in Canada. He knew the exact reason why he was happier but knew that was all but impossible for him to pursue that reason.

That night, Ilya decided that he wanted to go back to Canada. He was going to become a free agent anyways, so he might as well go now. He could never go to Montreal and play for the Voyageurs. While it was not public knowledge, the Voyageurs were one of the worst teams

when it came to homophobia, sexism, and all things vile against omegas. They kept their vitriol on the ice, reserving it for other players to hear and keeping their fans blissfully ignorant. Then there was Toronto, where the monster Dallas Kent lived. Troy Barrett knew more than anyone how disgusting that man was. Ilya didn't want to go near Kent for fear of what Ilya would do to him. So that left him with Ottawa, a shitty city with a shitty team, and a rookie coach.

And now, Ilya was in Ottawa, Canada and he felt just as defeated. He had only replaced his empty Boston mansion with a large, empty house in Ottawa. His impressive car collection was replaced with a sensible Mercedes SUV. All these replacements only reminded Ilya that the new house and the new car were meant for families. Families. The only family Ilya ever had died when he was twelve, as his brain frequently reminded him. Now, he didn't have anyone. His father was dead and Alexei was dead to him after Ilya cut him off at their father's funeral.

By the time Ilya came to, he found himself sitting alone in his living room. His body had sunk uncomfortably deep into his couch. The sun had set long ago and he didn't know or care to know what time it was. His stomach rumbled but he couldn't be bothered to get up and eat.

The darkness was beginning to seep in and settle into Ilya's lungs; his breathing felt laboured even though he had done nothing but sit since coming home.

Ilya turned on his phone, its bright screen nearly blinding him as he called the only person who he knew would pick up.

"Do you want another car?" Svetlana's voice seemed to instantly lift some of the weight that Ilya carried. It was nice to hear someone so familiar. There was loud music coming from the Svetlana's background. There was no doubt in Ilya's mind that she had stepped away from a party or networking event to talk to him.

The weight was quickly replaced with guilt. It hadn't even crossed his mind to tell Svetlana that he had purged his entire collection. They hadn't talked since news broke out that Ilya was going to Ottawa, and they had only talked because Svetlana called in a panic, worried that Ilya was high out of his mind when he signed his contract. Because that was the only plausible reason why a good player like Ilya Rozanov could ever go to a shit team.

"No," Ilya replied with a clenched jaw.

"So what did you want with me then?"

"Can't a friend just call?"

Svetlana laughed before turning more serious, *"Ilyusha, have you eaten dinner yet? It's ten o'clock."*

Of course Svetlana would be able to immediately sense that someone was wrong with him. He could never hide anything from her, no matter how hard he tried.

"I have," he lied.

“I am ordering you some food to your house right now.” Ilya heard her nails furiously tapping away.

“Sveta, I live in a different country now.”

“How come you think so little of me? I am ordering a pizza with a salad and coke for you. There will not be any fruit on the pizza, but you do need to eat some fruit. You do have food in your fridge, right? You know what? You men cannot be trusted. I’m also ordering groceries for you.”

Maybe Ilya wasn’t as alone as he thought.

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Both Shane and Ilya come into terms with some things.

Baby Amber was only some ten-odd pounds but had the lung capacity of an entire orchestral choir. Shane bounced her up and down, softly patting her back as she continued to wail. She had been fed and burped, but she just wouldn't go down for her afternoon nap. Poor baby was in too much pain to sleep. Jackie assured Shane this was normal as she wrangled Ruby, Jade, and Arthur from the living room to the kitchen to have their lunch.

Shane and Hayden alternated their days off so that there would always be either an executive chef or head chef at the restaurant at all times. It was Shane's day off and Hayden asked if Shane could please help Jackie with the kids. Neither Jackie and Hayden had gotten any sleep the night prior as Amber was teething. Shane had suggested that he go to work instead, but Hayden said that it was more work to stay at home. It was fine. Shane was more than happy to spend some time with Jackie and the kids, no matter how sticky and overstimulated he got by the time he got home.

"I know," Shane whispered over her cries. "It can't feel good."

He gave her a pacifier to help soothe some of the pain but she spat it right back out. Maybe it would feel better if she had something cold against her gums, though he was sure that Jackie and Hayden had already thought of that before. They were seasoned parents.

Shane left the quiet calm of the dim nursery with Amber to find Jackie and the rest of the kids wearing more food than they were eating. Despite this, the kids were happily eating the remaining amounts of food left on their colourful plates while watching Bluey on the TV.

"They all seem to know the best time to be on their worst behaviour," Jackie helplessly laughed as she took Amber in her arms. Amber immediately quieted but still whimpered. "They usually don't get along but as soon as they sense that we're tired, they band together to create utter chaos."

Shane sympathetically smiled as he fixed Jackie a glass of water, which she happily took a large sip of. He felt guilty that he had to pass Amber over to Jackie without being much help. Then, he took a couple of strands of spaghetti out of her long, dark hair.

"Could you please watch them while I put her down? They should be fine for the most part. Bluey is hypnotic to them, but sometimes Arthur likes to run during mealtime."

Shane was well aware that Arthur wasn't the biggest fan of mealtime. Once he got out of his seat, there was no getting him back. He was a little fellow who didn't eat much but could run like Usain Bolt. He was fuelled by god know's what. Arthur was painfully similar to someone Shane knew.

"Of course."

Shane sat down with the children, deliberately avoiding the seat that was covered with spaghetti. Amber and Jade were independently eating while Arthur struggled to scoop up pasta with his fork. Shane couldn't help but wipe off some of the sauce on Arthur's cheek with his thumb as he watched.

"Uncle Shane," Arthur laughed, tickled by Shane's touch.

"Yes, little man?"

"Could you cut up the pasta for me? With the scissors, please?"

Shane looked at Arthur, who looked right back at him with his bright blue eyes, and wasn't sure if this was Arthur's way of distracting Shane so that he could bolt.

"Pasta is quite soft, so I think I can cut it with your fork. Is that okay with you?"

"Yeah!"

As he divided the pasta into smaller pieces, Shane glanced over at the twins to make sure they were still alright. They were loudly singing along to the Bluey theme song as a new episode started playing. Arthur now started to happily eat his pasta, easily scooping up the small segments and shovelling them into his mouth.

Shane understood genetics, but it still blew his mind whenever he saw the Pike children and saw how much they were a perfect blend of their parents. Ruby and Jade were fraternal twins who resembled both of their parents, but Ruby looked more like Jackie while Jade looked more like Hayden. Arthur was just a mini version of Hayden. He had the same eyes, same nose, and same cowlick on the back of his head, but his personality was entirely Jackie's. It was too soon to tell how Jackie and Hayden blended together in Amber's features, but she already had Jackie's warm green eyes.

Shane couldn't help but wonder what his kids would look like, if he ever chose to have them. How many of his features would they have? He hoped that his kids wouldn't have his freckles. He hated how they looked and was always slightly paranoid that he would eventually develop skin cancer. If he had children, he hoped that they got Ilya's eyes—Shane cut off his thoughts, ashamed that he had even started that train of thought. There was nothing going on between them.

"Uncle Shane," Arthur quietly got his attention again.

"Yes, Arthur?" Shane contentedly looked at Arthur's empty plate. Arthur still had a bit of bread leftover, but it was more than Shane had seen him eat in while.

“Can I have more, please?”

“You want some more pasta?” Shane picked up his plate.

“No, not pasta.” Arthur furrowed his brows in thought. “Can I... frenchy toasts?”

Shane’s heart felt unbelievably full. He tried not to let the full extent of his happiness show on his face, as he knew that if his reaction was too big, then Arthur might spook and change his mind.

“French toast?” Shane clarified. “Is that what you would like?”

“Please.” Arthur eagerly nodded. “French toast.”

“What do you think, Jade and Ruby? Would you like some French toast as well?”

The girls screamed in unison.

“Okay, how about this? If you guys finish your pasta, just like Arthur, then we can make French toast together.”

The three Pike kids were all too happy to agree with him.

Shane knew both Jackie and Hayden well enough to know that they would bend over backwards to get Arthur to eat more. The reason he was so little was mostly because he was such a picky eater. So, Shane was more than happy to help them with this. If Arthur wanted to eat French toast, then that was exactly what he was going to get.

With the dining table cleaned up and the kids slightly cleaner than they were, the four of them were in the kitchen making French toast together. Jackie had come downstairs a while ago but Shane ushered her to rest, as he could manage the kids for a bit. After all, he could go home tonight to a child-free apartment and pass out for as long as he wanted. The kids took turns cracking an eggs and Shane secretly fished out any shards of shell when they weren’t looking. Shane firmly gripped the kids’ hands as they held the serrated knife to each cut a slice of the loaf of brioche the Pikes had in the fridge. The kids also each took turns at whisking the egg mixture. They spilled much less than Shane had anticipated. Then, as Shane fried the French toast on the stove, he had his own little fanbase, staring at him from the dining table with amazed, wide eyes as if he were doing the impressive thing in the world.

The visuals of Shane cooking with the kids made him laugh. Years ago, when Shane had just met Hayden and they only had Jade and Ruby, Shane was absolutely terrified of children. Even the thought of holding one of them scared him to no end. It took him two months just to hold one of them. Looking back at it now, Shane was so terrified of his own designation that it bled into his view of children. He was worried that being comfortable with children made him too stereotypically omega. But Jackie showed him that there was nothing stronger than a childrearing omega. Hayden, an alpha himself, could not even keep up with Jackie’s tenacity towards their children. Even on no sleep, Jackie still managed to handle all four children by herself, make lunch, and make sure that no one was harmed with little help from Shane today. If that wasn’t powerful, Shane didn’t know what was.

Still, the thought of Shane having his own kids was terrifying to him. He didn't know if he would be a good parent. He would probably be a strict, no-nonsense dad, just based on how he controlled his own day-to-day. Sure, he was good with the Pike children, but that was because he didn't have to lay down the law. He just followed Jackie and Hayden's lead and reinforced whatever rules they had. Shane wasn't sure if he would be able to do the same for his kids, if he had any in the far, distant future.

"Thank you for doing that," Jackie said as the two of them finally succeeded in putting all the kids to sleep for their afternoon nap. The house was hauntingly quiet as they collapsed on the couch alongside a plethora of hard, plastic toys.

"I didn't do anything," Shane shrugged. He was being honest when he said that like spending time with Jackie and the kids.

"Shane Hollander, has anyone told you before that your modesty is extremely irritating?" Jackie laughed.

"A couple of people might have mentioned something."

"Seriously, you were a tremendous help today. A literal godsend. Thank you. Any kid would be lucky to have you as their dad. I mean it."

Shane didn't like compliments as they made him uncomfortable, so he just weakly smiled at Jackie. There was a small part of him that hoped that what Jackie said was true.

Ilya found himself on the backyard deck of Bood's house quietly nursing a beer. Barrett sat next to him with a blank stare directed at the wooden floors. Bood was manning the grill, flipping his jerk chicken once one side got a nice char. Everyone else seemed to be chatting along and getting along just fine. Lisa and Cassie, Wyatt and Bood's wives respectively, were delighting everyone with embarrassing stories. Even Haas, who was often like a little baby deer was laughing along, though Ilya thought it was probably because Haas had drank more than a few cans of liquid courage.

He wanted a cigarette. Badly. His hands were shaking with withdrawal. By the time he joined the Raiders, he had nearly quit smoking for good. The entirety of his rookie year was spent with nicotine gum in his mouth and patches plastered just about everywhere on his body. Ilya was still known to smoke a cigarette now and then, but his body craved it right now. He just needed something to cut the edge and the drinks in Bood's several beer fridges weren't cutting it for him.

To think of it, Ilya hadn't smoked his occasional cigarettes much after he bumped into Shane. Ilya didn't want to spend much thought on the connections between the two.

It was cruel to admit but it was oddly comforting to see that Ilya wasn't the only person who was miserable. Barrett hadn't spoken a word or moved a single inch since he came and sat down next to Ilya, far away from the action. Ilya knew that Barrett had an explanation for his withdrawn behaviour—Barrett believed that everyone hated him to the core and still didn't think he was good enough to act with anyone. Ilya, on the other hand, didn't have an excuse. For all the team knew, he was just a weird asshole who was simultaneously the life of the party and flighty when confronted with opportunities to socialize.

Maybe, Ilya just needed to try. He needed to stop being lazy, as his father once put it.

"We should join them, yes?" Ilya asked Troy, who snapped out of his trance with darkening cheeks and an increasingly worrying look. "This is our team."

Ilya dragged Barrett over to the fire pit where Lisa was just finishing up on telling one of her horror stories from the hospital, something about a man getting his member stuck in a can. If he was being honest, he was dragging Barrett as much as he was dragging himself. He just thought that if he brought Barrett, he could think of it as a feat of camaraderie rather than a feat of loathing self-pity.

"Ah, how nice of you newcomers to join us," Wyatt welcomed.

Ilya tried to think of a quick remark but the thought died in his mind as quickly as it came to him. Instead, he just winked.

"I'm not sure if anyone has said it yet, but we're all really glad that you're apart of the Centaurs now, Ilya" Lisa said with a warm smile. "We could really use your skills."

"And your looks," Cassie added, which got a wave of mixed reactions. "Hey, just because I'm married to Zane and carrying his child does not mean that I can't enjoy the view! We're happy to have you. I'm sick and tired of losing all the time."

A smile grew on Ilya's face and the tremble in his hand wasn't so severe anymore. He didn't know that the team had talked about him in such a way.

"Troy," Lisa said, maintaining her smile. "It was very brave of you to do what you did. Good for you for standing up to that piece of shit."

Everyone was quick to say "fuck him" in unison, which Ilya found amusing. Troy had the ghost of a smile on his face, which looked extremely awkward as his face actively fought against making such an expression. Ilya was sure that his own smile before looked no better, even if Cassie had complimented his looks.

As everyone fell back into stories, Ilya couldn't help but feel distant. It wasn't that his English suddenly failed; he still understood most of what was being discussed. It was like he wasn't there. He looked at everyone talking animatedly. He smelled how everyone's scents mingled and was thankful that, for the first time, they weren't dripping with sweat, body odour, and pheromones. He tasted Bood's infamous jerk chicken and hot sauce. He felt the laughter bubble up inside his chest as they heard Bood complain about Barrett stealing his

thunder years ago. But... it was undeniable it felt like Ilya wasn't there, like he watched everyone and everything unfold as a ghost who no one knew was there.

It was when everyone started fawning over Haas and the other younger players for their drunk, rosy cheeks and Ilya couldn't do anything but blankly stare that he decided that he needed some help.

Ilya could not be a hockey player, never mind a *good* hockey player if he felt so out of tune with his mind and body. He would be failing all of the good people before him. He would be failing all of the work he put into his career. Above all, he would be proving his father right.

As soon as Ilya climbed into his SUV, he started searching for psychologists in the area.

It was because of Ilya's barbecue crash out that he found himself in a small, windowless room on one of his rare days off. He sat down on a small sofa with his hands sandwiched between his thighs. He might as well look like a whimpering dog that was backed up into a corner.

To his right, Galina readied her pen and notebook. She was a petit Russian woman who was one of the only Russian-speaking psychologists that Ilya had managed to find.

"Okay, Mr. Rozanov, so what brings you to therapy?"

Ilya took a deep breath. "I am broken. At least my brain is."

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Shane and Ilya figure out if they can have a normal dinner together.

Chapter Notes

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

It was purely by chance that Ilya had bumped into Shane during a morning run. Shane was just finishing his run whereas Ilya was just beginning his. Ilya had deliberately chosen a different spot than the park that he had run into Shane weeks ago—he wasn't sure if he could handle seeing Shane in this state. After speaking with Galina, Ilya discovered that he was much more broken than he realized. But life carried on and hockey waited for nobody, so he still had to continue with his regular workout regimen. It just so happened that Shane had the exact same thought of choosing another park.

Shane's face was flushed from exertion and his black hair was tousled. Ilya couldn't help but stare at the freckles that littered his face. They were definitely darker than the last time Ilya saw them. In fact, Shayne looked a little bit more tanned.

"Morning," Shane breathlessly huffed.

"Still no music, huh?" Ilya asked as he put in his earphones.

"Of course not. What are you listening to?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

It was painfully obvious to Ilya that he always had the energy to quip with Shane—that his mental headspace was clear enough to let Shane in. He didn't know why that was, but talking to Shane felt like parting clouds in his mind.

"Alright. Be careful on the path. A large tree must've just fallen over last night—it's still covering a large portion."

"Thanks." Ilya beamed a smile at Shane.

Before Shane could turn away, it was like the spirit of Ilya's younger self had possessed himself to say: "Come over for dinner?"

"W-What?" Shane looked taken a back, nearly tripping over his own feet.

"Dinner. You know, like eating?" Ilya gestured eating with his hands and mouth.

“You want to have dinner with me?”

There was no taking it back now. Ilya was just going to deal with the consequences of his actions. “That is why I asked, yes?”

Shane’s eyes nervously scanned Ilya’s before deciding. “Okay.”

“Okay. I’ll text you?”

“You don’t have my number. My number has changed since um university. Here, let me give it to you.” Shane reached out his hand for Ilya’s phone, which Ilya instantly handed over.

Ilya wondered if that was the reason why so many of his texts and calls went unanswered those years ago. Shane couldn’t have possibly changed his number immediately after Ilya’s graduation, right? The answers to both possibilities hurt Ilya to think about. He didn’t dwell on it for too long.

Shane handed Ilya’s phone back to him and Ilya noticed that he had texted a gentle “Hi :).” Shane didn’t use an emoji, opting for a colon and parentheses just as they used back in the day. Once again, Ilya tried to not dwell on his thoughts about Shane for too long. He had to remind himself that he was not normal—he was far from it—which meant that he could never really have Shane.

“Just dinner, right?” Shane asked apprehensively.

“Why? Was there something else you wanted to do?”

“No. Not at all. See you.” Shane all but ran away as soon as he finished speaking.

Ilya was fucking stupid. He invited a chef over for dinner at his own house. What in the hell was he going to cook for a chef without looking like an idiot?

Shane was losing his mind. He had already messed up in the kitchen, having mistaken cilantro for parsley before putting it all in a pot of velouté. The flavour was nice, but it wasn’t at all what they needed. He had to pour the entire pot down the drain and waste it all. It was horrible. And then he sliced his thumb while segmenting a grapefruit. Don’t ask. He didn’t know how it happened either.

During his lunch break, Shane stood behind the restaurant, frantically texting while taking shallow breaths of the autumn air. He didn’t know how to gather any of his thoughts so he reached out to the one person who he know could help.

Shane: Are you free right now?

Rose was in LA filming a sequel for yet another movie where she got kidnapped, so it was a long shot that she would be able to reply. Still, Shane reached out anyways and got a reply only a minute later.

Rose: I'm in makeup right now, what's up???

Shane: This is a level 4 emergency, and I could really use someone to talk to.

Rose: LEVEL 4!?! SHIT I'm calling right now.

"Take a breath, Shane," was the first thing Rose said. Shane followed her instructions. "So what are we freaking out about?"

Shane bit his thumbnail, trying to ignore the bandaid wrapped around it, even if its fraying edge was really bothering him. "Um..." He couldn't find the right words to say.

"Does this have anything to do with a certain man named Ilya Rozanov?"

It felt like the air had been knocked out of Shane's lungs. "Wait. How did you know?"

"I'm a hockey fan, Shane. Anyone who is remotely interested in hockey has heard the news that he's in Ottawa now. And I was at McGill *with you*, so..."

"So..." His mouth couldn't catch up with his brain, which was moving all too quickly and too slowly at the same time. He felt like he could vomit or faint. Or both, simultaneously. Shane really didn't know why he had agreed to going to dinner so quickly. It was reckless and stupid.

"Let's start at the beginning then—when he first came to Ottawa. Did you meet him immediately after he came?" Shane was more than grateful that Rose was so patient and knew him so well.

"Probably a few weeks after he arrived but he asked me to dinner, Rose," Shane suddenly blurted out. "He told me to come over to dinner and I don't know what to do."

Shane knew that if he weren't freaking out right now, Rose would probably squeal in delight. She had always liked the idea of him and Ilya together, though he wasn't sure why. Instead, she took a calming breath herself. "Okay, dinner—that's really good! Did he say anything about it?"

"No, he just asked me to come over. That's it. Do you think it's just a regular dinner or is it some sort of date?"

“Shane. My sweet, sweet friend. I love you so, so much and you have grown tremendously since I met you in university, but you are so fucking stupid if you think that an old flame would just invite you over for dinner and nothing else. It’s a date!”

That was the answer that scared Shane the most. He was terrified that it was going to be more than dinner.

“So what do I do?”

“Are you asking me how to prep?” Shane could hear the sly smirk in her voice and rolled his eyes even though she wouldn’t be able to see.

“God no, Rose! Gross. What should I do for this dinner?”

“You show up and enjoy yourself. That’s what you do.”

Pasta seemed like a safe option. Ilya ordered some fresh pasta (rigatoni, he thinks it was called) from an Italian deli and had it delivered to his house. For the sauce, he was besides himself when he discovered there was something called vodka sauce. He watched several YouTube tutorials before becoming semi-confident that he could make a presentable dinner. The sauce was good for Ilya’s standards—much better than he could have anticipated—but that still didn’t calm the nerves that Ilya felt. Surely, his food wouldn’t be up to Shane’s standards.

By the time the pasta was boiling on the stove, Ilya heard a firm knock, proceeded by the doorbell. Game time.

Ilya smoothed out his hair with the palms of his hands before opening the door. Shane was wearing a suede jacket with a tight white t-shirt and black jeans and held up a large, black box with Leaf + Sake written on it. Ilya tried not to stare too hard, especially not at how Shane’s longer hair framed his face and freckles. He certainly tried his best not to take a deep breath—Shane was clearly just fresh out of the shower and smelled very sweet.

“I hope you don’t mind that I brought dessert. We had too much leftover tonight.” Shane’s eyes remained fixated on the box.

“Of course not. Thank you.” Unease was bubbling in Ilya’s stomach. He just hoped that it wasn’t obvious.

Shane took off his shoes and Ilya led him to the kitchen, which was mostly cleaned up from his cooking. More importantly, he had been able to rid his entire house of his depression piles, as he and Galina came to call them. He wasn’t able to bring himself to clean it up—he had to hire some cleaners—but he was glad that his house was finally in a presentable state. Now, everything appeared to be normal.

“Smells nice,” Shane commented quietly.

“Thank you.” Ilya wasn’t sure that he had ever thanked someone so much in quick succession. It was the nerves—they were making him polite. It was disgusting. He wasn’t even this nervous for the final game before he won his first Stanley Cup. “Pasta is okay with you?”

“Pasta sounds great.” A faint smile appeared on Shane’s face. It was still the shy smile that Ilya came to love in university.

Silence fell upon the two of them. Ilya busied himself with draining the pasta but reserving some of the starchy water. Keeping his hands busy helped keep his mind at bay—he was too scared to mess up in front of Shane. Shane sat down on a barstool in front of the kitchen island, bouncing his leg up and down. Was he just as nervous as Ilya was? Probably not, though it was not entirely impossible. Shane had always been a high-strung person but that was the Shane Ilya came to know in university. The Shane in front of him, though still bashful at times, was much more confident and seemed to have a good head on his shoulders, which was more than Ilya could say for himself.

“Maybe I could help?”

“Yes, Chef!” Ilya saluted.

“Shut up.”

As Ilya stood by the stove, Shane stacked a couple of basil leaves on top of each other and rolled them tightly before finely slicing them into thin ribbons. Once again, Ilya found himself being mesmerized by Shane, entirely entranced by Shane’s skill and confidence.

“Can I have a taste?” Shane gestured to the simmering pan of vodka sauce before turning a cherry pink. “Oh-sorry, this is your kitchen. I shouldn’t. I’m 100% percent sure that whatever you made tastes great.”

“Go ahead. Make sure it doesn’t taste like shit.” Ilya passed him a spoon.

Without so much as blowing on the spoon, Shane tasted a spoonful of the piping hot sauce. A small grin tugged at the corners of his lips. “It’s good.”

Ilya fidgeted in his spot. He was glad but he was also 100% sure that it could be better. “You want to say something. Please.” Ilya folded his arms in content. He was excited to see up close how Shane’s brain worked when it came to the kitchen.

“Really, it’s good.” Shane nodded, sincerity dripping from his eyes.

“But it could be better. Go ahead. I am proud on the ice but not too proud in the kitchen. I am not in here often.”

There it was. The unabashed smile that Shane rarely showed. It was adorable. His eyes creased in the corners and much of his freckles bunched up as he showed his pearly whites.

Suddenly, the storm happening in Ilya's mind started to quiet.

"Okay, maybe, we could put some chilli flakes in there if you don't mind? More parmesan, too?"

"Yes, Chef," Ilya repeated. He didn't miss how pink the tips of Shane's ears were.

He opened his drawer, which was full of a variety of spices that he had never really used until today. Shane's eyes practically twinkled in excitement as he quickly dove into the drawer, picking out not only chilli flakes but some other spices that Ilya didn't really pay attention to. Ilya picked up the block of parmesan and started grating some into the pan, waiting for Shane to tell him to stop, which he did with a small nod.

It was nice cooking with Shane, Ilya thought. It felt oddly... domestic. At least that was the word he thought was appropriate to use. Maybe it wasn't the right word.

Soon, Shane plated up the pasta, garnishing each plate with the basil he had cut up earlier and more parmesan. Ilya poured them each a glass of red wine.

It was a bit of a dance to see where they would sit at the dining table. Ilya's table was huge. Did they each sit at opposite ends like kings did? Beside one another? In the end, they sat across from each other. If they suddenly moved, their feet could perhaps brush up against one another.

"Thanks for letting me help in the kitchen. Sorry that I steamrolled you." Shane pushed around a piece of rigatoni on his plate with his fork.

"Not at all. I liked it," Ilya answered honestly. The pasta tasted so much better because of Shane.

Once again, deafening silence engulfed them. Ilya refilled their glasses with plenty of wine as Shane still finished his pasta. It was really hard not to focus on how Shane's lips closed around his fork as he ate. Ilya secretly had a white-knuckling grip around his seat. He didn't know why he was acting this way—well he did understand but he logically knew that it was more than likely that nothing was going to happen between the two of them. They were just friendly right now—not even friends. There were a lot of years lost between the two and, clearly, a lot has changed. They couldn't just jump right back into who they once were prior to graduation, even if that was all that Ilya wanted.

"Dessert?" Shane said as soon as he finished his last piece of pasta. He practically jumped up from his seat, running to the box before Ilya could respond.

Ilya could only watch in amusement as he cleaned up their plates in preparation for dessert.

"This one is a pavlova with a passion fruit curd and basil Chantilly cream. This one is a chocolate opera cake with a hazelnut praline. This one is called Paris-Brest but it's not the kind of Brest that you're thinking of. It was originally named after a bicycle race, and it's basically like a fancy cream puff. Our pastry chef J.J. makes all of our desserts fresh every single morning and his attention to detail is incredible."

Ilya didn't understand half of the words that were being spoken, but it didn't matter. He just knew two things: Shane looked so happy and cute while talking about food, and the dessert was going to be delicious.

"Which one should we eat first, Chef?"

"Probably the pavlova," Shane answered immediately. "It has the gentlest flavour so it might get overpowered by the nuts and chocolate of the other desserts."

"Pavlova it is."

Ilya gave Shane the honour of cutting into the desserts. He didn't think he could ruin them, even if another strange man had made them.

The pavlova was delicious, even if Ilya didn't know exactly what it was. It had a crunchy shell and a soft inside. The passion fruit had a good sour taste to it that was balanced by the cream. Ilya thought that he could easily eat ten of these.

"You have cream on the side of your mouth," Shane said while gesturing to the left corner of his own lip.

Ilya immediately licked it away. "Better?"

Shane's eyes lingered on Ilya's mouth. Maybe he didn't get all of it. Ilya licked again but he didn't taste any of the cream. He must have gotten it all in the first swipe.

"Yeah, better," Shane said breathlessly.

Ilya cleared his throat and quickly moved onto the next dessert. He was heading into dangerous territory. "What was this one called again? The singing house, yes?"

"Opera, Ilya. It's an opera cake." There Shane was, correcting Ilya's English again without a single ounce of judgement.

"Opera. Singing house. Same thing."

"Goodness, who was your English tutor? They clearly didn't do a good job."

Ilya bit his lip, trying to suppress his smile. He pictured eighteen-year-old Shane with his arms crossed as he unhappily sat beside Ilya. His brows were furrowed and his lips were set into a deep frown. Shane was clearly agitated about the fact that he had to talk to Ilya but still completed the class exercise nonetheless.

"Clearly. Why is it called opera cake?" Ilya quickly asked. He needed a distraction.

"You see how there are several layers to the cake? We have the sponge cake, which is soaked with an espresso syrup, the ganache, and the buttercream. The French thought it looked like an opera house because of its different layers."

"The French are stupid. It doesn't look like an opera house at all."

“You still hate the French? After all they did for you?”

“The French did nothing for me. I just went to McGill where most of the students stupidly spoke French.” Ilya leaned back in his chair as comfortably as he could. Maybe there was just no escaping Shane.

“Are you calling me stupid, Ilya?” His eyes shone with challenge.

“You are a lot of things. Boring? Yes. Absolutely.”

“Still?”

“Yes. Of course. Shane Hollander, you are very boring, but you are not stupid. Not at all.”

“Wow. Thank you. Such huge compliments from Ilya Rozanov. I am deeply honoured.” It was easy to smile at Shane, who held his hands over his heart.

“Yes, you should be.”

Shane and Ilya both stood by the kitchen sink, washing up the dishes. Shane was washing and Ilya was drying. Ilya had planned to do them later, after Shane left, but Shane insisted that since Ilya cooked, he should be the one to clean. It was only fair this way. They went back-and-forth—with Ilya arguing that Shane shouldn’t wash dishes if his hand was hurt and Shane arguing back that he had washed dishes with much worse injuries—before settling on both cleaning together. Ilya also thought that Shane had offered because he felt bad for “interfering” with Ilya’s cooking, which Ilya enjoyed more than he’d like to admit.

Despite Ilya’s sink being quite sizeable, they found themselves pressed hip-to-hip. Logically, Ilya convinced himself, it was because they were both bigger men. Ilya enjoyed the heat that radiated from their touch, but sadly thought that this was as much as he would ever come to getting Shane. So, he relished their contact as much as he could without letting his thoughts cloud his head too much.

“Can you pass me that plate?” Shane gestured with his chin to the plate that was far across the island.

Ilya wordlessly grabbed it and gave it to Shane, settling right next to his warmth again. Shane hummed in content as he gently lathered the plate with a sudsy sponge. If domestic was the right word that Ilya had used earlier, they were doing too much of it now. It, maybe, scared Ilya a little bit. The queasiness he felt in his stomach earlier was nearly gone, but his heart was beating fast. It was almost painful. He could be having a heart attack. He didn’t know if anyone in his family had problems with their heart, but it wouldn’t surprise Ilya if that were the case. While he was okay with dying on the spot, he didn’t want to scare or scar Shane for the rest of his life, so Ilya took a deep breath and carried on with wiping clean dishes with a dry tea towel.

“All done,” Shane said as he passed the last plate to Ilya, who grabbed it, grazing Shane’s hand. Shane nearly dropped the plate upon contact, but Ilya was quick to catch it.

“Oopsie.” Ilya winked. He knew it was too much, but he couldn’t help himself.

“Fuck off.” There was his feisty kitten again, looking up at Ilya with a playful but serious gaze.

Ilya looked at Shane’s lips and how they were a little bit more red than usual. He had no doubt that Shane had probably been furiously chewing on them from anxiety before coming over. Firmly pressing his lips together, Ilya walked away, putting the plate back into its rightful place.

Contrary to his worries, dinner with Ilya went remarkably better than Shane had anticipated. His face felt a little flushed as they walked towards Ilya’s front door but Shane attributed it to the wine. He always had a little bit of Asian glow whenever he drank wine.

Ilya had been nothing but nice, which made Shane felt incredibly guilty for having untoward thoughts. When Ilya had licked the cream off of his face, Shane was instantly brought back to sitting beside Ilya at the little burger joint on St. Patrick’s Day. Thank goodness he hadn’t licked the cream off of Ilya’s face this time, but he’d be lying if he didn’t say there was a part of him that wanted to.

Shane needed to get it into his head that they were adults now. They were nothing like the foolish and irresponsible teenagers they once were. He had to be sensible and realistic. He just hoped that he wasn’t being too awkward or that it wasn’t too obvious that he was being flighty to ease some of the tension that he felt.

Shane was painfully aware of Ilya’s gaze as he bent over to put on his shoes, just as he was painfully aware of how intensely warm Ilya and his entire house smelt. Immediately, he shut down his mind from having anymore thoughts. He needed to stop thinking. He should really go home and meditate or exercise—anything to relieve the feelings that wracked his body.

“Thanks for dinner tonight,” Shane said as he reached for the doorknob.

Ilya walked up to him with a smile, leaving almost no space between them. His comforting scent immediately filled Shane’s sinuses. “Thank you for coming.”

They both stood at the front door, gazing into each other’s eyes. Shane really tried not to look into Ilya’s hazel eyes the entire night—he knew that he would get lost in them in some way. But, Shane would be stupid if he didn’t already know that he had had no self-control when it came to Ilya.

“Good night, Ilya.”

“Good night, Shane.” His warm breath fanned against Shane’s face, smelling like the variety of desserts they had not long ago.

“I should get going. I have an early start tomorrow.” They still didn’t break away from each other’s gazes. Shane looked at the greenish grey ring around Ilya’s irises.

“Then go.” Ilya’s nose was millimetres away from Shane’s own.

All it would take was one move, and it would be over between them. It was just a matter of who would move first. Shane didn’t know if he had the guts to but did so regardless, brushing the tip of his nose against Ilya’s cheek.

“Okay?” Shane asked.

Ilya didn’t reply, he only grabbed Shane’s chin and brought his face close. It felt like minutes had passed by the time Ilya’s lips were on Shane’s. Regardless of how many years had passed since their first kiss, their kiss now had just as much electricity, if not more. Ilya’s tongue was all over Shane’s mouth, exploring and tasting. Shane’s skin buzzed under Ilya’s touch and he couldn’t get enough.

“You do not know how long I waited to do that,” Ilya panted as they broke for air.

Shane knew Ilya’s answer all too well because he had waited just as long.

Shane tasted as sweet as he smelled, just like Ilya remembered. No, it was better than he had remembered. It was pure ecstasy.

Fuck hockey. Fuck the NHL. Ilya would give it all up right here, right now if that meant that he could keep Shane forever.

Ilya had Shane pinned to the wall and Shane was quick to hook his ankle around Ilya’s legs, bringing him closer. Without breaking contact, Ilya practically ripped Shane’s jacket off, needing to feel the smooth skin underneath. Shane reciprocated by trailing his hand down to Ilya’s waistband and palming Ilya’s half-hard bulge.

Ilya would fuck Shane right here by his front door if that’s what Shane wanted, but Ilya had waited too long for this. “Let’s go upstairs,” Ilya mumbled against Shane’s lips.

“Is that what you want?” Shane firmly held Ilya’s waist.

Ilya couldn’t believe the words that came out of Shane’s mouth. What made him doubt that he didn’t want Shane? Shane also looked like he was willing to give Ilya anything if he asked for it. Ilya was confused.

“Yes,” Ilya answered before either of them could spiral.

“Okay.” Shane nodded and swiftly took off his shoes.

Ilya took Shane by the hand as he led him to his pathetically empty bedroom. It was fully furnished and designed by an interior designer that Ilya had hired but it felt like more of a hotel room to him. The problem was that he still had yet to put anything personal in the room to claim it as his own. Ilya took all but one step in the bedroom before he found himself pressed against Shane’s body. Shane’s plump lips worked against his own, hungrily devouring Ilya.

Ilya never wanted this night to end. If this was a dream, then he hoped that he’d never wake up either.

Wasting no time, Ilya helped Shane to take off his shirt. Time had treated Shane’s body well. While Shane’s body was toned during university, it was now firm with muscles and hard planes—he had the body of a Greek god. Thank goodness Shane didn’t become a hockey player with him, Ilya selfishly thought, or else he would have jumped Shane every time they hit the showers. That would not be a pretty sight for anyone.

They stumbled to the bed together, both wearing one less article of clothing with each step taken. Ilya pushed Shane onto his bed and looked at him with sheer awe. He couldn’t believe that Shane was here in his room. Not denying himself another second, Ilya climbed on top of Shane. He could have sworn that Shane’s body melted into the mattress as Ilya adorned his body with kisses.

As Ilya laved his tongue against Shane’s nipple, soft moans spilled from Shane’s mouth. “Ilya. More, please.”

Ilya knew exactly what Shane wanted but decided to capture his nipple between his teeth, giving a slight tug. Shane’s fingers tangled themselves in Ilya’s hair and tugged. Ilya loved when Shane did that—his scalp tingled with each pull. Ilya was quick to lick away the pain he just caused, pointedly ignoring how much he wanted more.

Shane’s other hand trailed down to Ilya’s cock, giving it a slight stroke. Ilya swore he could come in just a few seconds if Shane kept going.

“I need you,” Shane panted.

“To do what?” Ilya loved getting Shane hot and bothered and much too riled up.

Shane’s near drunk-dazed look was promptly replaced with fury. Somehow, Ilya ended up pinned underneath Shane’s weight, completely breathless.

“If you’re not going to fuck me, I will use you to fuck myself.”

“Is that a threat, Shane?”

Ilya smiled into Shane’s smouldering kiss. Pinned underneath Shane’s straddle, Ilya couldn’t help but thrust his hips upwards to get some friction against his erection. With a little bit of

spit as lubrication, Shane grabbed their cocks and started stroking them in tandem. It was Ilya's turn to melt from Shane's touch.

"What happened to needing me?" Ilya groaned. He was painfully close.

"That was before I decided to take matters into my own hands," Shane nearly growled, nose brushing against Ilya's scent gland.

Ilya's hands firmly grabbed onto Shane's back dimples for support, guiding Shane's hips to slightly grind along with his hands. Shane panted Ilya's name over and over, as if it were some kind of chant.

But enough was enough. Just as Shane needed Ilya in him, Ilya wanted to tear Shane apart lick by lick.

With a firm smack against Shane's ass, Shane was almost stunned into a state of stupor, which gave Ilya ample time to flip them over again. He positioned Shane's legs over his own shoulders as Ilya licked a fat strip down Shane's length. It delighted Ilya to see Shane squirm under his touch—he was always so sensitive.

Wasting no more time, Ilya worked Shane's entrance, using Shane's moans as motivation to lick deeper every time. Shane was so wet for Ilya, it was dizzying. Eventually, he worked in his fingers and was able to feel Shane's tight heat around him. Ilya couldn't wait to be inside Shane.

Shane watched with determined eyes as Ilya rolled on a condom and lubed himself up. God, Ilya was enjoying himself too much and it was only possible because it was Shane he was doing this with. None of the girls in America could even compare with Shane—they couldn't hold a candle to the burning sun that was Shane Hollander.

Ilya nearly lost consciousness as he entered Shane. Shane easily took Ilya deeply, allowing him to bury himself to the hilt.

"Is okay?" Ilya asked.

"More than okay."

Slowly, Ilya started rolling his hips. They moaned in tandem. Shane buried his nails into Ilya's back, which Ilya loved but chuckled at the idea of his teammates seeing. The Centaurs could deal with it, and Ilya definitely didn't mind it as long as it was Shane giving him his tiger stripes.

Ilya could tell that Shane was close by the way that his moans became lighter and lighter and his heat was tighter around Ilya. He was probably directly pounding onto Shane's prostate.

"Do you think you can come untouched?" Shane whimpered but dug his nails in deeper. "Try for me. Just focus on how hard I am for you and how deep you're taking me. You're doing great, *kitten*." The compliment in Russian came out of Ilya's mouth before he could register it.

The headboard thumped against the wall as Ilya continued to pound into Shane. He was already close but seeing Shane's pure gaze on him sealed the deal. Ilya emptied himself as Shane also came, spurting in between their chests.

"Oh my god," Ilya laughed, resting his head against Shane's forehead.

Shane's face was flushed but wore a satisfied grin. "That was... something."

"It was everything."

Ilya pulled himself out and took care of the condom before getting a damp wash cloth for the two of them. He took his time as he wiped the cum off of Shane's chest and was extra gentle when working around Shane's hole. The entire time, Shane fondly traced his hand over Ilya's arm. Done with cleanup, Ilya placed a kiss against Shane's forehead.

"I have to go," Shane said abruptly. His body was suddenly as stiff as a board.

Just like that, the dream was over. Ilya pulled away from Shane's warmth and looked at him, wondering if this was going to be repeat of their past. His heartbeat quickened.

Shane still looked too calm. "I have to wake up early, remember? Unless you would like to wake up at four in the morning with me?"

"I do not mind." If that meant Ilya could have more time with Shane, he would do anything.

Shane leaned in, lips brushing against Ilya's cheek. "If I leave now, it might make next time more exciting."

"Next time?" Ilya's face split into a smile.

Shane hummed and pressed a ghostly kiss onto Ilya's face before climbing out of bed and getting dressed. Ilya could only watch him leave, too stuck in a trance to move.

Chapter End Notes

Yay! We're moving onto some lighter stuff and Hollanov are finally making some progress!

As we continue with the story, I did want to give a sort of heads up for you guys. Just like *The Long Game*, my story will also delve deeper into mental health issues and eating disorders. As someone who has struggled with both for their entire life, I want to say this: there is no such thing as "broken beyond repair" when it comes to you. I am so sorry if you feel that way but things will get better. I promise. Secondly, and on a much brighter note: there will be angst, but there will not be any miscommunication if I can do anything about it. I hate the miscommunication trope with a burning passion. So please look forward to that!

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of their dinner.

December 2020

Shane never knew that an inconspicuous bowl of greek yogurt with homemade granola could be so daunting. He had been sat in front of it for so long that he was sure that the yogurt was room-temperature now and there was no way that the granola wasn't soggy. Thinking about the temperature and the textures only made eating more unappealing for him.

Picking up the spoon for the nth time, Shane tried to bring it to his mouth. But just couldn't. He couldn't bring the spoon close enough to his mouth. Every time the spoon was lifted further than a couple of inches away from the bowl, his arm froze and he couldn't move, as if rigor mortis had already settled in.

The spoon landed in the bowl with a muffled clunk. This was so stupid. It was eating. Shane had eaten for his entire life. It should be easy—easier than riding a bike.

His therapist told him that he should be kinder to himself and to take focus away from his body, but it was impossible not to be this critical. Even a babbling infant could do what Shane was struggling with right now. An infant.

It was also hard not to feel like an infant at home—his parents hovered around him whenever they were home from work. During the day, his mom often called during her lunch break just to check up on him. That was Shane's least favourite part of the day: having to lie to his well-meaning mom that everything was completely fine. He definitely wasn't sobbing into his pillow after watching someone's team advance in the playoffs this morning.

Shane shoved the bowl away from him and leaned back in his seat. His head hit the chair harder than he intended and it stung upon contact. Taking a deep breath, tears started welling in his eyes. This was stupid. Shane couldn't seem to do anything right these days. He couldn't even do this one stupid thing. No wonder he imploded his first love. No wonder he dropped out. No wonder he was living back at his childhood home. His mom was right—he did become a patient before he became a doctor, not that there was a chance of Shane ever becoming a doctor now.

“Shane, I'm home!” His mother called out from the garage.

Shane didn't bother moving. His mom could see him crying over yogurt for all he cared—she'd seen much worse in the past few months.

“And look at who I brought home!”

Shane covered his face with his hands. “Please, Mom. I can’t see anyone right now.”

“Not even me?” The familiarity of the voice made Shane peep through his fingers.

“Rose.” Even more sobs wracked his body. Shane felt Rose’s warm embrace wrap around him, and her soothing lavender scent helped calm him down.

Immediately after graduation, Rose moved to America to pursue her acting career. Of course, she found success right away. Anyone who took a look at Rose Landry knew she was going to make it big in Hollywood. She was always meant to be a star.

“All right. I’m going to leave you two alone and fix us up some supper.”

“Thank you, Mom.” His mom flashed him a quick smile before leaving. “How’d you get here?”

Rose’s grip was still tight around Shane, as if she were afraid that he was going to disappear. “By plane, dummy.”

“I know that, but aren’t you super busy?”

“Never too busy for my friends.” Rose looked at Shane with fighting emotions that he knew all too well these days: she didn’t want to treat Shane like he’s fragile cargo but she also wanted to be delicate with him because he was going through a rough patch. “Plus, everyone wants to go home for Christmas anyways, so you’re not that special.”

Shane’s mouth morphed into a wobbly smile. At least she wasn’t treating him all that differently.

Rose pulled up a chair next to him and sat down. “Shane, you’re so skinny.” Though she was painfully direct with her words, her voice was rife with concern. He didn’t care about comments about his weight all that much, though he knew why people would. It was never about his weight or appearance. Still, Shane knew what she meant. Shane had never been a skinny kid in his entire life—he always had an athletic build. Even in his preteens, he had abs. Now, his cheekbones were more prominent than ever and he was always cold.

“I know.” His voice was barely above a whisper.

“How about this? You go change out of your sweats and we can go out.”

“Out? Where?”

“I don’t know, it’s Christmas! I’m sure there’s going to be something fun that we can go do. Maybe we can drive around and see the lights?” That sounded nice. Shane didn’t think the idea of having dinner with his parents and Rose sounded particularly appealing.

“I don’t think my mom would appreciate us sneaking out.”

“You underestimate me, Shane. I can sweet talk my way out of anything.” Rose dramatically batted her eyes.

“As long as you don’t use your acting skills to manipulate my mom, I’m all for it.”

“I would never! I love Yuna. She was the one who flew me out here.”

Oh. Shane didn’t know that. “Okay, fine.”

“Great! We’ll reconvene here in five minutes.”

Present Day

The popcorn texture of his ceiling really wasn’t that interesting, but Shane couldn’t peel his eyes away from it. He didn’t know how long he had been staring, but he knew that he would have to get up from bed any moment. Shane just let himself become one with his mattress while his mind ran wild.

Last night turned out so much better than he could have ever anticipated. Shane could still feel Ilya’s mouth peppering kisses down his body. He could still feel how Ilya ravaged his body by the way his body ached. But, Shane couldn’t help but wonder if he ruined it all—if he had ruined Ilya in just one night. The image of Ilya’s chiseled face stunned into silence as Shane announced that he had to leave was permanently ingrained into his mind. Now, Shane’s heart was torn and his mind pulled him in different directions. He was developing a throbbing headache from how much he’d thought about this.

The shrieking loop of his alarm pulled him back down to reality. Shane was quick to turn it off but slow to crawl out of bed. His legs wobbled and his lower back was warm with a throbbing pain, but Shane secretly loved it. There was no way he would be able to do his lower body workout this morning, but stretching could do him some good.

Normally, Shane would drink a protein shake or green juice before his workout and then eat a bowl of savoury oatmeal afterwards, but food was out of the question this morning. Just as his brain raged on, his stomach churned with waves of unease. The turmoil his body was undergoing almost made his morning stretch unbearable—he felt dizzy as he bent over to stretch out his hamstrings.

But then Shane parked in front of the restaurant and buttoned his chef’s jacket and a light switch went off in his head. He stopped thinking about how losing Ilya the first time nearly killed him. They were launching their brand new fall menu today and Shane had a team to lead. There was no time for mistakes—no time for ruminating.

J.J. must have noticed something off with him during their morning debrief because he pulled Shane aside after Shane dismissed everyone.

“*Chef*,” J.J. said in French with his thick accent. Shane always had a little chuckle whenever J.J. called him that since chef also meant “boss” in French. “*We will blow their fucking minds with this new menu.*”

“*Yes, we will.*” Shane smiled.

“*Have you had breakfast yet? I was going to fix myself up something.*”

Shane did know that J.J.’s go-to breakfast was a toasted cinnamon raisin bagel with cottage cheese on top. Shane himself didn’t really care for either but was grateful for the offer and easily accepted. It would not be a good idea for him to work on an empty stomach. He just tried to not dwell too much on the clumpy texture of the cottage cheese, or the way that the sticky raisins clung to his teeth as he chewed.

As he ate, he found himself gravitating towards his phone.

Shane: Mr. Rozanov, I’d like to file a complaint.

Ilya: ?

Ilya: Are you going to rate our sex last night?

Shane: God no!

Shane: It was fine, asshole.

Shane: I wanted to tell you that I could barely get out of bed for work. Then you ruined it.

Ilya: Just fine?

Ilya: I thought your asshole was excellent

Ilya: I need to make sure that you can’t get out of bed next time

Ilya: Keep you there forever

Shane: Stop.

Shane: I’m at work.

Ilya: Even better :D

Ilya: Let Hayden see that we do much better than whatever he does with his poor wife

Shane: He’s my friend, Ilya.

Shane looked up from his phone and hoped that no one heard him snicker loudly. He truly did not understand why Ilya hated Hayden so much, but it was nothing if not amusing. Instead, Shane directed his attention to taking another bite.

Ilya: Only good friends give each other sex tips

Shane: Please stop.

Shane: Have fun at practice! You're going to do great.

Ilya: I am always great ;)

"Are you texting the girl who fucked up your back?" Bood whistled as Ilya stood shirtless in front of his stall, phone in hand.

Ilya knew that he probably had a stupid grin on his face, but he didn't care. He was floating on cloud nine. He was soaring. "How did you know I was texting your mother?"

"You sure do live up to your reputation, Rozanov." Bood laughed and patted Ilya's shoulder before walking away to get ready.

Ilya: And you will set the kitchen on fire

Shane: I sure hope not, but I know what you mean.

Shane: Thank you :)

Ilya bit on his mother's cross as stared at his screen. None of this felt real.

His happiness translated into his performance. Somehow, it just felt like everything just clicked for Ilya overnight. He felt like he was more in tune with his teammates. Ilya, Bood, and even Barrett were able to compete their drills together without a hitch.

Things in Ottawa were looking up. Maybe, he hadn't made a terrible impulsive decision.

Ilya tossed and turned in his bed. He had replaced his sheets and they smelt sickeningly sterile—void of Shane’s scent. His body was too warm and the air felt too stifling, but he could only reach out and touch the empty, cold space beside him. He wondered if it was just because of last night that his bedroom felt even more impersonal, or if Ilya had just been too in his mind to notice.

Now lying on his back, Ilya waited for this—everything to all come down and crash and burn in front of him. Everything was too good to be true. He wondered which way Shane would leave him this time. He thought of all the ways that he could mess up at practice tomorrow. Nothing good in his life ever seemed to stay. The darkness in his mind always loomed around, waiting to engulf him.

Giving up on sleep entirely, Ilya scrolled through the texts between him and Shane, as he had done millions of times in previous years. He was pleasantly surprised to see that there were already three little dots dancing across his screen and patiently waited.

Shane: Are you okay?

Ilya’s body stiffened. Had it been that apparent that there was something off about him? He couldn’t respond and just waited for Shane to continue, watching as the dots appear and disappear a couple of times.

Shane: Your entire team came to the restaurant for dinner but you weren’t there.

Shane: What, you got a taste of having a chef in your kitchen and thought too highly of yourself to come to a public restaurant?

Ilya: You were looking for me

Shane: No.

Shane: I was just making sure that you didn’t die of embarrassment at practice.

Ilya: Was very proud to show off my back today.

Ilya: Got plenty of comments and looks

Shane: ...

Shane: You didn’t answer my question.

Ilya stared at his phone in the darkness of his room.

Ilya: I'm fine.

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Shane and Ilya enjoy each other's company.

Ilya: 10

Shane: 10 what?

Ilya: 10 o'clock

Ilya: Come to my house

Shane: And what if I'm busy?

Ilya: The only thing you'll be busy with is me.

Shane: 😏

Shane found himself going to Ilya's house anyways. It was his day off and he couldn't help himself. The desire to be with Ilya always overrode his own guilt.

He didn't even have time to take off his shoes before Ilya attacked him, pulling Shane in by the collar of his shirt and pressing his soft, hungry lips against Shane's mouth. Shane was quick to part his lips, letting Ilya's tongue fight for dominance with his.

"Hello to you too," Shane said, slightly dazed.

Ilya briefly smiled with his reddening lips and wrapped his arms around Shane. Shane didn't miss how Ilya took a deep breath as he nuzzled into the crook of Shane's neck. Maybe his scent wasn't all that repulsive to Ilya.

Shane ran his fingers through Ilya's curls, nails slightly grazing across his scalp. Ilya finally didn't smell of the arena's plastic body wash, but there was a faint, clinging aroma of cigarettes under Ilya's regular scent. Of course, Shane didn't like it when Ilya smoked but he kept his mouth shut. He wasn't going to shame Ilya for the choices that he made, especially not now.

"What did you have planned for me?" Shane asked. "You said you were going to keep me busy tonight."

Ilya took another deep breath before standing straight. "I think you know."

Shane craned his neck upwards and whispered into Ilya's ear, "Tell me."

Without a second of hesitation, Ilya kissed Shane with fervour. They somehow started migrating towards the stairs without breaking contact, only stopping to tear off Shane's sweater. Halfway up the stairs, Shane shucked off Ilya's shirt and started to grind his hips against Ilya. By the time they had made up the stairs, their flies were undone and were each trying to pry their pants off.

Shane was quick to pin Ilya against his bedroom wall, earning a quiet "fuck" from Ilya. He wanted to taste Ilya tonight. He dropped to his knees and mischievously kissed along Ilya's happy trail. Seeing Ilya's happy trail always made Shane crazy, and he was going to let himself enjoy it tonight.

"You are going to kill me," Ilya huskily whispered.

His words only further turned Shane on, as he loved that Ilya had given Shane permission to take control. When Shane was younger, he was always afraid that as an omega, he would be confined to nothing but complicit and submissive. And then he met Ilya, who had only ever treated Shane as an equal.

Despite Shane's own arousal, Shane took his time working on Ilya's body. He even pointedly started sucking the skin around Ilya's hip bone, then licking the bruising skin. Only when Shane decided he had teased Ilya enough, he gave Ilya's cock some attention. He started by tasting the bead of pre-cum forming at his head, making Ilya hiss and grab onto Shane's hair for support. Shane licked the thick vein that ran along Ilya's length before finally taking him in his mouth.

It had been a while since Shane had done this but he reminded himself to relax and keep his jaw lax and tongue flat. He used Ilya's moans of his name as motivation to go deeper and let one hand explore the expanse of Ilya's ass while the other gave Ilya's balls some attention. It pleased Shane to no end to know that he was the reason for Ilya's pleasure.

"Shane-fuck." Ilya's hand was firm on Shane's jaw. "Come here."

Shane rose to his feet, ignoring the ache in his knees from kneeling. "You didn't like it?" His voice was hoarse.

"If you keep doing that, I will not be able to do all the things I wanted tonight."

A smile was quick to appear on both of their faces.

Ilya swept Shane off of his feet and carried him bridal style towards the bed. Ilya gently set Shane down on the soft surface, which radiated with Ilya's scent. Shane propped himself on his elbows as Ilya stood at the foot of the bed. Ilya crawled onto bed, but only barely, deciding to lift Shane's foot and starting to press adoring kisses down his leg.

Halfway down Shane's calf, Ilya froze as his eyes made contact with the bottom of Shane's foot. "You have tattoo."

It was a tiny fine-line tattoo of a burger drawn in a cartoon style under the arch of his right foot. It was no wider than an inch. Shane had gotten a few months after he started therapy years ago—he just needed to prove to himself that even if he did the worst thing he thought possible to his body and could still live, then maybe he could start moving on from some of his issues with food. It was silly and the logic wasn't entirely there, but it did strangely help Shane in some ways.

"Yes. Is that seriously more important than what we're doing?" Shane laughed in exasperation.

"It is cute." Ilya gave it one more quick glance before continuing.

Shane savoured the way that Ilya's lips felt against his skin. He wanted to remember this forever. As Ilya gradually made his way up Shane's body, Shane started to tremble and arch his back, especially as Ilya's lips moved towards his inner thighs. Shane was always the most sensitive there.

Just as Shane had done unto him, Ilya also smugly ignored Shane's erection, moving straight onto Shane's torso.

Shane was his own worst enemy.

Ilya's weight sat comfortably on top of Shane's body as their lips moved together. He didn't seem to mind at all that Shane had taken Ilya by the mouth just moments earlier.

Shane moaned into Ilya's mouth as Ilya's finger brushed around Shane's entrance. "Holy shit, Ilya."

Wasting no time, Ilya was quick to grab lube and a condom. He lubed up his finger and started working on Shane's hole with so much intensity Shane had to remind himself to relax. It wasn't a bad kind of intensity by any means, Shane just wasn't prepared for it. Ilya was also just as quick to find Shane's prostate, rubbing against it in a way that instantly sent waves of pleasure washing over Shane's body.

"Ilya, please."

"Use your words, *kitten*."

Shane clenched his hand over Ilya's shoulder as he rode out another wave. "Need you in me."

Flipping Shane onto his stomach, Ilya then spread Shane's cheeks apart before ultimately aligning and burying himself in Shane. They both babbled incoherent words as Ilya went deeper. Shane didn't know if he could ever get used to how amazing this felt with Ilya.

"Okay to move?" Ilya asked.

Shane nodded as he buried his face and chest into the mattress. He wanted to angle his body so that he could feel Ilya as deeply as possible. Ilya had a firm grip around Shane's hips as he started to relentlessly thrust into Shane. Though Ilya's grip wasn't too strong that it hurt, Shane hoped that it would be firm enough to leave marks—they were in a place where only he would be able to gander and appreciate.

Over and over, Ilya slammed against Shane's prostate, fucking him into a state of delirium. Shane began to stroke himself as he started to the edge the state of ecstasy.

"Ilya—I'm going to—"

"Fuck, me too."

It only took a few more thrusts before Shane came, with Ilya following shortly after. As Shane panted, Ilya planted a kiss at the base of Shane's spine and then one more between his shoulders before pulling out.

Ilya laid down right next to Shane, still catching his breath. His hazel eyes were dilated and looked intensely at Shane. "Stay. For tonight."

Shane's mind was amazingly calm—maybe it was because Ilya had just given him mind blowing sex—but he felt calm and sure enough to agree. "Okay. I'll stay."

Ilya liked Harris, but he didn't necessarily like Harris's job. He liked it just fine when Harris was filming the entire team or when Harris interacted with fans on behalf of the team. But, when Harris filmed interviews or special segments, that's when Ilya disliked Harris's job. It wasn't that Ilya hated his fans—he just didn't really care for social media or the interviews. He only recently got Instagram at Harris's request.

The entire team was at the airport, waiting for their flight to New Jersey for their first away game in the States. They already lost their first game—a home game too—to Toronto, but no one was surprised. Toronto's team was a beast compared to them. What did surprise, Ilya, however, was how empty the entire arena was. It was less than half full. Nobody was surprised either when they lost the next few.

Still, Harris was going around to each player, interviewing them as they waited to raise morale and perhaps increase viewership for their future games. Ilya overheard over the noise of the rest of the team that the question has something to do with what they brought with them, but he didn't pay too much attention. He was avoiding Harris and waiting for a response from Shane.

Jane: Glad to hear that you made it to the airport on time.

Jane: Have a safe flight, and you're going to kill it in Jersey!

Jane: Just try to stay out of the penalty box.

For Ilya's sake, Shane had asked him to change his contact name to something feminine just so that they could have some privacy. "Jane" was the first thing that Ilya came up with. They both knew too well that hockey players had no regards for privacy, especially when they were traveling. Somehow, traveling made hockey players turn into little girls during sleepovers—they were extra nosy and liked to snoop around. Ilya didn't really care but did it anyway to quell Shane's worries.

Ilya sensed someone sat down next to him and didn't need to look up to know that it was Harris, whose apple scent gave him away. Harris was grinning from ear-to-ear and his blond beard made him look extra jolly.

"Who's the lucky person you're texting?"

Ilya didn't care to wipe the grin off of his face. "Someone special."

"They must be special if they got you smiling like that. Good for you!" Harris playfully slapped Ilya's shoulder.

"Yes." Ilya could only picture Shane's body draped across his own, his head on top of Ilya's chest. Waking up to Shane in his bed with their legs tangled together still seemed too good to be true.

"Can I bother you for a quick second? I've been asking each player one question: what is the only thing you can't go without on a travel day? Is that okay with you?"

"It's fine." Just because he didn't like Harris's job it didn't mean that Ilya was going to make his life harder. Ilya also wanted more people to come to the games.

Harris stood in front of Ilya and started filming. "Okay, Ilya Rozanov. What is the one thing that you cannot go without on a travel day?"

"Noise-canceling earphones. The team is very loud everywhere we go so it is nice to get some quiet," Ilya said earnestly, which earned a laugh from Harris.

"That is very true. Many people have also said that. Thank you for your time!" Harris put away his phone and thanked Ilya again before moving onto Dykstra.

Ilya's phone buzzed once more.

Jane: I'll be watching and cheering you on from home!

“What’s going on, man?” Hayden stood in front of Shane with a Bordelaise-stained towel over his shoulder.

Shane kept straining the vegetable stock. It just finished and Shane needed to get it cooled down in an ice bath before they closed for the night. “What do you mean?”

Hayden gave Shane a look as if the answer were the most obvious thing in the world. Unfortunately for him, Shane wasn’t the best at reading people. “What’s up with the good mood?”

“I’ve always been pretty happy.” Shane shrugged.

“Yes, but you have been extra happy lately. What’s with that?”

“It’s a crime to be extra happy?”

“No—well kind of. You’re scaring some of the cooks and waiters. You didn’t even give the cooks a stern talk after they accidentally served supreme sauce instead of Allemande sauce for an entire lunch service. It was such a rookie mistake on their part!”

“I talked to them!” Shane looked up to find Hayden holding his head in confusion. Some of the cooks in the kitchen were also nervously looking at them, heads darting between the two of them and their tasks.

“But it was nice! ‘Guys, let’s be more attentive to details next time.’ That was it!”

“Yeah—because that was the problem!” Shane really didn’t know where Hayden was going with this.

Hayden pointedly looked at Shane. “It was the problem, but you normally would be big boss Chef Shane and give them a much longer talk. Are you dying? Are you seeing someone? What’s happening?”

“You thought me dying was more plausible than seeing someone?”

“Well?”

“I might be seeing someone.” Shane’s face felt warm.

He and Ilya hadn’t specified anything about their relationship. Shane knew that he himself wanted to take things slow, but he didn’t know if going to Ilya’s house several times counted as “taking things slow.” They were just taking things... very physically.

“That’s great, man! So happy for you.”

“Thanks, Hayd.”

“You should bring him over for dinner sometime. Jackie and I will be more than happy to meet him.”

Shane resisted the urge to laugh and chose to smile instead. He was sure that Jackie and Hayden felt that way, but there was no way that Ilya would be as happy to meet them. Shane still needed to work out the grudge the Ilya had with Hayden.

“Will do.”

The Hollander household always came alive when there was a hockey game on. Both Yuna and David Hollander lived and breathed hockey, and so did Shane at one point. Now, Shane mostly liked to watch his mom during games for entertainment, though he still found pleasure in following the games.

The three of them sat in front of the TV together. A large bowl of lightly buttered popcorn sat in front of them, and they each had a beverage of their choice: Shane had ginger ale, David had beer, and Yuna had water. She typically only drank after games because she liked to keep a clear mind while watching. Then, she would have a glass of wine.

The Centaurs were playing against the New Jersey Demons and were doing surprisingly well—much better than Shane could have expected. Wyatt Hayes had already blocked two scoring chances and Troy Barrett came very close to scoring. Regardless of their performance, Shane could really only focus on number eighty-one. Ilya had already won his first face-off and, as always, was lightning fast on the ice.

“I still don’t understand why Rozanov came to Ottawa,” Shane’s mom spoke. “He had it all in Boston. He was on track to winning another Stanley Cup this year, too.”

“I’m not sure anyone knows, honey,” his father replied.

Shane didn’t know the answer either. He and Ilya didn’t exactly talk about things.

“Well it’s certainly not because he injured himself,” Yuna continued. “He’s still playing roughly and his gait is perfectly fine. I just hope that he doesn’t expect to score the same fifty goals he scored in his rookie year this year—not with that team coordination.” Her brows became increasingly furrowed as she spoke.

Shane winced at his mother’s words. Nothing she said was untrue but the reality of Ilya’s career as it stood was bleak. He just hoped that Ilya didn’t regret coming to Ottawa.

“Right, didn’t Rozanov go to McGill?” David asked. “Did you ever bump into him, Shane?”

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Shane decided to answer truthfully. Perhaps doing so would ease the shock his parents would go into if he and Ilya ever decided to become more than what they were now. “Yeah, we were actually in first-year English together.”

“What? You never told me this!” His mother’s mouth was agape with surprise, eyes finally not looking at the TV. “Is he as mean off-ice as he is on-ice?”

“No, actually. He’s pretty decent.”

Yuna looked at Shane with a squinted, skeptical look. “Okay.”

Leaving it at that, the three of them turned back to the game again. Shane could only bite his nails as the match progressed. There were only two minutes left and the score was tied at 1-1. By some miracle, Ilya had slipped through the Demon’s burly defence and scored with a hat trick.

“The Centaurs are going to win this one,” Yuna claimed.

Shane believed her. Yuna was often right about a lot of things, but was almost always right—about ninety-nine percent correct—about all things hockey.

Shane leaned forward, forearms resting on his knees as the timer ticked on. There were thirty seconds left to the game—thirty seconds to score another goal before overtime was deemed necessary. The Centaurs crowded around the Demons’ net and the puck was flying across the ice.

With an assist from Dykstra, Ilya scored another goal. The puck cleanly hit the back of the net.

Shane exhaled in relief and overwhelming pride. He did it. Ilya won the Centaurs their first game of the season. Still, Shane couldn’t move an inch. He could only sit still as he continued to watch.

“You were right,” David laughed, leaning back onto the couch.

“When am I not?”

“You’re a witch when it comes to hockey.”

Ilya tore off his helmet as his team rushed to engulf him in a crushing hug. Even the players from the bench were quick to jump onto the ice. Gloves, sticks, and helmets were quickly strewn about the ice—all of the teams’ attention was solely focussed on Ilya. Hayes was quick to pick Ilya off of his feet. Ilya looked so happy. His smile was large and unabashed.

Ilya winked and blew a kiss at the screen. Shane knew it was for him but couldn’t let it show. He just stared at the screen and continued to watch the Centaurs celebrate in raw, unfiltered glee.

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Things are happening!

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone one of you who has read my story! I'm still in awe every single time I check this fic and see that the hits have skyrocketed. Thank you!!

Just a reminder: since Shane also understands Russian, I thought it would be appropriate for all Russian words to be written in italicized English. So, whenever you see italics in lines of dialogue, just know that Russian is being said.

Ilya stood outside of Leaf + Sake at eleven o'clock. The lights of the signage had already been turned off and there was only a faint orange glow coming from deep within the restaurant. Even though his body ached with fatigue, Ilya came to the restaurant in a heartbeat when Shane had asked him to come. He wouldn't have been able to sleep anyways—he had trouble doing so these days.

Shane ran up to the doors and opened it for Ilya. He was wearing a crisply ironed baby blue button up with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. There was a little bit of flour on his cheek that Ilya was all but too tempted to wipe away.

“You are trying to murder me and no one is here to witness it,” Ilya said, looking into the darkness of the restaurant. Less than half of the lights were turned on.

Shane rolled his eyes. “Get in here.”

They walked towards a small table close to the kitchen, where a bottle of iced wine sat waiting for them. There were a few lit tea candles for the surrounding tables.

“Sorry for making you come so late. This was the only time we could have the place to ourselves, unless you wanted to come here at two in the morning,” Shane said as he pulled a chair out for Ilya.

“What is this?” Ilya's chest felt impossibly warm as he soaked in the scene in front of him.

“I wanted to give you a proper celebration for your big win.” Shane’s face was pink as he spoke.

A smile grew on Ilya’s face. He was happy when they won against the New Jersey Demons, but having Shane in front of him made him exponentially happier. Ilya set his arm on the table and reached for Shane’s hand. Shane happily entwined their fingers together. His hands were always cooler than Ilya’s, but their temperatures balanced each other out.

“Are you hungry?” Shane asked.

Ilya wasn’t particularly hungry but could eat as he ate a smaller dinner on Shane’s request. His text read: “Bring your appetite but don’t starve yourself!” Ilya was sure that whatever Shane had in store for them was much better than the Big Mac that he had picked up after practice.

“Come on, I know a guy who might let us go into the kitchen.” Shane took Ilya by the hand and led them to the kitchen.

Ilya had never been in an industrial kitchen before but it was a lot cleaner and organized than he had anticipated. It was just a room filled to the brim with stainless steel, porcelain, and clear plastics.

Shane put on a clean black apron and neatly tied a knot on his front before tucking a folded towel in the waist tie. He disappeared for a second before returning with a tray of... no. Ilya felt his chest tighten. He didn’t want to get his hopes up too high but it wouldn’t be out of the realm of possibility that Shane was holding a tray of un-fried piroshkis.

“I didn’t know what kind of filling your mom used to make so I made some with beef and some with cabbage. I know it won’t be as good as hers but I hope you like them.”

Ilya was quick to hold Shane in his arms. He took a shaky breath of Shane’s sweet, fresh scent—the smell of Katsura trees—as his eyes stung with tears. Shane wrapped his arms around Ilya’s waist, nuzzling his face into Ilya’s scent gland.

“Thank you, *sweetheart*,” Ilya whispered. He gave Shane a quick squeeze.

“Sweetheart?” Shane looked up at Ilya with a fond smile. Ilya could get lost in those chocolate eyes forever.

“You are my *kitten*—my *sweetheart*.”

Shane gave Ilya a quick peck before shimmying out of his grasp. “I have to cook these before the overproof.”

Ilya couldn’t help but hug Shane from the back as Shane started to fry the piroshkis in the deep fryer. Shane warned Ilya that he could get splashed with hot oil but he really didn’t care. It was dumb but Ilya had gotten hurt in so many ways throughout his career that pain didn’t really bother him anymore. He just didn’t want to let go of Shane. Luckily, with Shane’s expertise, Ilya got away unharmed.

The kitchen came alive with the familiar scent of piroshkis. It smelt like a distant home that Ilya had locked away in his memories. He tried to not picture his mother in the kitchen with them. She would have had her hand on her hip as she used a splintering wooden spoon to flip the golden piroshkis. Ilya wished for nothing more than for his mother to meet Shane. But like all things in Ilya's life, that dream was too good to be true.

Shane plated the piroshkis onto a large white plate. His fingers seemed to be immune to the extreme heat of the piping hot pastries. Ilya couldn't wait a second later to seize Shane's lips with a smouldering kiss, which was quickly reciprocated. Shane's fingers entangled themselves in Ilya's hair, practically pulling moans from Ilya's mouth. As Shane pulled away, Ilya chased after him with his lips.

"These are going to get cold if we keep doing that." Shane spoke with a low voice. "And I would really like to not make out where I work everyday."

Ilya groaned but relented. He did really want to try Shane's piroshkis, so he trailed behind Shane as they walked back to their table.

"The ones with a crimped edge have a beef filling, and the ones with a straight edge have a cabbage filling. I read online that cabbage piroshkis typically have boiled eggs, so I tried to make it as authentically as possible. *Bon appétit.*"

As Ilya bit into a beef piroshki, tears instantly welled up in his eyes. It tasted just like his childhood—the time before hockey peeled him away from his mom; it tasted like skating on frozen lakes with his gloved hand in hers; and it tasted like secret flour fights in the kitchen while his brother and father were away.

"*Fucking hell,*" Ilya mumbled, trying to stop the tears. "I'm sorry."

"Ilya..." Shane immediately stood up and embraced Ilya. He rubbed soothing circles against Ilya's back.

"It tastes exactly like hers. Thank you."

Shane knelt down to meet Ilya's eyes and pressed a gentle kiss against Ilya's forehead.

"My mother passed away when I was twelve," Ilya admitted. "I didn't realize I missed her so much until now."

"I'm so sorry, Ilya. I didn't realize—"

"How could you have? I never told you. But this was the... this was the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me. Thank you."

Shane kissed Ilya sweetly before sitting down again. They held each other's hands on top of the clothed tabletop. Shane's thumb continuously brushed against Ilya's hand. Ilya's foot found Shane's as he gently stepped on Shane's toes—he wanted to be as close to Shane as possible.

"I like you a lot, Ilya." Shane smiled, his eyes incredibly warm despite the dim lighting.

“I like you too, Shane.” He was sure his smile was all lopsided as he was still too emotional.

But, Ilya also braced himself and waited for the ball to drop. There was always going to be a “but.” He could only wait in swelling silence as Shane gathered his thoughts, eyes darting back and forth. Ilya’s stomach churned in anticipation.

“And I don’t want to mess this up—not like last time.” Shane’s hand was still gripped around Ilya’s but his grasp was getting firmer. “I would love to be your boyfriend but... could we please take things slowly?”

It felt like someone had catapulted Ilya into heaven. The dread that had consumed his body had suddenly vanished into thin air. None of this felt real. Shane Hollander. His boyfriend. He was sure he was looking at Shane with dumb wide eyes and an agape mouth, a look that his father surely would have slapped off of his face. Stunned, Ilya could only watch as Shane’s face morphed into terror.

“Ilya? If you don’t want that-”

“No, I do,” Ilya replied immediately. “I just cannot believe it.”

“Believe what?”

“That I could be this happy.” Ilya leaned over the table and planted kisses over Shane’s freckles before meeting his lips.

Ilya had been feeling a little bit better nowadays. There were still some inexplicably hard days and he could never seem to get enough sleep, but it felt like things were finally looking up. He and Galina were delving deeper into the roots of problems that Ilya had, and the medication helped too. Now, with Shane, it felt like Ilya was finally seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. Smiles were easier to form and he could finally stand up straighter.

“My boyfriend, Shane Hollander,” Ilya said, trying the new label. He never thought that he would be able to have Shane like this.

“My boyfriend, Ilya Rozanov.” Shane was glowing with an adorably shy smile.

Ilya stood up and pulled Shane in by the chair so they were sat next to one another. He didn’t hold back from kissing Shane this time—the surprised look on his face as Ilya moved him was too much to ignore. Shane hummed in delight as Ilya’s tongue swept across his lips.

This time, it was Ilya to pull away first. Immediately, he started to eat the piroshkis with gusto while still savouring the flavours dancing on his tastebud.

“What are you doing?” Shane chuckled.

“You should eat too. We will need fuel for what we will do next.”

Despite being stunned into silence for a second, Shane quickly took a beef piroshki and started eating.

They left Shane's car in the parking lot and drove Ilya's SUV to Shane's apartment after cleaning up in the restaurant. While Ilya's house was bigger and better in every sense, Shane's apartment was closer and they couldn't wait any longer. The entire ride, Ilya firmly gripped onto Shane's thigh, feeling the hard musculature underneath the rough denim.

The elevator ride was just as intense, Ilya had to hug Shane from behind to hide his erection, heavily breathing in Shane the entire time. In return, Shane offered no help, only burying his ass into Ilya's crotch.

Then, they lost themselves in each other's warmth, taken apart piece by piece with each kiss and thrust.

Both freshly showered, Shane rested his head onto Ilya's bare chest, fingers playing with Ilya's hand and tracing his knuckles. Shane's barely damp hair tickled Ilya's cheek but Ilya wouldn't have it any other way. Ilya was sure that Shane could feel how quickly and loudly his heart thumped in his chest but he didn't care—it was proof of how deeply he felt for Shane.

"This is real, right?" Shane asked. He knew what Shane meant. He was still thinking that it was too good to be true for himself as well.

"Yes. Very real." Ilya caressed Shane's back, feeling his boyfriend's soft warm skin.

"*Boyfriend.*" Shane traced a heart onto Ilya's palm before propping himself on his elbows to directly look into Ilya's eyes. "Please be patient with me. I like you so much, but I don't know if I'm exactly comfortable with other people knowing yet. I'm terrified of what will happen."

Ilya nodded. He would wait until the end of time if it meant that he could be with Shane.

"Is that okay with you?"

"Yes."

As much as Ilya wanted to let people know that his wish had come true, he understood what Shane was so terrified of. He was nervous too. Their situation was precarious at best. There were too many things to worry about: Ilya's career and Russian citizenship, as well as Shane's privacy. Ilya was constantly underneath a spotlight that the average person wouldn't be able to handle. Shane was already familiar with how horribly exploitative the world of hockey was to personal information, and Ilya didn't want that for Shane. And although Ilya had applied for Canadian citizenship, it probably would not look good for him if he immediately got into a scandal within a few months of living in Canada.

For now, Ilya was happy to just enjoy Shane—to have Shane in his arms to hold and cherish.

Ilya sat up to bring their lips together and then lightly nipped at Shane's scent gland, too scared to make his mark yet. One day.

One day, he would be able to tell the entire world that he and Shane Hollander belonged to one another.

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Shane surprises Ilya in Montreal.

Shane was buzzing with so much excitement he didn't know what to do with himself. He couldn't recall when he had last gotten so excited over something. Maybe it was when he started playing for an AAA team and proved to himself that his designation didn't mean shit. Shane could still vividly picture himself at twelve years-old, laying out his brand new jersey and gear bag at the foot of his bed before he fell asleep. He had originally wanted to wear the jersey to sleep but was quickly dissuaded at the thought of sleeping in a scratchy jersey and waking up to it being crumpled. Or maybe it was when he was fourteen and made it into the U18 division a year early and promptly got to slap a C onto his jersey, becoming the youngest player and captain in the team's history.

Now, he was waiting at a red light, practically vibrating in his car, just blocks away from the Bell Centre in Montreal. The Centaurs were going to play against the Voyageurs tonight, and Ilya had no idea that Shane had driven two hours to watch the game. Shane secretly bought tickets weeks ago on a night where Ilya was in Chicago and Shane had missed him dearly. Shane also had a few glasses of merlot with the restaurant staff that night in celebration of the success of their fall menu that night, but he didn't think that was relevant. He just missed his boyfriend, which Shane never got tired of saying or hearing.

Winter had forcefully made its presence known early this year. There were already flurries of snow in early November. Shane stayed warm with his puffer and the secret jersey he had worn underneath. It probably wouldn't be a big deal if he entered the arena wearing "Rozanov 81" in blocky red letters—he'd already seen plenty of people wearing the same jersey—but Shane didn't want to risk it. Logically, he knew that wearing the Rozanov jersey didn't equate to holding a giant, red sign that proclaimed he was Ilya's boyfriend, but his mind made it feel that way.

Tonight, Shane just wanted to enjoy watching his boyfriend.

The Bell Centre roared with life. Pheromones were strong and screams were loud—it was extremely overstimulating. Montreal had always had its huge fanbase with its diehard fans, but there were a good amount of Centaurs fans as well. Shane could spot more than a couple of clumps of black and red jerseys breaking up the ocean of blue and white. Ever since the Centaurs won against New Jersey, they were on a winning streak, gradually gaining attention and building a steady fanbase too. Now, they had won six games so far and Ilya had played no small role in securing these wins.

Shane sat behind the Centaurs' net, his view half obscured. He wasn't able to get a great seat because although the restaurant was doing great, Shane wasn't exactly rich by any means and especially not by NHL standards. The Montreal fans were also quick to snatch up the good seats, which only left Shane with a few options. He didn't want to sit behind the Voyageurs' net just in case Ilya spotted him mid-play and got too distracted to score.

Bouncing his leg up and down, Shane continued to wait for Ilya and his team to come out. He could already see the team's social media manager—Harris, Shane thinks—in the team's reserved box seats. Shane often watched the videos that Harris posted on the Centaurs' social media to see what Ilya was like at work. Shane may or may not have not gotten Instagram for that sole purpose, which Rose was all too quick to tease him about. (Rose also made Shane search up Leaf + Sake but Shane had to immediately stop after seeing one too many so-called “thirst traps” of him and Hayden.) Ilya wasn't all that different on social media. He was still quick witted and all too smug, but Shane couldn't help but notice that he was much more reserved. Secretly, he liked that only he got to see that unreserved side of Ilya.

The Voyageurs started filing onto the ice, and Shane had no doubt that the Centaurs would come out soon after.

“I bet those cock-sucking motherfuckers will lose today,” someone in Shane's vicinity spat.

Immediately, Shane's body froze. After a few long breaths, he was able to relax a little. He knew that he would be confronted with this kind of behaviour and language today and had prepared himself. In fact, he was going to hear plenty more of these comments throughout the night. Still, it didn't hurt any less to see that some people still maintained these backwards ideologies. Nevertheless, Shane moved on. He wasn't here for these bigots. He was here for his boyfriend.

“Listen up, everyone!” Bood's voice rang loud and clear in the locker room. “We've been killing it lately, but that doesn't mean we can get comfortable with where we are. Montreal is vicious—they're fast and hit hard—but we've got heart and that's so much more than anyone could ask for. Let's go get 'em!”

The room erupted in cheers.

It wasn't the most inspirational pep talk that Ilya had heard but he didn't care. Ilya didn't think he could ever feel proud to be apart of a team again. He thought the win in New Jersey was a fluke, but then they kept on winning. And winning. Something just clicked for the team. Ilya could suddenly read his teammates' body language like a book and Wiebe's gentle, dad-like approach finally got through their thick skulls. Even Troy seemed to be coming out of his shell.

Tonight was going to be a great game. Win or lose.

“We won’t let those bigots win!” Hayes exclaimed, earning cheers of his own.

Bood individually high-fived each player as they filed out. When it came to Ilya, he also gave him a pat on the back. “Go get ‘em tiger.”

Ilya reciprocated with a pat on his alternate captain’s shoulder.

While the arenas of their games had been becoming increasingly fuller, tonight’s area was packed to the brim, just as they were when Ilya had played for Boston. Ilya kept his head down as he skated around their half of the rink, having no interest in looking into the crowds of Voyageurs fans. He just kept his eyes on the several pucks littered on the ice as to not trip. He knew that Hayes’s wife, sister, and sister-in-law had all flown down to watch the game and were sitting in their box seats. Hayes was overjoyed that his wife had gotten a day off at the hospital and could also see his sisters. Ilya was happy for the goalie but he was also admittedly a little jealous. Aside from Svetlana, no one he knew came to watch his games.

Ilya started practicing his shots with Hayes. By puck number four, Ilya couldn’t help but notice someone sitting behind the net. He thought that maybe his mind had been playing tricks on him, or maybe his visor was too foggy. But there Shane was, sitting just two rows up and shyly waving at Ilya. His winter jacket was zipped all the way to the top and there was a slight flush on his cheeks.

Ilya flashed the best smile he could with his mouthguard in. He couldn’t wait to kiss that adorable face later.

Just hours ago, Shane had texted Ilya that he would be watching. Ilya would have never guessed that he would be here—that he would drive over two hours to come see Ilya play in person. Ilya had to scramble to shoot the next puck, which he clumsily missed, as to not give Shane too much attention. If there were some hyper-vigilant fan out there, which there always were, they would probably overanalyze how Ilya stopped mid practice and find their way to Shane. Still, that didn’t stop the overwhelming happiness that Ilya was feeling.

Shane didn’t expect watching his boyfriend on the ice to be this nerve-racking. He couldn’t help but wince whenever Ilya was checked into the boards, and he could do nothing but watch as the referee pulled Ilya away to prevent a fight breaking out. The referee incorrectly waived a penalty for number 87 (Roy) on the Voyageurs team, who had clearly tripped Ilya with his stick. At one point, Shane had to get up and leave to get one of the arena’s disgustingly dry and ridiculously overpriced hot dogs to distract himself. It was all getting a bit much for him.

He supposed he had watched Ilya play years ago in university but that was different. Back then, Shane had denied himself of his own identity—more than he had realized—and struggled with pretty much everything. He was also so in his head that he wasn’t able to see

Ilya for who he was. During university, Ilya was just a cocky hockey player that Shane couldn't stop thinking about and shamed himself for wanting.

Ilya was still that same cocky hockey player, but Shane could also see his kindness, his tenacity, and his tender heart. Above all, Shane wasn't letting himself get in the way of liking Ilya.

Shane sat in his Land Rover once again, now waiting for Ilya to join him. He was glad to finally have a moment to himself and relish the quiet.

The Centaurs had lost 4-3 but fought with a valiant effort. It was truly a close call but the Montreal team was simply more forceful and well-versed together as a team. The good news was that because they lost, there would be no celebratory drinks or dinner for the Centaurs. This meant that Shane could text Ilya to meet him in the nearly empty parkade so they could drive to Shane's hotel room together.

Soon, Ilya appeared wearing a sleek suit. Even though the league had retracted the dress code for games, the Centaurs still wore formal suits to every game. They wanted to appear professional and unified, especially since they were poorly regarded by most of the public. Shane had no complaints about the continuation of the sleek, formal dress code.

As soon as Ilya climbed into his car, Shane had to restrain himself from pulling Ilya in by his tie to give him a kiss. His tie was navy blue, which only accentuated the oceanic colours of Ilya's eyes. Instead, he scrunched his nose at the smell of sickly cherry-like soap that radiated from Ilya's body.

"What are you doing here, *my beloved*?" Ilya's face shone with glee. This was not the look of a man who just lost a game.

Shane kept his hands to himself, even if he desperately wanted to run his hand along Ilya's face. He could do that later in the comfort of his private hotel room. He also desperately wanted to take off his jacket but he didn't want to ruin Ilya's surprise. Shane was wearing a long-sleeve underneath the jersey, too. Even after all these years, he never could get used to feeling the rough, mesh polyester against his skin. Though, Shane was critiquing himself for his choices—it was getting terribly warm and muggy. He should have changed into Ilya's jersey after the game.

"I missed you," Shane replied honestly.

"You missed me so much that you would drive two hours to come to terrible city?"

Shane nonchalantly shrugged his shoulders and started his car, despite his raging heartbeat.

"Thank you," Ilya said while placing his hand on top of Shane's on the gear shift.

Shane panicked at the contact but realized that the only way anyone could see their hands would be if they stood directly beside the car and peered inside. As it stood, there weren't any people actively walking around in the parkade by his car. They should be safe. So, Shane let himself enjoy the warmth radiating from Ilya's hand.

He couldn't sneak Ilya into his hotel room—it was impossible to hide a 6'3 man dressed in a cleanly pressed suit—but Shane just had to trust that even if people saw them, that they would not assume that they were in a romantic relationship.

Once the door was closed and latched, Shane took Ilya by his tie and pressed him into a smouldering kiss, just as he had wished to do earlier. Ilya's hands traveled to Shane's jacket, wanting to take it off, but Shane stopped him.

"I am so proud of you, Ilyusha," Shane said, looking directly into Ilya's eyes. He hoped that Ilya knew that he truly meant it. *"And to reward you for your amazing performance, I have a surprise for you."*

"Oh? What did you prepare?"

Shane sat Ilya down on the bed. Ilya looked at him with what Shane could only call adoration, his eyes following Shane's every movement. Finally, Shane unzipped his jacket to reveal Ilya's jersey. With how warm he had gotten, Shane couldn't help but notice how strong his natural scent had gotten as the jacket came off. Still, he did a little twirl to show that Ilya that he was proudly donning his jersey.

As soon as his jacket met the back of the hotel chair, Ilya practically pounced on top of Shane. One of his hands cradled the back of Shane's head while the other wrapped around his waist as Ilya's kissed him. Ilya's coffee scent was making Shane dizzy and loose under Ilya's grasp.

"I'm assuming you like your surprise?" Shane laughed as Ilya deeply inhaled Shane's scent.

"I love it. You are best surprise ever. Thank you."

He felt impossibly warm upon hearing Ilya's words, and it wasn't because Shane had been wrapped up like a baked potato for hours on end.

"I like you so much," Ilya said. His eyes were a little red.

"I like you so much, too." Shane didn't know that it was possible for him to like someone so much. "Now did you only want to look at me in your jersey or..."

Ilya's smile morphed into a smug grin. "You do not know how hard it was for me to play once I saw you."

Immediately, Shane felt guilty. His chest and throat tightened in tandem. Had he caused Ilya to falter because of his presence? His being here was a mistake.

"The moment I saw you," Ilya continued, sensing Shane's discomfort, "I got hard. You made me want to play harder and better than ever. Couldn't wait to see you after."

“Stop,” Shane replied, but it didn’t have the same annoyed edge that he usually had when he said this. How could he even pretend to be annoyed? He placed his hand on Ilya’s chest, feeling Ilya’s heartbeat underneath.

“Barrett’s lucky tonight.” Ilya brushed his nose against Shane’s.

“Why?”

“He won’t have to hear all the things I will do to you. We’re sharing a room.”

“You seriously considered having sex with me with Troy Barrett in the room?” Shane laughed.

“No one can stop me from being with you.”

Shane couldn’t take the sweet talk anymore. This was too much for him to take. Instead, he pulled Ilya in by the lapels and took him by the mouth. Without breaking contact, Ilya started taking off his blazer and loosened his tie. Shane was quick to help Ilya with unbuttoning his shirt and unbuckling his belt. Even though Shane loved seeing Ilya in a suit, he liked Ilya better with nothing on. Clothes then flew to the ground, but Shane kept Ilya’s jersey on.

Something that Shane grew to love was feeling how Ilya became hard under his touch—he loved knowing that he was the reason for Ilya’s lust. He palmed at Ilya’s crotch before giving his member a few strokes. It wasn’t long before Ilya was grunting in Shane’s mouth, which pleased Shane to no end.

“Where do you want me?” Ilya panted. His grip was firm around Shane’s hips.

“Tonight is about you. What do you want?” Shane felt dizzy with excitement.

“On your knees.” Ilya patted the mattress.

Shane climbed onto the bed and presented himself to Ilya. The mattress sunk under Ilya’s weight as he settled behind Shane.

“So eager for me,” Ilya whispered as he pushed the jersey up to reveal more of Shane’s skin. He smacked Shane’s ass, leaving Shane almost shuddering with pleasure.

Ilya’s trimmed beard prickled against Shane skin as he reverently kissed around his hole. Ilya pulled a stream of moans out of Shane’s mouth as he ate him out. God, Shane loved Ilya’s mouth. Even though Ilya was being gentle with Shane, the intensity of what Shane felt was not gentle at all. Shane gripped onto the bed sheets as Ilya sent ripples of pleasure throughout his body.

When Ilya’s thick fingers joined his tongue, Shane had to bite his lip to muffle his moans—they were in a hotel and couldn’t be as loud as they normally were.

“I want to hear you,” Ilya said.

“Can’t—we’re in a hotel room.” Shane spoke through a moan.

Ilya relented. “Do you have lube?”

Shane scrambled to his feet and quickly grabbed both lube and condoms from his overnight bag, leaving Ilya chuckling and staring at him with such fondness that Shane didn’t know what to do with himself. He practically threw both at Ilya as he returned to his previous position.

“I think you need this more than me,” Ilya laughed.

“Shut up and get on with it.” Shane was too shy to admit that Ilya was right. Being secretive with their relationship and having Ilya gone for days on end made Shane want him more than ever.

Shane was sure he was seeing stars when Ilya penetrated him. He couldn’t stop himself from loudly groaning as he stretched around Ilya’s length. He missed feeling so full around Ilya.

“Hard, please,” Shane gasped. “I want to feel it tomorrow.”

Ilya’s grip around Shane’s waist immediately tightened as he forcefully thrust. “Fuck. *You take me in so well, don’t you?*”

“*Please.*”

Shane’s face was smushed against the bed, his mouth slack with pleasure. All he could focus on was how Ilya continuously brushed against his prostate—it felt so intense that Shane felt like he could burst. Tension continuously built up in Shane’s belly and he was going to come if Ilya kept going on like this.

Subconsciously, Shane started to stroke himself to chase his orgasm. “Ilya, I’m-”

Ilya swatted Shane’s hand away. “Show me how well you take my cock.”

He had come untouched with Ilya before but he didn’t know if he could do that tonight. As much as Shane was enjoying this, he still felt tense. He was scared that they could be discovered and outed at any time, even in the privacy of their hotel room. Shane didn’t know if he was capable of completely letting himself go for Ilya tonight.

“You can, *sweetheart.*” Ilya ran his hand along Shane’s peck before rubbing his nipple between his fingers. “Focus on me.”

Shane didn’t have time to worry again as Ilya pounded into him with such force that he could only moan. Maybe he could try. This night was all for Ilya and Shane didn’t want to ruin it with his anxiety.

“I need to see you,” Shane said.

Without a hitch, Shane settled on his back as Ilya’s weight settled on top of him. The jersey and his long-sleeve practically clung against his damp skin but he didn’t mind it as much now that he knew Ilya liked seeing him in it. Shane refocused his attention onto Ilya and how his

hazel eyes deeply peered into his own. Shane liked this man so much that he might... That train of thought was for later.

Ilya reentered Shane and quickly regained momentum. They were both gasping and moaning into each other's mouths, noses senselessly rubbing against each other's faces.

Shane tried his best to fight the urge to touch himself. Instead, he let the friction of Ilya's body moving against his own do some of the work and dug his nails into Ilya's back. He just thought of how Ilya was here, whole-heartedly devoting himself to Shane.

"Ilya-"

Before Shane could finish his sentence, his orgasm overtook him. Streaks of white cum spurted across his jersey.

Ilya huffed satisfactorily before joining Shane. His jaw clenched as he emptied himself.

"Did you like your surprise?" Shane kissed Ilya.

"Do you have to ask?" Ilya smiled brightly.

Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

It's Ilya's turn to surprise Shane.

Despite how good everything was in Ilya's life was at the moment, he still felt something tugging at him—trying to pull him into the darkness. There were days where he was in Ottawa, resting in between games, but couldn't get out of bed, despite desperately wanting to go see Shane. His mind had anchored him to his mattress and he could do nothing but watch as the day passed by through his window. The only form of entertainment he had was watching snow build up on his windowsill. Really, the only thing Ilya could feasibly do was to get up and go to the washroom. Even then, he only went when his bladder was screaming with pain.

Galina told him that healing takes time. The path to becoming better wasn't linear. There would be great days—and there were plenty of great days—just as there would be horrible days. Ilya hated the horrible days, more than he hated his mind for creating those days in the first place. He hated how useless and helpless he was.

Though he wasn't feeling entirely himself today, he knew he needed to get out of bed and do something. He needed and thoroughly desired to do a grand romantic gesture for Shane.

Ilya wasn't the slightest surprised by how thoughtful Shane was, but he was surprised at the frequency in which Shane was able to pull off these gestures for Ilya. He still couldn't believe that Shane had been able to bring him back to his childhood with just a single bite of his piroshkis, just as he couldn't believe that Shane took time out of his day off to surprise him in Montreal. Ilya never knew that he had wanted to see Shane dressed up in his jersey until Shane had done it. Seeing him engulfed in the material with no padding underneath just made Ilya's heart soar. It was as if Shane had proclaimed himself to be Ilya's biggest cheerleader.

Ilya liked Shane so much and wished he could prove it to him. He could never pull off something as thoughtful as Shane—the man's attention to detail was truly frightening and endearing. But there was something that Ilya could do that most people couldn't do: he could buy experiences with money.

“Where are we?” Shane asked, completely blindfolded.

“If I told you then it wouldn’t be a secret, yes?”

Ilya climbed out of his car and opened the passenger door. Taking Shane by the hand, they walked inside the building. Shane took small and apprehensive steps as he clutched onto Ilya’s hand for dear life. Ilya held back the urge to laugh at how cute Shane looked. Shane probably wouldn’t appreciate being laughed at when he was in a vulnerable state, even if the laughing came from a place of love.

The cold, rubbery smell immediately hit Ilya as the automatic doors slid open. The smell, though not pleasant, was extremely nostalgic to Ilya. He wondered if Shane would immediately recognize it too. After all, his boyfriend did spend most of his childhood here.

With nimble fingers, Ilya untied the blindfold but kept his hands over Shane’s eyes for a few seconds to let him adjust to the stark white lights.

“Ilya...” Shane’s voice was quiet as he trailed off. His eyes swept around the empty facility.

“I rented the rink for just the two of us.”

“The entire rink on a Friday night? Ilya, you’re insane.”

“Maybe. Yes. For you, only.”

Ilya hadn’t rented the Canadian Tire Centre—he wasn’t that crazy—but he did find a local, community ice rink. The owners were all but too happy to rent it out to Ilya after he suggested his starting price. They didn’t even mind that Fridays were free-skate days, when they earned a lot of their revenue. Maybe he offered too much, but it didn’t matter. It was all worth it.

Even though Shane didn’t miss the environment and culture of hockey, Ilya knew that Shane still missed being on the ice. In the few times they talked about it, there was a way about the way that Shane described his hockey career that made Ilya realize that Shane longed to return to the ice. He knew it because he was the same way—after not being on the ice for extended periods of time, his body craved for the cold of the rink and his feet just wanted to glide across the smooth surface.

There was always a risk that Shane would be overly traumatized from the surprise, but Ilya liked to think that he knew Shane well enough to know that he would be more overjoyed than scared. And he was right. He would do anything to fulfill Shane’s desires.

“Thank you. Really.” Shane looked at Ilya with his adoring eyes.

“Anything for you. Now let’s go get some skates.”

Ilya hadn’t bothered bringing any of his own equipment. It wasn’t fair to Shane if he wore his custom skates while Shane had to wear stinky, scuffed up skates. Shane was quick to tell the lone employee, who was no older than sixteen, what his skate size was. Ilya could only watch in amazement as Shane expertly laced up his own skates, as if he could do them in his sleep and had never taken a break from hockey.

They all but raced to the rink. Shane immediately started to dance across the ice. His dark hair fluttered against his forehead as he flew across the surface. Although he was a trained hockey player, Ilya swore that Shane could easily have been a figure skater with how graceful he was on the ice, especially on borrowed skates that were too lumpy and ill-fitted.

“Are you going to join me or are you just going to stand there?” Shane laughed. He looked so unbelievably happy that his eyes twinkled.

Ilya stepped on the ice and took a few strides to join Shane. He couldn’t help but smile at Shane’s unbridled joy. As they spent more time together, Ilya got to see more of this side of Shane. Whenever they were outside, however, he noticed how Shane clammed up with nerves. Ilya couldn’t blame him, of course. He understood where Shane was coming from. For now, it was just nice to see Shane this happy.

Ilya held out his hand for Shane to take. In return, Shane apprehensively looked at Ilya and the entrance of the rink.

“I think it will be okay. The poor kid is probably just looking at his phone behind the counter,” Ilya replied, recounting how bored the kid was as he handed them their skates. Ilya didn’t know if he didn’t recognize Ilya, or if, in typical teen fashion, just didn’t care. Either was fine for Ilya.

“Okay.” Shane had a tight-lipped smile on his face as he reached for Ilya’s hand.

Now hand in hand, they skated a couple of laps around the rink, just soaking up each other’s presences. The tip of Shane’s nose, as well as his cheeks were tinged pink, kissed by the cold. Ilya just wanted to grab Shane by his face and kiss every single freckle. He loved Shane’s freckles and couldn’t understand why Shane disliked them. Truly, it had a been a slap in the face for Ilya to hear his boyfriend confess that he hated the way his freckles made him look. Ilya promptly pinned Shane down and kissed his cheeks with fury.

“What?” Shane asked, noticing Ilya’s stare.

“Just happy.” Ilya brought their hands up to his mouth and kissed Shane’s knuckles.

“I’m happy too.”

“Do you think you would still be happy if we played a few rounds?”

Shane’s face lit up.

With some help from the teenaged employee, they were able to procure nets, sticks, and a couple of pucks. Ilya didn’t care that his stick was a couple of inches too short for him, all he cared about was watching as his boyfriend cleanly slapped puck after puck into the goal. He would be lying if he didn’t admit that watching Shane like this turned him on. Ilya always thought Shane looked extremely sexy when he was concentrating.

Then, what started as a 1 v. 1 game was quickly abandoned as they played together. Ilya passed the puck to Shane as they skated across the rink. With a quick tap on the ice, Ilya

signalled for a pass, which Shane was quick to understand. As they curved around the net, Ilya passed the puck back to Shane who instantly scored. Ilya immediately skated to Shane and pressed a kiss on his temple.

It was exhilarating to play with Shane, which only made a feeling gnaw away at Ilya. Ilya was certain that if Shane hadn't had such a horrible experience with hockey, that he would be in the NHL with Ilya right now. They would have dominated the league together.

Maybe in a different life, the world could be fair and the two could both live out their dreams. Together.

They sat huddled up in front of the fireplace in Ilya's living room. Ilya had a cup of hot chocolate piled high with whipped cream and mini marshmallows while Shane sipped away at his apricot herbal tea. They had come home just in time as the snowfall started to intensify. Shane had warned Ilya about Ottawa winters but Ilya just laughed it off, citing that he was Russian and Canadian winters would pale in comparison. Internally, Ilya was grateful that he had the dancing fire of the fireplace to warm him up. Ottawa seemed to have the same kind of bone-chilling cold that Russia had, even it didn't drop to the same arctic cold temperatures outside.

"Thank you again for today." The fire was making Shane's eyes shine with warmth. "I didn't realize how much I missed hockey until today."

Shane rested his head against Ilya's shoulder, and Ilya pulled him in closer. He couldn't get enough of Shane.

"You deserve the world, *my pet*."

"My pet? Really?" Shane gently poked Ilya's side.

"As long as you're mine, I don't care what you are. My boyfriend, my pet, my horny animal..."

"Fuck off, Ilya." There was still an air of amusement in Shane's voice.

"*My beloved*," Ilya said, guiding Shane's chin so that they were looking into each others' eyes. "*I love you. I love you. I love you.*"

Maybe it was too quick for some couples to admit they were in love only a few months into the relationship, but not for Ilya.

Ilya had known this for a long time. He had known that he was utterly entranced by Shane the moment he patiently explained complex English words to Ilya. He had known that he didn't want anyone else but Shane the moment Ilya caught a glimpse of him in McConnell

Arena when they played against the Paladins. And, he had known that his heart only belonged to Shane once Shane drunkenly licked sauce off of his face at the burger joint.

It has only ever been Shane for Ilya, and he had waited years to say it.

A tear fell down Shane's cheek. Ilya immediately wiped it away with the back of his hand.

"I love you, too. *I love you, Ilyusha.*"

Ilya never knew that he would be able to hear that someone had loved him again, especially not in his mother tongue once his mother passed away. Hell, he never thought he would live to see the day that Shane Hollander had loved him back.

It was all too good to be true.

This time, Shane brushed away tears falling from Ilya's eyes. He didn't even realize that he was crying. The tears just freely flowed. Shane climbed onto Ilya's lap and held him, his arms grounding Ilya in reality.

Ilya couldn't help but give Shane a snotty kiss, which was easily reciprocated. Despite the salty tears, this kiss could not have been sweeter. The taste of chocolate from Ilya's mouth mixed with the taste of fruit from Shane's mouth.

"How did I get so lucky?" Shane exhaled, hands still cradling Ilya's face.

It should have been Ilya to say that. Part of him had ended after he graduation. He never would have thought, even in his wildest dreams, that this part of him would be rekindled and burn with a raging fury as it did now.

He loved Shane Hollander, and Shane loved him back.

"I don't deserve you," Ilya truthfully admitted.

"Don't say that. You deserve the world, Ilya." Shane looked at him with such intensity that Ilya couldn't help but give him another peck.

Ilya wondered if his father was rolling in his grave at the image of him kissing his boyfriend. If he was still alive, his father probably would have had burning rage hot enough to melt even the coldest Russian winters at the sight of Ilya and Shane wrapped in each other's arms. But it didn't matter. Not anymore. He was a vile and loveless man who nothing but hatred. His father was the one who had taken a quick look at twelve-year-old Ilya when he had just found his mother and called him "too soft" and "pathetic."

In fact, Ilya hoped that his father was watching right now—he hoped that his father felt smothered and suffocated by the love that Shane and Ilya felt for one another. Their love was a kind that his father had never felt in his entire lifetime. Ilya felt sorry for him. The same went to Alexei too. He pitied his brother and felt sorry for his wife and daughter, who had to deal with Alexei and his addictions.

As far as Ilya was concerned now, they were both dead to him.

“I...” Shane started, “I want to tell my parents about us—I want to tell all of our loved ones. Is that okay with you?”

“Okay.” Ilya nodded.

Aside from Svetlana, Ilya had no loved ones left. Still, he was more than happy that Shane had people he felt safe to share his life with.

Maybe one day, if luck would have it, Shane’s family would become Ilya’s family too.

Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Ilya meets the Hollanders.

They had come up with a plan to meet Shane's parents later that night as they were tangled in bed. Shane couldn't let go of the idea as soon as he came up with it. Of course, he could let it go for just long enough for them to have sex and take a shower together, but as soon as they returned to bed, his mind took off once again.

Shane talked with intense concentration while mindlessly fiddling with Ilya's hair. Ilya was all but too happy to listen to what Shane had to say. Shane could explain how to unclog a toilet and Ilya would still be happy to listen.

"I think my parents will love you. They might be a little confused because you're Ilya Rozanov, but they will happily accept you."

"Why do you think they will be confused by me?" Ilya laughed.

"My mom and dad, mom especially, are quite... intense when it comes to hockey. My mom grew up being a diehard Voyageurs fan, and I do mean diehard. It isn't even a competition when it comes to liking hockey for my mom. I mean, she's not that big of a Voyageurs fan now that rumours have been circulating that the people on that team aren't the best."

That made sense. If Yuna supported Shane as much as he had described, there would be no way she could continue to support a team like that, even if she had cheered them on for her entire life. Ilya liked her already. Even though he hadn't met her yet, Ilya knew that if he confirmed the rumours, she would abandon the team in a heartbeat.

"Is she the reason why you like hockey so much?"

"Mostly. My dad also grew up playing hockey. He played for McGill too."

"McGill? Never heard of it before. Must be a terrible team."

"They're both going to talk your ear off about hockey, just so you know."

"Okay." Ilya looked at Shane and could not feel anything but fondness and love.

"I'm being serious here, Ilya." Shane tried to flatten his mouth into a serious expression, but his face was still laced with happiness. His eyes were scrunched up with content.

“I am too! I am very serious about hockey, and I love hockey very much. More than anything else in the world.”

A light flush grew on Shane’s face. “Okay, I think it would be best if I contacted my parents and ask if I can bring my boyfriend over for lunch. Maybe it would be best if we went when next Saturday, when the Admirals are playing. You’re back then, right?”

Ilya nodded. They had a home game on Friday night but would be free on Saturday.

“Good. If there’s a game on then they can direct their intensity towards the TV and not you. You can also bond with them over the Admirals’ performance.”

“Yes, Hunter is a living relic. It is easy to shit on him.”

Ilya had met the man before. He was all different flavours of vanilla—very harmless—but so easy to tease and rile up. Hunter was a walking target because he was an older player on a failing team. Well, they weren’t exactly failing. Just like the Centaurs, they were also doing exceptionally well this season.

“I don’t think I’ll be able to casually mention over text that my boyfriend is Ilya Rozanov, so we’ll just have to go in blind and rip off the bandaid all at once. If we bring my mom some flowers, then maybe it will soften the blow for her. We just have to make sure that we don’t get white flowers—it’s a major taboo in Japanese culture because they’re only used for funerals. And we could bring a bottle of vodka for my dad. He really likes the Russian stuff—he calls it ‘the good stuff.’”

“A man after my own heart,” Ilya joked.

Shane lightly kicked Ilya’s leg in response.

“I will get fancy Russian vodka for David. Don’t worry,” Ilya said.

“Okay, then it’s set: we will tell my parents about us on Saturday.”

The Hollanders lived in a typical Canadian suburban home shrouded with greenery. Ilya assumed that the inside would also match the outside in terms of its boring Canadian-ness but he wouldn’t be able to confirm it for himself yet. Shane took deep breaths as he sat behind the wheel of his Land Rover.

Ilya place his hand on top of Shane’s, giving him a firm squeeze. “Your parents love you. It will be okay.”

Shane looked at him with watery eyes. “I know. I just want them to love you as much as I do.”

Ilya could only kiss Shane in return.

He couldn't reassure Shane for this worry because he also hoped that Shane's parents would like him. Above all, he hoped that they saw Ilya for who he was off the ice and could trust him to take good care of their beloved son, just as he had been trying to do all along.

Taking another deep breath, determination returned to Shane's eyes. "Okay, let's do this."

Just as Shane had planned, Ilya bought Yuna a sensible bouquet of peonies and eucalyptus, and he also bought David a bottle of vodka. Shane's eyes nearly popped out his skull when he saw the bottle—instantly recognizing the brand and price. He told Ilya that he didn't have to buy something so expensive, but Ilya wanted to. The price didn't matter to him.

At the doorstep, Shane flattened out the collar of Ilya's white button up. While Shane himself wore a knitted navy blue sweater, Shane had requested that Ilya wore a button up because he looked good in one and Yuna always liked nicely dressed men. Ilya easily complied with his request, eager to please both Hollanders. He also shaved off his beard so that he was more clean-cut and less grizzly looking. Shane had all but attacked Ilya's face with his lips when he saw Ilya's bare face, an unintended but welcomed surprise.

Ilya was shocked that Shane just immediately opened the door and stepped inside. Were the Hollanders so open that they did not care to lock their doors? Were they not scared of being robbed? But this was Ottawa, where nothing ever happened, so there would probably be no burglars.

Ilya was all too aware of his heartbeat as he followed Shane inside. He tried to focus on how the Hollanders already had Christmas decorations up, even though it was only the first week of December, or how pictures of Shane from his childhood filled up every single wall. If things went well today, he would definitely have to ask David and Yuna if he could have copies of the photos, especially the one with a chubby-cheeked Shane beaming with a toothless smile. He deeply inhaled the mix of pine and floral scents that emanated from the home—the smells of David and Yuna.

Shane's fingers intertwined with Ilya's as he called out, "Mom, Dad, it's me: Shane."

In no time, Yuna came out of the kitchen with David, both wearing aprons. Yuna was a tall, slender woman whose dark hair was streaked with hints of grey. David was equally tall and had a head of greying brown hair and kind blue eyes. Upon first glance, it was clear that Shane was a perfect mix of the two: he had Yuna's eyes and hair, as well as David's nose, lips, and ears.

"Hi sweet—" Yuna stopped dead in her tracks as her eyes landed on Ilya.

They knew he was coming (technically just "Shane's boyfriend" was coming), just as he knew that they would be shocked to see him.

"Hi." Stupidly, that was all Ilya could manage to utter. His hand clenched around the bouquet for Yuna.

“This is my boyfriend-”

“Ilya Rozanov,” Yuna whispered, almost breathless, cutting Shane off. “How...?”

“Nice to meet you,” Ilya said. “I brought you flowers and vodka.”

David stiffly nodded at Shane and Ilya with a taut smile.

Ilya wanted to look over at Shane to see if this reaction was typical of his parents, but Ilya didn’t want to cower behind Shane. He had something to prove today.

Yuna snapped out of stupor and immediately walked over to them, immediately engulfing Shane in a hug and kissing his cheek. Surprisingly, she did the exact same for Ilya. He was stunned to feel her arms wrap around him as if he were a close friend of hers.

“We’re so excited to meet you, and thank you for the flowers,” Yuna said with a large grin—the same one that Shane has—and eagerly took the bouquet from Ilya’s hands. “Come on, your father has made his special chicken parm just for you two.”

Aside from the fact that Ilya was surprised with warmth beyond his imagination, he was also surprised that David cooked. His own father had never stepped into the kitchen once—he had only ever demanded his mother and later Polina, his stepmother, to cook for him.

Shane looked at Ilya with his warm eyes and flashed him with a shy smile. Shane then led Ilya to the dining room, where the table had already been set with salad, pasta, garlic bread, and four sets of everything.

“We have some red wine that your mother bought, but I’d love to try Ilya’s vodka,” David said, holding up four glasses.

“Ilya bought a Russian-imported vodka and spent a ton of money on it, even though I told him not to,” Shane said while handing his father the bottle.

“Kauffman, wow,” David whistled. “Ilya, you really did not have to.”

“I wanted to. Really.”

David smiled, a little more widely this time, and patted Ilya on the shoulder.

To Ilya, having David pat him and Yuna hug and kiss him already meant the world to him. To them, it may not seem like much at all, but Ilya never felt this kind of affection growing up. His mother was kind and loving, yes, but he had never had a complete family where the loved was equally shared and shown.

Yuna brought out a piping hot casserole dish and set it on the table. Just like that, lunch started and Ilya readied himself. David was quick to serve Ilya first, giving Ilya a large portion of chicken parmesan. He then served Yuna and Shane before plating any up for himself.

“Shane hasn’t told us very much about your relationship, just that he is very, very happy,” Yuna said, making Shane blush. “So how did you guys meet?”

“We met at McGill in English class,” Ilya answered honestly.

“Yes, Shane did mention that a while ago.” David nodded.

“When did you guys start dating then?” Yuna asked.

“Uh…” Shane trailed off and started twirling spaghetti around his fork to find an answer.

Ilya wasn’t sure how to answer either. They never had a clear timeline when it came to their relationship. Hell, Ilya wasn’t sure if they had even become friends before they started sleeping with one another. All Ilya knew for sure was that he was hellbent on becoming closer to Shane the moment he set his eyes on the freckles that danced across Shane’s face.

Yuna and David’s faces morphed with intrigue. Forks were long forgotten on their plates. After all, it should be a clearcut answer.

“We started unofficially seeing each other in late August, when I came to Ottawa, but…” How do you tell your boyfriends’ parents that you frequently slept with their son during university?

Shane shot Ilya a look, one that told Ilya that he was heading into dangerous territory.

“But what?” Yuna asked, eyes wide with curiosity.

“We were… how you call it—um-lovers in university?” Ilya said with absolutely no confidence whatsoever.

“Ilya—please.” Shane covered his face out of dread.

“Wait, were you the boy Shane constantly texted in university?” Yuna asked, ignoring the choice of words that Ilya had fumbled with. “He was completely smitten.”

“Unless Shane was texting other boys, then yes. Probably.”

“No,” Shane was quick to reply. “Just you.”

Ilya reached out for Shane’s hand as he saw how quickly the tips of Shane’s ears were turning pink from embarrassment. Ilya held onto their intertwined fingers, massaging Shane’s knuckles.

Yuna’s gaze immediately softened and returned her attention towards eating. Ilya joined in on the eating, finally able to get a taste of David’s cooking. He hadn’t ever had chicken parm before, but it was good—it tasted very homemade in the best way possible. Shane clearly grew up having good company and good food on the table in attendance for every meal.

“So, Ilya Rozanov,” Yuna started again, eyes suddenly sharp with intention, “why did you leave Boston?”

“Jesus, Mom!” Shane exclaimed. “You can’t just ask that during lunch.”

“No, it is fine. I missed Canada,” Ilya said plainly as Shane took a swig of vodka. “I just became a free agent and wanted to return. I could not go to Montreal because, well, the people there are not so good, just as the people in Toronto aren’t good. Their teams may be great, but I don’t think I could work with people like that.”

Upon hearing Ilya’s answer, Yuna hummed in satisfaction, but her gaze didn’t soften.

“And surely you couldn’t go to Vancouver.” David smiled.

“No, not Vancouver.” Ilya smiled back. “My heart is in the East Coast, so Ottawa it was.”

“And what do you think of Boston now?” Yuna continued.

Ilya couldn’t help but smile at the intense look Shane was shooting at his mom. Shane didn’t like that Ilya was being interrogated but Ilya didn’t mind at all. He wasn’t one to shy away from conversations or emotions. “I am very grateful that they drafted me, and I gave them my best years. I think we are even in that sense. I still have good connections with the team, like Marleau.”

“What do you think about the Centaurs? You must not like being on a team that loses so much... in comparison to the Raiders, of course.”

Shane grumbled beside Ilya, back slowly sliding down his chair.

“I like them very much. Everyone on the team, Wiebe included, is a good person. Yes, we do not win as much, but we have made a lot of progress as a team this season. I think we have just realized our potential.”

Yuna’s stern composure broke and she smiled at Ilya, which he easily reciprocated.

As lunch continued, it became immediately apparent to Ilya that Yuna and David Hollander were the type of people who would say hi to everyone they passed on a morning walk—the kind of people who would complain about Mondays or the terrible weather for small talk with friends and strangers alike. They talked about work and their day-to-day hassles as if Ilya had been privy to them all along while still making sure to fill in gaps of knowledge for him. They were the same kind of boring Shane was. Ilya loved it.

Ilya helped the family clean up afterwards, taking everyone’s dirty plates. Shane’s face glowed with a small, content smile, the one that settled in his eyes as twinkling fondness. Ilya brought the plates to the kitchen, where Yuna and David were cleaning up in harmony. David was rinsing while Yuna organized everything in the dishwasher.

“Thank you,” David said as he took the plates from Ilya’s hands. “Now go sit down in front of the TV with Shane and wait for the game. We’ll take care of the rest.”

Ilya nodded and did exactly as told. Shane was already sitting on the sofa, twiddling with his thumbs and clearly revisiting everything that had just unfolded.

“Everything is going well, yes?” Ilya said as he ran his hand along the back of Shane’s head.

“I’m sorry that my mom asked you such intense questions.” Some of Shane’s nerves seemed to have melted under Ilya’s touch, but it was clear that he was still a little uneasy.

“I did not mind. She cares about you a lot and just wants to know the man who stole her son’s heart.”

“I hate you,” Shane pouted. “Why do you have to be so sweet all the time?”

“Not all the time but only for you, *my lawnmower*.”

“You’re having way too much fun with creating these pet names.”

Ilya kissed Shane’s temple in response. It was so much to fun to see how many of the odd Russian words Ilya used that Shane knew. As of yet, Shane had understood every single one, and Ilya loved watching Shane’s nose scrunch up in confusion at each nonsensical noun.

David was the first to join them in the living room. He handed Ilya a pale ale and Shane a can of ginger ale, and had a pale ale for himself too. “So Ilya, there’s no pressure to tell me of course, but have you ever thought about coming out?”

Shane visibly froze beside Ilya. He was so tense that no emotions showed on his face.

Ilya had thought about this question a lot ever since he and Shane became more serious with their relationship. He didn’t have a concrete answer yet, just a lot of possibilities looming around in his head.

“I’m not sure. I love your son very much but I do not know if the fans or the league itself will accept us. I do not ever want Shane to be under any spotlight that he doesn’t want to be in either.”

“I understand,” David replied. “As an outsider, I feel as though the NHL can be very performative when it comes to more ‘liberal’ topics. They say they support the LGBTQ+ community or designation rights but there just doesn’t seem to be any really support.”

“You are very correct, David,” Ilya grimly responded. That’s why no active queer hockey players had ever come out. It’s also why Shane never made it to the NHL.

“I wish very much for both of you that there soon will be day where you can just be yourselves.”

“Thank you.” Just as easy as it was for Ilya to smile around Shane, it was easy for him to smile around Shane’s family too.

Yuna soon joined with a tray of snacks. There were two bowls of popcorn and a plate of cookies. “Ilya, Shane said that you have a bit of a sweet tooth so there’s kettle corn and chocolate chip cookies for you. The other bowl is salted popcorn, which you are more than welcome to eat too.”

Ilya changed his mind—it was impossible to not smile around Shane and his family.

“Thank you.”

As the TV turned on, Shane settled by Ilya’s side, their bodies firmly pressed against each other. David sat at the edge of his upright La-Z-Boy while Yuna positioned herself next to Shane, placing herself right in front of the screen.

Ilya couldn’t care less that he sat furthestest from the TV, thereby having the least clear view of the game. All he wanted to do for the next few hours was just soak in the time he had with Shane and his parents.

“Who are we cheering for?” Ilya whispered in Shane’s ear as he watched the New York and LA teams warm up.

“The Admirals. My mom thinks that this is their year, especially Scott Hunter’s.”

Ilya bit the inside of his cheek to prevent himself from chirping at Hunter. He would save that for later, once Yuna started to get intense about the game.

Once the game started, the house truly came alive. Ilya watched in glee as David leaned forward in anticipation every time the puck got close to the opposing team’s net, or as Yuna jumped to her feet to exclaim her frustration with the players’ performances with alarming insight. Shane occasionally shot Ilya an apologetic look for his parents’ intensity, though Shane also quietly contributed to it with his iron grip around his ginger ale, as well as his furrowed brows and sharp eyes.

Ilya had to admit that Hunter was doing unbelievably well... for an old man. The game was tied 2-2, with Hunter scoring the first goal and assisting the second. Maybe he had something to show the world before he retired after this season.

“The Admirals are going to win,” Yuna muttered with complete confidence as the players became frantic on the ice. There were two minutes left of the game and both teams had something to prove.

“You have to trust her on this one, Ilya,” David added. “She’s usually always right about things like this.”

“Oh I believe it,” Ilya laughed.

Yuna winked at Ilya before fixing her attention to the screen once more.

Somehow, by sheer talent and luck, Hunter was blazing through LA’s defences, though Ilya would never tell Hunter that he thought well of him. It was as if the puck was glued to his stick as Hunter flew across the ice. In one clean hit, the puck flew into the goal, cleanly hitting the back of the net. Just like that, with only mere seconds left, Hunter had secured the win for the Admirals.

Yuna crossed her arms in delight as the Admirals flooded the ice and swarmed around Hunter.

For reasons unknown, Hunter skated away from his team, looking directly into the stands. The camera shakily followed his line of vision and showed a group of regular fans. Soon, Hunter started waving his hands and eventually climbed over the dasher boards. A man with brown hair and brown eyes eventually came down from the stands and stood in front of Hunter.

Ilya looked at Shane in confusion and was met with wide eyes. Ilya could only hold Shane's hand. Everyone in the living room and arena were equally as perplexed over the scene unfolding in front of their eyes.

In the blink of an eye, Scott Hunter was kissing this man on live television as if he had just won the Stanley Cup. It was an incredibly sweet kiss—too intimate to be seen by the entire world. Ilya thought that the man had to love Hunter very much if he could kiss Hunter that deeply when he was drenched in sweat and radiating with unpleasant hockey odours.

“Holy shit,” Yuna whispered.

Ilya turned to Shane. All he could see was his future.

Chapter 20

By Monday, Scott Hunter's coming out story was the only thing anyone could talk about. The Centaurs took the news as well as Ilya had expected, which was with shock and acceptance. In fact, Harris made an Instagram post of support on behalf of the team and its owners shortly after the game on Saturday. Still, a large portion of their practice was spent discussing how no one could have anticipated for this to happen. They talked so much that Wiebe had to stop them and tell them to save the chatter for dinner—it was the sternest that Ilya had ever seen Wiebe.

Somehow, after their first outing to Leaf + Sake, the team unanimously agreed that the restaurant would be their meeting place of choice. Everyone loved the food and was grateful that the restaurant could seat the whole team. Ilya had no problems with this of course, he loved seeing Shane in his element.

“Before we start talking about the elephant in the room, I just wanted to say how proud I am of each and everyone of you,” Wiebe said, holding a glass of whiskey to toast. “When I became a rookie coach this season, I could have never expected that we would do as well as we have. Thank you for trusting me with your careers. I respect the hell out of each of you.”

The entire team, Ilya included, held up their drinks to cheers to Wiebe's speech.

“To Coach Wiebe!” Bood held up his glass and the team was quick to repeat their cheers.

Wiebe held his hands out in gratitude before gesturing for the team to talk.

“Did you guys see the post that Scott Hunter made?” Harris asked. “He and his boyfriend are so cute.”

Ilya shook his head and Harris passed him his phone with the post already pulled up. The photo was of Hunter and his boyfriend immediately after the game as they embraced each other, foreheads pressed together as they looked at one another with adoring eyes. Hunter's caption read: “I love you, Kip. Love is love is love .

Ilya passed Harris's phone to the rest of his teammates, who were also oblivious to the post.

“Good for them,” Hayes huffed in confirmation as he continued to pass the phone.

Barrett looked at the screen with wide eyes before handing it back to Harris, both of them a little red in the face. Ilya was confident that Hunter had changed something for the two of them too, even if they were too stubborn to do anything about it—it was clear as day that they were interested in each other. Maybe, they just required some form of interference.

Before more could be said, the hostess came with a bottle of champagne. “Courtesy of Chef Hollander. For making Ottawa proud.”

Ilya looked up and found Shane standing by the entrance of the kitchen. As soon as they made eye contact, Ilya watched as Shane’s face quickly became pink. Shane immediately bolted into the kitchen. Ilya loved him so much his chest ached.

Wiebe asked the hostess to pass along their thanks, and the champagne was quickly distributed amongst them.

Ilya let the fruity and fizzy drink wash over his tastebuds as his teammates kept talking about how brave Scott Hunter was. Ilya hadn’t considered talking to the team about Shane—they weren’t that close yet and he didn’t know if Shane was up to having an entire team of rowdy hockey players knowing about their personal business right now. He did, however, consider coming out to them. With how well they received Hunter, Ilya thought that he might as well just do it now.

“Listen up everyone,” Ilya said, immediately capturing everyone’s attention, “I have something to say. I am bisexual. I like both women and men. I do not plan on doing a public coming out like Hunter, but I wanted to tell you.”

Just like they did on the night Ilya secured their win for their game against the New Jersey Demons, the Centaurs were quick to swarm around Ilya. They patted Ilya on the back and all offered their unwavering support for who he was. Harris, specifically, wrapped Ilya in such a warm, crushing hug that Ilya didn’t know what to do with himself.

“I’m proud of you,” Wiebe said firmly. Ilya could only nod in gratitude.

Even though Ilya wasn’t sure about the decision he made initially, he knew now, more than ever, that coming to Ottawa was the best thing he could have ever done.

“I heard you made a big commotion at the restaurant tonight,” Shane said later that night as they got ready for bed together. Shane was halfway through his multi-step skincare routine and Ilya was just happy to watch, having finished minutes ago.

“Did you hear what it was all about?” As happy as Ilya was to finally reveal a part of himself to his team, he was worried that he had fucked it all up. He had exposed a very vulnerable part of himself in a public place and could have ruined his chance to be with Shane.

“No, just that the team was very happy after you said something.” Shane looked at Ilya in the mirror, his hands rubbing toner into his cheeks.

Surely, Shane would have heard any details and gossip that happened in the restaurant. So, if he didn’t hear anything, then Ilya was fine.

Ilya exhaled deeply. "I came out to them."

"Really?"

"I did not tell them about us, but I wanted them to know about me."

"I'm so proud of you." Shane wrapped his arms around Ilya's waist and gave him a squeeze. His sweet scent filled Ilya's nose, immediately placating Ilya's worries.

Even though Shane came close to vomiting from anxiety multiple times when Ilya met his parents, he had to admit that it went exceptionally well. His mom had grilled Ilya, just as Shane anticipated, but Ilya answered everything with unexpected ease. Shane didn't know how Ilya was able to be so articulate under the iron gaze of Yuna Hollander, but he did it. Both his parents called Shane later that night to tell him how much they liked Ilya and to wish him luck on their behalf for his incoming games.

Now, Shane just hoped and prayed that Ilya would be just as good with the Pikes. Hayden and Jackie were the only close friends that Shane were able to make since meeting Rose, so it was imperative that the three of them liked one another. Shane did, unfortunately, have to threaten withholding sex from Ilya after Ilya looked way too smug about meeting the Pikes. Only one threat was sufficient enough to turn a burly 6'3 hockey player into a puppy who looked like it had just been kicked.

Ilya still looked like a poor puppy as they waited for the Pikes to open their door. Shane playfully checked him with his hip as he heard the Pike children screaming behind the front door. Ilya had initially suggested that the Pikes come over but Shane quickly objected. The Pikes had three children who needed forms of entertainment at all time and a fourth who needed constant naps, so it would be best if the two of them visited instead.

"What the fuck," was the first thing Hayden said as he opened the door. His eyes slowly scanned Ilya with abject horror.

"Hayd," Shane said with a warning tone. "Be nice."

"Shane, you said your boyfriend was a hockey player but I never expected Ilya fucking Rozanov. I thought you meant like he played in the beer league or something."

Shane could practically feel the smirk growing on Ilya's face, which was only confirmed when he glanced over. Out of all of the possibilities that Shane had conjured in his mind, this was one of the worst possible ones.

"You did not think that your best friend Shane could get someone as good as me?" Ilya slyly rebutted.

Shane groaned at the same time as Hayden grimaced.

“No—I think it’s the other way around, actually,” Hayden said firmly.

“Hayden, are you going to let them in or are you just going to let them stand outside and freeze?” Jackie yelled from inside the house.

Hayden mumbled a response under his breath and begrudgingly let Shane and Ilya inside. He watched Ilya with severe skepticism as they took off their shoes.

Shane expected some push back from Hayden, as Hayden was well aware of the reputation Ilya had. He was also well aware that Hayden’s hostility was because he felt protective of Shane. But, he never expected it to be this intense. Shane just hoped that Ilya would be able to contain himself and Jackie and the kids would be able to ease the tension.

It took all but two seconds for the kids to be climbing all over Shane, yelling “Uncle Shane” over and over again in his ears. Really, it was the twins climbing over him with their scratchy and sparkly princess dresses while Arthur stood a few feet away, patiently waiting for his turn to embrace Shane. Shane couldn’t wait to give him some attention later.

“Uncle Shane, Mommy and Daddy said you were bringing over your boyfriend,” Ruby exclaimed, pulling on Shane’s collar.

“Is this him?” Jade asked, holding onto Shane’s legs.

“Hi, I’m Ilya.” Ilya shyly waved to the kids.

“Ee-lee-ya,” Ruby said, trying to mimic Ilya’s Russian accent.

“Nice to meet ya, Mr. Ilya,” Jade said, firmly holding out her hand like a businesswoman. “My name is Jade.”

Ilya gently shook her hand, his hand engulfing hers, with a fond smile on his face. “Nice to meet you, Miss Jade. And you are?”

Now clinging onto Shane’s back, Ruby reached over his face and offered Ilya her hand as if she were royalty. “You can call me Princess Ruby.”

Ilya took her hand and kissed it gently, making her giggle. “Of course, Princess Ruby.”

Shane looked at Hayden, who still looked conflicted. “Okay now, enough with the introductions. Let’s go inside. Jackie is manning the kitchen and baby all by herself.”

It was going to take time for the two of them to make nice and get along—a lot more time than Shane expected.

Jade and Ruby ran into the house alongside their dad.

Shane was quick to scoop Arthur in his arms and carried him on his hip as they walked. “Hello, my little man.”

Arthur buried his face into the crook of Shane's neck, subconsciously scenting him. Shane melted underneath Arthur's gentleness and held him tighter.

"Arthur, this is Ilya, Uncle Shane's boyfriend," Shane said. "Can you say hi?"

"Hi," Arthur whispered into Shane's neck.

Ilya watched Shane and Arthur with soft eyes. It took everything in Shane's power to not give Ilya a kiss. He wasn't sure that would be a good idea. If Hayden saw, his mind would certainly short circuit.

In the kitchen, Jackie was carrying Amber in a baby Bjorn, gently bouncing her along as she carried a tray of roasted potatoes. In the Pike household, Jackie was the main chef. The kids always preferred her cooking over Hayden's, which frustrated Hayden to no end.

"Shane—Ilya Rozanov! Hi, welcome! I'm Jackie." Jackie set the potatoes down and gave both of them a hug with baby Amber squished in between each embrace. "Don't tell my husband but I'm a big fan of yours."

"Your husband has ears!" Hayden exclaimed as he set the table. "Fully functioning ones too!"

"You have good taste." Ilya winked at Jackie, causing her to smile brightly.

"Oh yeah, we brought some dessert for the kids and wine for us," Shane said, pointing to the bag that Ilya carried.

Upon hearing this, Arthur tightened his grasp around Shane's neck in excitement.

"Thank you very much! You can just put it on the island and we'll sort it out."

"Do you need help with anything?" Shane asked as Ilya did as instructed.

"If you could please get the kids to the dinner table, that'd be great, thank you. I just have to get this one to bed before we get started."

Jade and Ruby were in the living room sitting on mini plastic chairs and holding teacups with their pinkies out. Each twin also wore plastic tiaras and other jewelry that were several sizes too large for them—Ruby had a ring that Shane was sure was at one point a Ring Pop, and Jade had a beaded necklace that went down to her hips. They were so occupied with playing that they didn't even notice Ilya, Shane, and Arthur, who was still tightly clinging onto Shane.

"Miss Jade and Princess Ruby, your presences are required at the table," Ilya said with a slight bow.

"But we're in the middle of high tea!" Ruby exclaimed.

Without missing a beat, Ilya knelt down next to them. "If we go now, you will be able to get a carriage ride to dinner."

“A carriage ride?” Jade’s face scrunched up in confusion.

“Yes, of course.” Ilya opened his arms in preparation. “Whenever you are ready, ladies.”

The girls scrambled onto their feet and jumped into Ilya’s arms. Ilya picked them up, one girl in each arm, and twirled them around. Breathless laughter easily came out of the twins’ mouths and they squealed with delight as Ilya practically galloped over to the dinner table. Even Arthur giggled upon watching Ilya.

Shane didn’t know what to do himself. He felt inexplicably warm. He always knew Ilya would be good with children. Even if Ilya was infamous for being a smug asshole on the ice, Shane knew that under that exterior was a big softy that he only showed to a very select few. Shane just never expected Ilya to be this good with children. The image only made Shane start to wonder what it would look like if the two of them had children, but Shane didn’t entertain the thought for long.

Slowly, Shane trailed behind, joining everyone else at the table. He was sandwiched in between Ilya and Arthur. Hayden sat directly across from Ilya, now looking a little bit less suspicious of Ilya. Surely no one would be able to hate Ilya once they’ve seen the real him—the version of him who could persuade even the most stubborn children to come to dinner in the middle of playtime.

“Wow, you guys are experts,” Jackie said. “I think that’s the fastest I’ve ever seen the children come to the table.”

“Does it count if they were all carried over?” Hayden mumbled.

Shane and Jackie were both quick to look at him with warning glare, but Ilya looked none the wiser, clearly still obeying Shane’s commands. Shane knew that Ilya was probably itching underneath to quip with Hayden.

“Let’s dig in, shall we?” Jackie sighed.

Jackie made a beautiful pot roast with an assortment of roasted vegetables. The parents were quick to serve the kids with pre-cut portions, though Shane and Ilya gladly helped along as well.

The sounds of dinnerware scraping against porcelain never sounded so unsettling to Shane. Ilya and Hayden both busied themselves with their plates, as that was seemingly the only thing they could do to not fight. Jackie shot Shane an apologetic look, which he reciprocated. If avoidance was the only way they could have peace, it was not good. Even the kids were unusually well-behaved and quiet, which made dinner even more uncomfortable.

Shane tried not to drink too much wine—having too much vodka at his parents’ house had the opposite effect of making him more on edge than usual—but it seemed like it was unavoidable to drink tonight.

“How are you liking Ottawa, Ilya?” Jackie asked.

“Place is good but the people are my favourite,” Ilya replied with a slight grin.

Shane pressed his foot against Ilya’s, wanting to get some contact with him without being too obvious.

“Oh yeah? Me too. I grew up here but the people here never seem to stop surprising me.”

“You don’t say,” Hayden grumbled while shredding up some of the pot roast for Arthur.

“Yes,” Ilya replied, finally cracking. “Shane is part of the people here, and I love him very much. I know how I seem to other people but I am not like that with Shane. Not at all.” There was not an ounce of anger in Ilya’s voice. He spoke intensely but calmly too.

Finally not holding himself back, Shane took a hold of Ilya’s hand. “I love him too, Hayden. He really means it when he’s good to me. There is no one better for me.”

Ilya looked at Shane with a small smile and gave Shane’s hand a squeeze of reassurance.

“Aw, you guys,” Jackie cooed.

“Uncle Shane loves Ilyaaaaa,” Ruby chanted, which was soon joined by all of the Pike children, shouting the same line over and over again.

Hayden’s edge was finally wearing down as he just nodded. “Okay, kids. I get it. Uncle Shane loves Ilya. I see that.”

“See, was that so hard?” Jackie said with her head cocked to the side.

“Jackie, please. I need to take things slowly,” Hayden groaned.

“If you ever want to look for someone better, I know plenty of guys,” Ilya whispered not so quietly to Jackie, making the girls giggle. “Plenty of real hockey players too, not just university athletes.”

Shane had to let this one slide. Ilya had been so good all night.

“Don’t push it, Rozanov.” Hayden returned to staring daggers at Ilya, though this time it was a little bit more playful than before.

Even though Shane had a book open in his lap, he couldn’t read any of the words on the page at all. The only thing that occupied his mind was Ilya. Ilya had been so great with his parents, Jackie, and eventually Hayden too. Shane couldn’t shake the image of Ilya playing along with the Pike children either. Ilya even got Arthur to beg them to stay with rolling tears once it was time to leave.

He thought he couldn't love Ilya anymore until he saw Ilya being such a natural with children.

"You are thinking very loudly, *my sea bass*." Ilya was scrolling on his phone next to Shane in their bed and didn't bother to look up as he said this.

"I wasn't—how did you know?"

"You've been on the same page for a long time. Is same tactic I used to be close to you in university." Ilya's piercing eyes finally met Shane's.

"Oh, so you admit that you were pretending to study?" Shane beamed. "Stalker."

"I was never hiding it."

"Yes, you did! You tried so hard, Ilya." Shane mimicked how Ilya used to pretend to skim through the pages with his fingers tracing each line of text.

"Never mind what I did or did not do." Ilya placed his hand over Shane's hands. "What are you thinking about?"

"About you..." Shane said bashfully.

"Oh no, my boyfriend thinks about me. How terrible of a life I live."

"Shut up."

"And what were you thinking about when you were thinking of me?" Ilya pressed his firm chest against Shane's bare shoulder and his hot breath fanned over Shane's skin.

Shane turned his head and kissed Ilya's temple. He didn't care that Ilya was trying to be sly or sexy right now—he was too happy. "I was thinking about how much I love you and how good you are with children."

Ilya gently grabbed Shane's chin and kissed him hungrily. Shane could taste the spearmint toothpaste that Ilya used as he tangled his fingers into Ilya's hair, trying to angle his face to taste more of Ilya. In return, Ilya's hands held the sides of Shane's face, thumbs tracing over Shane's cheeks, no doubt gliding over his freckles.

"*I love you, my Shanya.*" Ilya's eyes began to water, so did Shane's.

"*I love you, my Ilyusha.*" Shane climbed into Ilya's lap and hugged him, holding his boyfriend close to his heart. "I want to marry you and have your children someday."

Wordlessly, Ilya joined their lips again. After catching his breath, Ilya sucked at Shane's scent gland, teeth grazing over it. Shane couldn't help but purr at the contact. If Ilya wanted to mark him now, he'd let him in a heartbeat.

"Say it again, please." Ilya's voice cracked as he spoke.

“I want to marry you and have your children someday.”

Shane meant every single word he said. He was more sure than ever that if he was going to have children, it was only going to be with Ilya.

Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Shane and Ilya both tell each other about their mental illnesses.

Chapter Notes

Please be warned that this chapter contains heavy discussions about depression, eating disorders, and suicide. If this chapter is not for you, that's completely okay. What is discussed in this chapter has already been referenced in previous chapters. This chapter is mainly about having transparent discussions with your partner. Please take care of yourselves!

There were some days where Shane noticed that Ilya was inexplicably not himself. There were no quips, no chirps. Sometimes, there was just a need for touch as Ilya lingered in Shane's hugs and sought for warmth. On those days, Ilya would be slow to get out of bed and even slower to eat. He looked at everything but Shane with a glazed stare.

Logically, Shane knew the reason for Ilya acting this way, but didn't want to be presumptive. So, he just wanted to make Ilya feel as safe and comfortable as possible when Ilya was not feeling himself.

This morning, Ilya snoozed his alarm five separate times (four more times than usual) and left the house six minutes late with an empty stomach. Shane had prepared him a breakfast burrito with extra bacon and eggs to take but he wasn't sure if Ilya ended up eating it. Ilya hadn't eaten much for dinner last night either and picked at his food the way that Shane used to when he was at his worst.

As it was his day off, Shane watched on the TV as Ilya skated on the ice, eyes barely meeting anyone he passed. Ilya even skated away on two accounts when members of the opposing team got up in his face, trying to start a fight. Shane could only flinch as he watched Ilya get checked into the boards with such force that he knew Ilya probably bruised some ribs. The Centaurs lost the game 3-1, though it was no fault of Ilya's. Hockey was a team sport after all.

Ilya came home with his shoulders slumped and wet hair matted against his forehead. Even though it was exceptionally hard, Shane tried his best not to swarm to Ilya as soon as he returned—he didn't want to treat Ilya as if there were something wrong with him. Instead, he

waited until Ilya dragged himself into the kitchen. Ilya immediately buried himself in Shane's arms, resting his head against Shane's shoulder after scenting Shane.

"Come here, baby," Shane said, running his fingers through Ilya's hair.

Shane led Ilya to the bedroom where he started to help Ilya out of his suit. Ilya kept his chin on Shane's shoulder as each article of clothing was shed. No words were exchanged but Shane could feel how heavy Ilya's heart and mind felt. He just wished that he could fix everything for Ilya. Ilya always seemed to know exactly what to do to soothe Shane, so Shane felt utterly helpless that he couldn't do anything for Ilya.

They then brushed their teeth together. Shane squeezed toothpaste onto both of their toothbrushes. Ilya had dark circles underneath his eyes and although he was staring straight into the mirror, Shane knew that Ilya's mind wasn't processing anything that he saw. Ilya only blinked twice the entire time they were in the bathroom.

Once in bed, Shane kissed Ilya's knuckles as Ilya laid down stiffly. He just wanted Ilya to know how much he meant to him. They laid in complete silence for a while with only the dimly lit lamp on Shane's side of the bed providing light.

"Shane... I am broken," Ilya said with a low voice.

"You are not broken." Shane sat up and shook his head.

"I think I am like my mother. She was so sad all the time. I found her when I was twelve. She was lying on her bed and accidentally swallowed a whole bottle of pills."

Ilya's words were a punch to Shane's gut. He had never known this about Ilya or his mother—he never knew that Ilya carried so much on his shoulders. Instantly, Shane's heart cried for Ilya.

Shane pulled Ilya into a hug, one that Ilya didn't respond to. "Listen to me, Ilya: *you are not broken*. Think about me. You always say that my mind is always loud and like an unstoppable engine. That's anxiety, Ilya. I had to leave the night you played against the Paladins because I had a panic attack, and I couldn't return to an ice rink until recently because I had a panic attack every single time I got close to one. Do you think I'm broken for having anxiety?"

"No." His voice was a ghostly whisper.

"You are not broken and you do not need to be fixed, *Ilyusha*. It breaks my heart that you think that."

"The truth is... I am depressed. I have been seeing a therapist ever since I came to Ottawa, and I take pills to make sure that I don't end up like my mother."

Shane tried hard to hold back his tears. He hadn't realized that Ilya had suffered so much in silence. Between the two of them, Ilya had always been the strong one—the one who Shane

relied on. Shane felt incredibly guilty that Ilya felt that he had to hide all of this, especially from Shane.

“You are the strongest man that I have ever known, but I hope you know that you do not have to be strong all the time. I love you, Ilya. Lean on me, and let me take care of you. We’ll face everything together.”

The next morning, Ilya seemed a little better. He got out of bed fractionally faster and even had the stomach to eat some of the eggs and toast that Shane made.

“I meant ever single word I said last night,” Shane said, watching Ilya slowly sip his coffee. “We’re in this together.”

Ilya stiffly nodded before exhaling a “thank you.”

Shane positioned himself so that he stood in between Ilya’s thighs and craned his head down so that he could capture Ilya’s mouth. Ilya was slow to kiss Shane back but once he did, his usual ferocity returned. Ilya pushed his hand up Shane’s shirt and gave his peck firm squeezes before lifting Shane up and sitting the two of them down on the couch.

Rolling his hips, Shane could start to feel Ilya’s erection grow against him. Wasting no more time, Shane pulled down the waistband of Ilya’s sweats, letting his member bobbed free. Ilya moaned into Shane’s mouth as Shane started to firmly stroke him. Shane diverted all of Ilya’s attempts to pull down Shane’s pants.

“Just... want you to feel good,” Ilya spoke through a groan, close to coming.

Shane couldn’t help but reach out his hand and hold Ilya’s face. He had a little bit of a stubble that tickled Shane’s palm upon contact. Ilya immediately leaned into the touch, almost searching for warmth. Shane brushed his thumb across Ilya’s cheek.

“How about this,” Shane said, “let me take care of you right now—let me show you how good I can make you feel.”

Ilya’s eyes flickered with emotion and barely met Shane’s eyes. “I can’t-”

“Let me finish what I started the first time we slept together at your house.”

Hesitantly, Ilya nodded and softened his posture.

Shane took off his pants and underwear in one fell swoop and fingered his slick-dripping hole. He had already fingered and opened himself up earlier in the morning during his shower, but he didn’t want to risk anything now. Right now was all about Ilya. Ilya stared at Shane with intense eyes as he prepped himself.

“Condom,” Ilya grunted as Shane positioned himself over Ilya.

“I started birth control shortly after we said our ‘I love yous’,” Shane whispered. Shane had started because he had become paranoid about how frequently and roughly he and Ilya had intercourse.

A shiver went down Ilya's spine upon hearing Shane's words.

As Shane sunk down on Ilya, the two of them exclaimed in sheer pleasure. Having nothing in between them was truly a transcendent experience. Shane never knew that he could feel Ilya so deeply and thoroughly. He didn't think he could ever go back to using condoms after this.

Slowly, Shane started to ride Ilya, using Ilya's shoulders as support. His thighs burned with excitement as he moved up and down. Ilya couldn't help himself and started rocking his hips upwards, meeting Shane as he slammed down into Ilya's lap. They simultaneously cried out in unison. Shane didn't have the heart to remind Ilya that he was supposed to relax and let him do all of the work—his jaw was too slack and his brain was too sex-drunk to form thoughts.

It only took a few more seconds before Shane was close to coming. By the looks of Ilya, who was falling apart underneath Shane's weight, he was close too. Shane stroked himself and he was soon spurting over his own chest. When Ilya came mere moments later, Shane shuddered in delight as he filled up with Ilya's cum, feeling impossibly full.

"I love you," Ilya panted, seemingly unable to say anything else.

"I love you, too."

When Ilya was ready, Shane would tell him about himself too.

The day Shane became completely transparent with Ilya came many days later. Ilya seemed to be doing better and the Centaurs were on another winning streak again.

Shane sat at the dining table with two mugs of hot chocolate as Ilya finished his shower.

"This looks serious," Ilya deadpanned as he came in.

"It is. Please come here. I also have something to tell you."

Ilya nodded with a worried expression and sat down next to Shane.

Shane was worried about telling Ilya about his past but he needed to do it. Ilya was brave enough to reveal the darkest parts of himself to Shane, so he should do the same. If they were going to spend the rest of their lives with each other, Shane owed it to Ilya.

"I don't know if you remember this but I used to have some pretty... unique eating habits when we were in university," Shane said as he bounced his leg up and down.

"I remember."

“I had rules in my mind about what I was and wasn’t allowed to eat—rules that I had completely made up. Initially, I thought it was all done in the name of health. I thought that even if I couldn’t play hockey anymore, I would still eat and train like I did. But, as we neared our graduation, I realized it was all about control. The more stressed out I got about exams and applications, the less I ate because I needed to feel like I had some sense of certainty in my life. By the time my graduation came around, I hadn’t eaten for three days and I fainted immediately after taking pictures with my parents. And then-” Shane choked up as he pictured his parents in his hospital room, vividly recalling how concern and fear etched themselves in their faces.

“Shane, you don’t have to tell me.” Ilya ran his fingers through Shane’s hair.

“No, I do. I don’t want to hide anything from you anymore.” Shane took a steadying breath. “By the time I got into med school, I had stopped eating altogether. I missed you so fucking much, Ilya. I spent every day punishing myself for ever liking you in the first place. And of course because I had my heart set on becoming a doctor, I knew I needed to be better than ever. I just dove headfirst into my studies and completely neglected myself. Eventually, I had to drop out. My parents held several interventions for me first, actually. But I had to drop out because I punished myself so much that I nearly starved myself to death and ended up hospitalized.”

Ilya grabbed both of Shane’s hands and held them tightly.

“You never did anything to push me away, Ilya. I prided myself away from you because I didn’t want to ruin you and because I thought... I thought I was too broken to ever be with someone like you. Every day after your graduation, I missed you. I learned Russian because that was the only way that I thought I could have you.”

“Thank you for telling me, sweetheart. I missed you too. Every day.”

Both of them were racked with emotions. Shane wiped away the tear that fell down Ilya’s cheek. Shane still ached thinking about how hurt he had been before and how much of that pain he had inflicted upon Ilya too. Nothing, not even time, seemed to ease that churning feeling he felt in his stomach from knowing that he had caused all of it.

“That’s why you are not broken, not to me or anyone at all,” Shane continued. “We all have our own problems, big and small. And now that we’re together, we will get through everything as partners.”

Ilya immediately kissed Shane, using his lips to show his gratitude and understanding.

“I love you,” said Shane. “I’ve loved you since the day you told me to ice my swelling hand, and I’ve never stopped.”

Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

It's Christmas time and Shane isn't feeling well.

Now that Ilya and Shane had fully come clean with each other, things were better than ever. Shane thought that they had it good before, but now, he felt like they were more connected—that it was the two of them against the world.

Shane fondly traced his fingers over his scent gland as he put on his chef's jacket, feeling the healing mark that Ilya had left on him. Ilya had one too. It shocked Shane that Ilya had asked to be marked—almost no alphas were nowadays—but Shane easily complied. It sent Shane into orbit anytime he caught a glimpse of Ilya's neck. Ilya was wholly his, just as he was entirely Ilya's. Just thinking about Ilya now made his chest flutter.

“Hey, J.J. called in sick this morning. Says he has the flu,” Hayden said as he came in the kitchen. “Would you mind making the *pâte à choux*? I'll get started on the praline.”

“Yeah, no problem,” Shane replied.

Because he was the head chef, Shane didn't get to cook at the restaurant as much as he'd like. His position was more about leadership and making sure that everything was running smoothly. Shane did like managing the kitchen—it always soothed his brain to be able to tackle logistical problems. But, there were times where he couldn't help himself and took charge of components of dishes or cleaned up dishes before they were sent out. Now that the opportunity presented itself for him and Hayden to work on dessert together, just like the old days, Shane was giddy with excitement.

Shane carefully weighed out all of the ingredients (flour, butter, water, and salt) on the scale. Flour fell like thick sheets of snow as he sifted it over a large sheet of parchment. He cracked eggs into a large mixing bowl before whisking them, watching as it became a homogenous, golden mixture. The butter and water simmered on the stove for a few seconds before Shane added in the salted flour, continuously stirring until it became a uniform lump of dough.

As soon as the eggs hit the hot pan, Shane had to slap his hand over his mouth and pinch his nose. Eggs had always had a strange smell to him, but this—this smelled absolutely vile. Shane forcefully cleared his throat to avoid gagging, but this was too much.

For the first time in his career, Shane bolted out of the kitchen and into the loading area at the back of the restaurant. The cold, frost-bitten air immediately hit Shane as large flakes of snow quickly landed on his folded figure. Slowly, Shane took shaky breaths, hoping to push the

nausea away. The *pâte à choux* probably would be ruined if he didn't go back soon, but it also would have been ruined if Shane vomited straight into the pot.

"Shane, are you okay?" Hayden exclaimed slightly breathlessly.

Shane swallowed the saliva that was quickly pooling in his mouth. "Yeah, I think I just ate something bad last night."

"Rozanov didn't try to poison you, did he?"

"No, I cooked last night." They had steak and it tasted perfectly fine. He'd have to text Ilya later to make sure that he was okay.

Shane's nails dug into his knees as another wave of nausea washed over him. Quickly, his eyes began to water from the intensity.

Hayden's hand clenched around Shane's shoulder. "Go home, bud. We've got this."

"No, it's okay. I just need a minute."

"No, no, no. You're going home."

Shane straightened up and let the cold air fill his lungs, already feeling marginally better. "I'm serious, Hayd, I'm okay."

Together, they walked back into the kitchen.

Shane was only able to finish the rest of his shift by exclusively breathing through his mouth and meditating—using all of his willpower not to think about all of the aromas and the unsettling feeling in his stomach.

By the very nature of their personalities and professions, Shane always got up earlier than Ilya. Once Shane woke up, he gave himself a few minutes to enjoy Ilya's warmth and to admire how handsome Ilya looked, especially with his curls all tousled. Then, he would start his morning routine and get breakfast started while Ilya slowly came to life.

But, lately, Shane would wake up from an overwhelming need to vomit. He would have to sprint straight to the toilet and dry-heave. He had only ever vomited once because of this nausea, but every time was still as unpleasant as it was violent. Whatever steak dinner Shane made that night truly messed him up. His stomach hasn't been able to settle since. Ilya, however, seemed to be entirely fine, which didn't surprise Shane since his mate's stomach seemed to be made of steel.

Shane was very grateful that Ilya slept like the dead and didn't notice this change in Shane's behaviour. There was one instance where there was a close call. Ilya stirred, mumbling

Shane's name as Shane shot up to his feet, but quickly turned over and dosed off to sleep. Shane didn't need Ilya to worry about him—this was nothing.

This morning was no different than the rest. Shane came close to spilling the contents of his empty stomach in the toilet and tried to carry on as usual. As Shane stirred his plain oatmeal on the stove, Ilya meandered into the kitchen, wearing nothing but grey sweatpants that sat low on his hips. Sleep still made itself known on Ilya's strong features, as his eyes were still squinted and slightly puffy.

"Good morning, *my beloved*," Ilya whispered with a raspy voice as his arms snaked around Shane's waist.

Shane pressed a kiss on the crown of Ilya's head as he soaked in the warmth radiating off of Ilya's body. Even in pyjama pants and Ilya's stolen sweatshirt, Shane wasn't as warm. It wasn't fair how warm Ilya was, but Shane wasn't complaining that he had a personal heater at all times—a personal heater that has been exceptionally touchy and affectionate lately.

"Good morning, *Ilyusha*."

"I didn't sleep well." Ilya took in a deep breath, which tickled Shane's neck.

When Ilya's depression seeped in, he always had a hard time sleeping. It was hard to watch Ilya blankly look up at the ceiling for hours on end. Shane could only hold Ilya close to his chest and rub his back, hoping to lull him to sleep, but Shane almost always fell asleep before Ilya could.

"I'm sorry. Do you want to stay home and rest? We don't have to go to my parents' tonight. They'll understand."

"No. I want to go."

Shane breathed in Ilya's rich coffee scent and ran his fingers through Ilya's hair. This was the only coffee that Shane ever needed.

"Why don't you go rest on the couch? I'll bring breakfast over."

"Okay."

Pulling the breakfast burrito that Shane had meal prepped out of the air fryer, Shane brought it over to Ilya with his morning coffee and a bottle of tabasco tucked underneath his elbow. Shane soon joined Ilya with his bowl of plain oatmeal topped with frozen berries. Even though he didn't like having sweet breakfasts, the cold sourness of the berries oddly helped him with his nausea.

Both of them took small bites of their breakfasts, eating at a snail's pace.

Afterwards, Shane turned on the fireplace and the two of them sat on the couch in silence. Ilya's head was in Shane's lap and Shane ran his hands up and down Ilya's bicep, feeling the ridges of hard muscle and smooth skin underneath his fingertips.

As much as Shane loved the intensity between the two of them—the physicality and the never-ending chirps—he loved these sweet and quiet moments too. He thought of them as stealing back the time that he and Ilya were never able to enjoy in their youth. There was no longer a need for them to covertly brush past one another in the halls or use studying as an excuse to see one another. They could just exist in the comfort of their home.

“I told my mom to go easy on the gifts but she said this was the first time she could buy presents for two sons, just so you know. You will get to see more of Yuna’s wrath today,” Shane absentmindedly said as his fingers found their way to Ilya’s scalp.

Shane could only see that Ilya scrunched up his cheeks, but he knew that his boyfriend was smiling.

“I have a present for you.” Ilya quickly said before rising to his feet. Ilya came back with a box perfectly enclosed in a matte, emerald wrapping paper and gently placed it into Shane’s hands. “Merry Christmas.”

“What’s this?” Shane asked as Ilya looked at him with gentle eyes.

“Open it.”

Gently, Shane lifted up the pieces of tape and unfolded the wrapping paper. As soon as he opened the lid of the box, a sob rose up his throat. Shane reached over to Ilya and kissed him deeply. “Thank you. I love it.”

It was them. It was a picture of Shane and Ilya at Ilya’s graduation in a dark wooden frame. Ilya looked beamed with happiness and pride as his cap sat a little askew on his head. Shane’s face was embarrassingly flushed but he looked at Ilya as if the camera wasn’t there. They looked so young and happy.

Shane never thought he would be able to see this picture. He never gave himself the chance to ask Svetlana for them. Even with the photos of Ilya that he took himself, he forced himself to delete them. He didn’t think he deserved to have them.

He held the photo close to his chest, thinking about how Ilya’s face lit up like the morning sun when he first spotted Shane after getting his graduation regalia, or how proudly Ilya held Shane close to his side as they took these photos. Never in a million years did Shane think that he would be able to get his happy ever after with Ilya.

As tears streamed down Shane’s face, Ilya wrapped Shane into a consuming hug. “It’s okay. I’m here, sweetheart.”

“These are happy tears.” Shane wiped away the wetness on his face with the back of hand.

“There’s something else.”

Underneath layers of tissue paper sat the very teddy bear that Shane had gifted Ilya that day. Time had taken its toll on the bear, but Shane didn’t care at all.

“You kept it? After all these years?”

“You gave it to me. I could never throw it away.”

Shane pulled Ilya closer to him and kissed the mark that he had left on Ilya, making him shudder underneath the gentle touch. “*I love you.*”

“I love you, *my Shanya.*”

“I have something for you too, but it’s not a physical present.”

Shane had planned to take the two of them to his childhood cottage for a romantic weekend getaway in a few weeks once Ilya came back from his game in Tampa. There, they didn’t need to worry about anything or anyone and could just enjoy each other’s company. Shane couldn’t wait to share his childhood memories with Ilya.

“You didn’t have to get me anything. I already have everything.”

“You deserve the entire world. Let me give it to you.”

Christmas and Thanksgiving were the two times out of the entire year that Shane’s parents let him help out in the kitchen. They didn’t want him to feel obligated to help out since he already spent most of his time in a kitchen already. Plus, after decades of marriage, they worked just fine without an extra set of hands in the kitchen.

The kitchen in his family home wasn’t the largest one, but they somehow managed to fit all four of them. It was cozy. His dad basted the roasting chicken, his mom stirred the gravy, Ilya halved Brussels sprouts, and he made the balsamic glaze for the Brussels sprouts.

“Shane, when you’re done with that, could you please grab the smoked salmon from the fridge and plate it up?” Yuna asked.

“Got it.”

Shane handed the glaze to Ilya, who immediately tossed the Brussels sprouts in the sauce. Shane loved how seamlessly well they worked together in the kitchen. As Shane tore open the thick plastic packaging of the smoked salmon, bile rose up his throat. Shane gripped onto the edge of the countertop as he swallowed and took deep breaths.

“Are you okay?” Ilya asked.

“Just give me a second.”

After more than a few deep breaths, Shane stood up. Ilya looked at him with concern flooding his eyes, which shone in contrast to the white knitted sweater that he wore. Shane fixated his eyes on the edge of the mark on Ilya’s neck and how it just barely peeped out of the collar.

“What’s wrong?” Yuna asked, making Shane groan. He didn’t want to make a big deal out of this.

“It’s nothing. The smell of salmon just made me sick for some reason.”

“I’ll take care of this—we’re almost done with everything anyways. Go to the living room and rest. Ilya, will you go with him?”

Shane melted into the sofa as Ilya passed him a mug of warm water. He took small sips, letting the warmth of the water soothe his stomach, as Ilya rubbed his palm against Shane’s thigh. Shane really wanted to enjoy Christmas dinner with his family and didn’t want to ruin it, but his body was getting in the way. Maybe he could take a few small bites later.

“You are not feeling well,” Ilya stated.

“I’m doing better now.”

“You have not been feeling well for a while.” Ilya looked at Shane with a pointed but concerned stare.

Shane bit on his lower lip. They promised they would be honest each other and, yet, Shane had been hiding from Ilya—pretending that he was completely fine when he was far from it.

“No, I haven’t.”

“Are you... sick?”

“I don’t think so. I’m just nauseous, that’s all.”

“Shane, that is not so good.”

“I promise it’s just nausea, Ilya. I have only thrown up once.”

“We should go see a doctor, *my beloved*. Get it checked out and make sure you are okay.”

“Okay.” Shane pressed his forehead against Ilya’s as he didn’t want to let Ilya taste the rancid taste of acid in his mouth.

“The chicken is resting and the sides are in the oven,” David announced. “Why don’t we open up some presents together?”

Shane had to hold back his smile. His parents never shied away from spoiling him, even as an adult. He was the only child they were ever able to have and they poured every ounce of love into him—they never let Shane forget how much they cherished him. Now, Ilya got to feel that unwavering love too.

His parents got Ilya a red letterman jacket from Roots, saying that he wasn’t a real Canadian until he owned something from Roots, a puzzle for future family game nights, and pyjamas that matched with the set that Shane also got. There was still one last present left for Ilya, which Yuna handed to him.

“You really did not have to get me so many things,” Ilya said.

“We did. You’re part of the family now, Ilya.” Yuna smiled.

Slowly, Ilya pulled out a large book from the glittery gift bag—it looked like a photo album of sorts. As he flipped through pages, his eyes increasingly got more watery. Ilya stood up and embraced both Yuna and David, thanking them both while doing so. The image made Shane’s heart soar.

“I saw you eyeing pictures of Shane on the walls the first time you came by,” David explained. “I thought maybe you’d like to have a copy of all of them.”

“Look at this, Shane,” Ilya pointed to a picture of Shane’s first time on the ice and David was holding both of his hands. He was probably four and his helmet was just as big as his torso.

Shane couldn’t help but picture Ilya doing the same with their future children. He would be so patient, leading their child on the ice and praising them for every single movement. Shane wondered if Ilya was thinking the same thing.

Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Maybe Shane wasn't sick at all.

Her golden curls floated in the wind as she spun around in the grassy field. She held a baby with short, dark curls close in her arms. Laughter flowed through the air, her light chuckles and the baby's delighted squeals mixing together in harmony.

Ilya walked towards them, wading through the tall blades of grass. But, with each step, his body sank into the ground. Dirt and mud swallowed Ilya as he desperately clawed his way towards them, ripping out grass to stay afloat. The two of them seemed oblivious to Ilya's presence, still laughing as he screamed out for his mother. He hoped that they would turn just so that he could see her face.

He just kept sinking deeper and deeper in the darkness. All he could hear was the shrilling ring of tinnitus.

Ilya shook awake, body drenched in a cold sweat. He patted the mattress around him and only felt the rough duvet bunched up beside him. Right, he was in Tampa. The stale air of his hotel room filled his lungs as he tried to even out his breathing.

Finally, when he felt more stable, he reached for his phone. 4:26 am. Shane should be awake right now, probably doing yoga if he was feeling well enough.

Ilya worried for Shane nowadays. Shane's work hours and normal routine were already gruelling enough—hell, Shane had more discipline and did more training than Ilya. But now that Shane was feeling sick, Ilya didn't like to see Shane pushing himself to return to normalcy. Ilya wanted him to rest and take a break.

For a moment, Ilya entertained not calling Shane and figured that he could probably carry on with the rest of his day. He didn't want to burden Shane since Shane already had so much on his plate. But, perhaps, if Ilya's mother had someone to lean on, maybe she would still be alive. She was so sad and incredibly alone—completely isolated to the world and chained only to her husband.

The more time Ilya spent with Shane, the more Ilya realized that he never wanted to leave his mate's side again. His sadness was only bearable because he had Shane by his side. Ilya swallowed his guilt and pressed on Shane's contact.

“Hello?” Shane's voice panted against Ilya's ear. It sounded like he was in the middle of exercising, which meant that he felt okay today.

“Shane.”

“What’s wrong, Ilya?” Immediately, Shane’s voice sharpened with concern. “Talk to me, please.”

“I had a bad dream.” Ilya swallowed the lump in his throat. A cold tear ran down the side of his face and splattered onto his pillow. “I dreamt of my mother but I could not get to her.”

“I’m sorry. You must miss her so much.”

“Yes.”

“I wish I was there with you right now. I wish I could give you a hug.”

“Me too.” God, how he wished that Shane were right by his side. “I um... I also dreamed of a child with her.”

“Really? What did they look like?”

“I didn’t see much. They had your hair colour but my curls.”

Shane hummed in acknowledgment. “Can I tell you something funny?”

“Please.” Ilya turned onto his side so that he could hear Shane better, already feeling a bit better.

“I went to the Pike’s house yesterday to help Jackie with the kids. We were making dinner together and I needed to throw up again. Jackie came up to me and said that she was exactly like that when she was pregnant with the twins. Ilya...”

Ilya’s heart quickened. The thought of him and Shane having a child together was too much—too good to be true for someone like Ilya. He already had more than he deserved and didn’t want to get his hopes up.

“Yes, Shane?”

“I have my doctor’s appointment in a few days but do you think I could be...?”

Tears welled up in Ilya’s eyes again. What if it were real? What if he and Shane were about to have a child?

“I come home tomorrow. We can find out together.”

“Okay. Tomorrow.”

Shane paced back and forth in their bedroom, too afraid to take a look at what was going on in the ensuite bathroom. Ilya could only sit at the edge of their bed, skin buzzing with nerves. He was just as nervous as Shane was but didn't want to show it. He needed to be strong for Shane.

"*My flower pot*, please come sit down with me. You are going to make a hole in the carpet."

Shane looked at Ilya with trembling eyes and sat himself in Ilya's lap. "I'm scared, Ilya. I know I said that I wanted to have children with you some day, but I never expected someday to come so soon. I'm scared that I won't be able to be a good dad. And... I'm scared that the tests will come out negative."

"I know. I'm scared too. But, you will be an excellent papa. I know it."

"You're just saying that because you love me. Love has blinded you."

"Yes, but it's also true. I saw how you were with little Arthur. He loves his Uncle Shane so much."

Shane leaned into Ilya's chest. "You were so good with the girls. I couldn't stop thinking about that for days."

"If the tests come back negative, we can start trying, if you'd like."

"Really?" Shane's eyes were twinkling with excitement as his beamed with a bright smile.

"If that's what you want, then of course."

"But what do you want?"

Ilya captured Shane's mouth and kissed him deeply. "I want to have children with you, just as I want to grow old with you. When we're both ninety and wrinkly, I will still annoy the shit out of you just so you know that I still love you."

"I love you."

Just in time, the timer that Shane set on his phone rang. Ilya gave Shane a tight squeeze of reassurance. Hand-in-hand, they walked over to the bathroom where a neat line of six pregnancy tests of different brands awaited them. Ilya tried his best not to look at them, letting Shane get the first look.

Ilya wanted to have a baby with Shane more than everything in the world, but he was terrified. The moment Shane told him that he could possibly be pregnant, Ilya couldn't calm his mind. In fact, he hadn't gotten any sleep since. The first thing he did after he and Shane ended their call was pray. He wasn't religious in any sense of the word but he hoped that God would be lenient and listen to his prayer nonetheless. He prayed that his child wouldn't have Ilya and his mother's destructive depression or even worse, the dementia that ultimately killed his father. Ilya didn't want his child to know the world of pain he was used to. This baby was going to be half Shane, and Shane and the baby deserved much better than that.

“Oh my god, Ilya.”

Ilya craned his head to look at the pregnancy tests. Six positives. His heart thudded so deafeningly that he couldn't feel anything else in his body.

“We're going to have a baby, Shane.”

They held each other as they looked at all of the positives in watery awe. They were going to have a baby, and Ilya couldn't be happier. Ilya thanked his mother for watching over them and gracing them with this blessing. He just hoped that God would honour his prayer.

“But we used condoms and birth control,” Shane laughed in exasperation.

“You think modern medicine can stop my super sperm?”

“Fuck off, Ilya. You're going to be a papa.”

“As are you, *my beloved*.”

Ilya dropped to his knees and delicately lifted Shane's shirt, where there were still a set of firm abs. Underneath the layers of muscles, their baby was growing. Ilya pressed his lips against Shane's abdomen.

“Hello, my little bean. This is your papa Ilya speaking. We cannot wait to meet you already. We love you so much.”

Shane watched with teary eyes and held onto the back of Ilya's head as he spoke. As Ilya stood up, Shane kissed him and then whispered, “I love you so much... but you do know the baby doesn't have ears yet, right?”

“What? Shut up, Shane. The universe will let the baby know.”

Shane knew that Ilya was bursting at the seams, thoroughly desiring to shout the news to the entire world, but Shane told him that they needed to wait. He wanted to tell people too, but thought it would be wise to have their first doctor's appointment to see if everything was alright with the baby first.

Ilya found a private clinic that was applauded for its confidentiality for them to go to. Shane had his doubts about private healthcare but relented once he realized how privacy was not only a luxury but a necessity they needed. One of the baby's father was a NHL all-star after all.

The waiting room was painfully white and sterile. The receptionist typed away at her computer with her manicured nails. The clicking of the keys only made Shane's stomach churn more. Even though he wanted this baby more than he had ever anticipated, he was also

all too aware that most miscarriages happened within the first trimester—he had to ground himself in the reality that the baby he carried now may not be in his arms in nine months.

Shane also worried that if this baby was viable, then what would happen to his career? Hayden has had plenty of babies over the years they've had their restaurant and was able to go on paternity leave. Shane's case, however, was different. He was the one who was going to carry and birth a baby. Would his body be able to return to the kitchen after paternity leave and be able to stand for 10+ working hours? Would he even want to return to the restaurant?

"It's going to be okay," Ilya said, firmly holding onto Shane's hand.

Shane really hoped that everything was going to be okay. He felt like his brain was melting from worry, so much so that a throbbing headache was developing.

"Mr. Hollander and Mr. Rozanov?" the receptionist called. "Dr. Patel will see you in Room 2 now."

They sat down in the spacious exam room. Shane could only stare at all of the plastic diagrams of babies in-utero on the wall. Until this moment, he never really thought about what it would be like for him as a male omega to be carrying a baby. There were plenty of male omegas who have been pregnant, but the reality of Shane specifically being pregnant started to settle in. Just as he had a baby inside him, he would somehow have to push it out too.

"What are you thinking?" Ilya used his thumb to gently smooth out Shane's scrunched up eyebrows.

"That it's going to fucking hurt," Shane grunted, gesturing to the diagrams, which made Ilya chuckle. "Hey, you're not the one who is carrying a baby. You don't get to laugh about this."

"I'm sorry, *my tractor*. I should have not laughed at you. I wish I could be the one carrying the baby for us so that you would not be in pain. But, my body does not work that way."

Shane huffed, semi-placated.

Soon, Dr. Patel, a tall and slender woman with tanned skin and dark eyes and hair, knocked on the door and joined them. "Hi, you must be the expecting fathers, Mr. Hollander and Mr. Rozanov. Congratulations and nice to meet you! I'm Dr. Patel."

"Ilya and Shane is fine." Ilya smiled.

Shane nodded in agreement.

"Alright. Ilya and Shane it is. Since you're both first time fathers, I'll give you a run down of what we will go through today. We'll first go through your medical histories, mostly focusing on Shane here. Then we'll do some exams and tests, nothing too scary just blood and urine samples, as well as a pelvic exam. And then we'll finish off with meeting your baby. Usually, first visits are not this comprehensive, but we like to be more thorough so that parents have a

little bit more reassurance. How does that sound?” Dr. Patel spoke calmly and methodically, which made Shane feel a lot better already.

“Would you be able to test for certain diseases like dementia?” Ilya asked.

They had talked about their worries and concerns shortly after finding out. Shane knew how consumed with worry Ilya was about their baby.

“It’s still too early to do any testing on the baby, but we can order tests for you parents to see if you are carriers of any diseases that you are worried about.”

Upon hearing Dr. Patel’s words, Ilya sighed with relief.

“Any more questions that I could address right now?” Shane and Ilya shook their heads in unison. “Great! Let’s get started.”

After going through everything that Dr. Patel outlined, Shane finally sat down on the examination table. The paper covering the table crinkled underneath his weight and gripped onto his skin.

“Since you’re quite early on in your pregnancy, we’ll have to do an internal ultrasound. Is that okay?”

Shane easily nodded. He couldn’t wait to meet their baby.

“Perfect. You may feel a little pressure as the wand goes in but let me know if there is any discomfort or pain. It shouldn’t be painful at all. I’ll also warm up the gel for you so it’s not too cold.”

“Thank you.”

Ilya firmly held onto Shane’s hand through the entire procedure. Shane did squeeze Ilya’s hand too firmly as Dr. Patel inserted the wand, but he soon relaxed as they watched as shapes soon appeared on the screen.

“There’s the placenta right there, and that’s your baby! Congratulations, Dads. Baby looks like they’re about six weeks along, and everything looks perfect.”

It was a tiny little blob on the screen and there was barely any semblance of a baby-like shape, but it was their baby. With the flip of a switch, their baby’s steady heartbeat filled the quiet of the room.

A million thoughts and emotions ran through Shane’s head but the most important one—the one that overpowered all of them—was happiness.

Ilya hugged Shane tightly from behind, making sure not to interfere with Dr. Patel. Ilya’s breath was a little ragged as he breathed, just as Shane’s was too.

“They’re perfect,” Shane repeated.

“It’s our perfect little baby,” Ilya confirmed.

“I’m just going to print some pictures for you guys, and you’ll be able to see your baby as much as you’d like.”

Shane sat in their car in utter awe as he looked at the sonograms in his hand. He still couldn’t believe that they met their baby today. The baby was only 6 mm long—the size of a pea, Dr. Patel said. Shane lightly traced his finger over the date on the sonogram: January 7th. He wanted to remember this day forever.

A gasp escaped Shane’s lips as realization dawned on him. “*Merry Christmas, Papa.*”

“Christmas already passed, did it n—oh.” Ilya kept his eyes on the road, but his face split into an unabashed smile.

Shane placed his hand over Ilya’s thigh and said it again.

Ilya reached over and placed his hand over Shane’s clothed abdomen. “*You are the best Christmas present I could ever ask for.*”

Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Shane and Ilya discover that nothing ever goes to plan.

Chapter Notes

The story was decidedly becoming too fluffy and sweet so I added some angst back into the mix. You have been warned.

They both agreed that they wouldn't tell anyone about the pregnancy until they were past the first trimester. This agreement helped soothe Shane's anxiety of prematurely losing the baby and gave time for Ilya to process the results of their carrier screening, which they were still waiting for. Despite this, they already had a specific plan set. They were going to tell Shane's parents first, the Pikes would be next, and then they were going to invite the entire Centaurs' team over to announce both their relationship and the pregnancy. Later, if both of their busy schedules allowed them to, Rose and Svetlana would be flown up to Ottawa for a long overdue reunion—Rose was on a press tour for her film and Svetlana started a new job with the Raiders in Boston.

Shane was ten weeks along now and he still didn't pregnant at all, which was to be expected. Carefully inspecting himself in the mirror, he just looked slightly bloated. Ilya loved to talk to Shane's belly and rub it any chance he got, but Shane didn't find himself having the same connection. He didn't even absentmindedly touch his stomach the same way that Jackie did when she was pregnant. Maybe the baby knew that he was too anxious so they were avoiding him in some way.

With a gentle hand, Shane tried to rub his belly the way that Ilya did but felt nothing. Shane tried to reason with himself that this was just because he was too early into the pregnancy, and he had plenty of time to bond with the baby. Still, unease sat heavy in his body.

"Shane, I am heading out to practice," Ilya spoke in a singsong voice as he came into the room.

"Good luck with the game today. You're going to do amazing." Shane kissed Ilya and fixed his tie for him. "My parents and I will be cheering you on from the stands. Baby will be cheering for their papa too!"

The Raiders came up to Ottawa over the weekend and were going to be playing against the Centaurs tonight. Shane knew that Ilya still had good connections with his old team, but that didn't soften the tension that Ilya probably felt playing against them. Ilya hadn't said anything, but Shane could sense some of the internal conflict that was going on in Ilya's mind. Ilya's shoulders had been more tense and he didn't tease Shane as much in the past few days.

"Thank you. I love you." Ilya's hand traversed down and massaged Shane's abdomen in soothing circles. "Be good for your daddy, *my peanut*. Please don't make him sick anymore."

Dr. Patel had given Shane some medication to ease his morning sickness but there were still some days where it hit him particularly hard. Last night was no exception. He spent half of the night hunched over the toilet. Morning sickness was really all-the-time sickness.

Shane and Ilya also decided that Ilya would be called papa and Shane would be daddy. Ilya wanted the baby to get used to their voices and different names as quickly as possible. There were no words that Shane could use to express how good of a father Ilya had already become in the past few weeks. Seeing Ilya expand his love for Shane to their baby just made Shane love him more than he ever thought possible.

"I love you, too. I'll see you later, okay?"

"See you later!"

Now alone in the room, Shane lifted up his shirt and tried again. His own hand wasn't nearly as warm as Ilya's.

"Hi baby, this is your daddy." Shane's voice was faint as he spoke. "We need to be extra supportive of your papa today. He's going to need a lot of love because he's going to be playing against his old team, the Raiders. We'll have to be his biggest cheerleaders, got it?"

Shane tried to imagine in months' time when his stomach would be swollen and his baby would kick back in response to his words.

One of Shane and Ilya's Christmas gifts to his parents were tickets for the Centaurs vs. Raiders game. Although Ilya had offered box seats, Shane suggested seats by the rink since Yuna typically liked to be as close to the action as possible. The three of them came to the arena wearing Rozanov jerseys. As much as Ilya hated to admit it, Scott Hunter had fundamentally changed the NHL. While the two of them weren't entirely ready to come out to the world yet, Shane felt brave enough to don his mate's jersey without hiding it this time.

"I'm going to get some beer and snacks. Do you want anything, Shane?" David asked as he stood up from their centre-ice seats.

“No, I’m good. Thanks, Dad.”

“Not even ginger ale?”

“Maybe a ginger ale please.” That would probably do his stomach some good. The overwhelming pheromones in the area were making him nauseous. Shane could also smell the lingering stench of body odour in a way that he had never before.

As David shuffled through the seats, Yuna’s stare landed on Shane. “Shane, you’re not... are you?”

Shane’s breath hitched. His mother has always been exceptionally perceptive, but he wasn’t ready to have this talk with her yet, not without Ilya.

“Everything between you and Ilya are alright, right? You’re not starting to relapse, are you?”

Immediate relief crashed over Shane like a tsunami, though he did feel incredibly guilty that his mother thought he was suffering. “No, Mom. We’re doing great. Better than ever, actually.”

“It’s just that I noticed that you’ve been picking at your food more lately. I only want the best for you, which is for you to be happy and healthy.”

“I’m okay, really. I got food poisoning from a steak dinner I made a while ago and my stomach really hasn’t been the same since. I’m not relapsing.”

Yuna shot him a skeptical glance but acquiesced, leaving Shane to wonder if she was going to jump to the logical conclusion that he was pregnant. He was sure that even if his parents had their suspicions, they would still wait for him and Ilya to announce it themselves. So, worrying would get him nowhere.

As David came back, the players from both teams both filed onto the ice to start their warmups. Shane could only firmly bite the inside of his cheek as he watched Ilya stretch out his hips, knees drawing circles as his hips thrust forward towards the ice. As much as baby made Shane unbelievably nauseous, they also made Shane want Ilya like never before. In Shane’s eyes, Ilya had always been attractive—he was objectively an attractive man, having been named the fifth hottest hockey player in the league. Now, Shane just couldn’t get enough of how handsome Ilya was and constantly wanted to be fucked by him. It was a blessing and a curse.

Shane sipped his ginger ale to distract himself.

“How does Ilya feel about playing against the Raiders?” His mom asked.

“He hasn’t said anything but I think he’s a little uneasy,” Shane replied as David nodded along to his response.

“Make sense. Although he’s certainly not a traitor by any means, there must be some fans or ex-teammates who feel that way. But, he’s Ilya Rozanov—he’s going to be fine. He didn’t get all the way to the top of the league by making nice. He got here by skill alone.”

“Mom,” Shane said with a quivering lip. “Thank you.”

Having his mom accept Ilya as Shane’s boyfriend was one thing, but having Yuna Hollander accept Ilya Rozanov as a hockey player meant everything to Shane.

“We love him, Shane,” David was quick to add. “He became our second son the moment you brought him over.”

“Thank you, Dad.”

“Yeah, no son of mine brings home a boy without it being serious,” Yuna said with twinkling eyes. “So we knew we had either the option to love Ilya or suck it up. Luckily for both of you, he is easy to love.”

Ilya stood up and started to skate around the Centaurs’ half of the rink, eyes scanning through the crowds. As his eyes landed on the Hollanders, Shane’s parents erupted into loud cheers while Shane waved with both of his hands. Ilya waved back with a bright smile, causing the fans around them to scream in both support and disdain. Despite the commotion, Ilya looked completely unbothered and kept his gaze on Shane.

Shane looked at the man he loved who grew up knowing little love. Even so, Ilya loved more fiercely than anyone that Shane knew. Shane was so proud of him.

The game soon started. Ilya stood in front of Cliff Marleau as they positioned themselves for the face-off. The two of them seemed to talk as they bent over, but Shane couldn’t tell if it was friendly or hostile chatter—Ilya just wore his usual, smug grin.

As soon as the puck hit the ice, Ilya flew across the ice with the puck, heading straight towards the Raiders’ goal. The Raiders’ defence-line crowded around Ilya while the Centaurs’ tried to ensure that their centre had an opportunity to shoot. Shane could only watch in horror as the 6’7 Raiders’ enforcer Ryan Price rammed into Ilya, throwing his body against the dasher boards. As Ilya’s body slammed against the boards with a deafening thud, Shane’s hand flew up to his mouth with sheer panic. His entire body froze with dread as Ilya laid on the ice, completely unmoving.

“Get up,” Shane whispered.

The referee knelt on the ice as he checked out Ilya’s still immobile body. Stretchers were soon brought onto the ice and the EMTs hoisted Ilya’s body on top before bringing him away.

Shane immediately shot up from his seat. He needed to be with Ilya. He didn’t care if anyone knew that he and Ilya were associated somehow—he didn’t care if the entire world knew that he and Ilya were mates—he just needed to be by Ilya’s side right now.

“Go, Shane,” his mother encouraged.

Shane ran through the rows of seats and stopped as soon as exited the arena. There was no way that he could chase the ambulance with his car. Even if he did that, what then? He couldn’t rush to Ilya’s side immediately—Shane would only get in the doctors’ way. He

needed to be practical, but his mind was too jumbled with worry. Shane covered his eyes with his palms as he took a few shaky breaths. He needed to calm down so that he could help Ilya in some way.

By some miracle, the Centaurs' social media manager was standing by the concession stands, furiously typing away on his phone. He was probably making some sort of official statement about Ilya's condition. Ilya once said Harris knew that the two of them were university friends, so it probably wouldn't be out of the blue for Shane to approach Harris.

Without a thought, Shane ran up to him. "Harris!"

Harris pried his eyes away from his phone. "Chef Hollander, what are you doing here? Sorry, obviously you're here to support Ilya and the Centaurs. That was such a brutal hit so my brain is fried and I tend to ramble when my brain is fried."

"Do you happen to know where they're taking him?" Shane's voice was breathless.

Harris's eyes landed on Shane's scent gland and seemed to piece everything together. Instantly, Harris regained composure and spoke calmly: "They're probably going to take him to the hospital on Baseline Road—it's the closest one."

"Thank you."

Shane could meet Ilya at the hospital and go to him as soon as he was cleared. That was the plan. As Shane ran off to his car, his phone buzzed incessantly in his pocket. He didn't want to check it but knew that it would send him further down his spiral if he didn't at least see who was calling. It was an unknown number but Shane picked up nonetheless.

"Is this Shane Hollander?" A deep voice asked.

"Yes, this is him," Shane replied as he put on his seat belt.

"Hi, this is Brandon Wiebe, coach of the Centaurs. You're listed here as Ilya's emergency contact. I just wanted to inform you that Ilya was badly injured during a game and is now being taken to the Queensway Carleton Hospital."

Shane wanted to throw up. He firmly held onto his steering wheel to compose himself.

"Thank you, I'll be there shortly."

A concussion, fractured collarbone, and two broken ribs. A concussion. A fractured collarbone. Two broken ribs.

The doctor told Shane that the injury could have been worse, but how was Ilya's condition not bad enough? How could they be so blasé about Ilya's injuries?

Shane buried his head in his hands as he sat folded over in the empty hospital room, replaying the visuals of Ilya's body slumped on the ice over and over again. He was so still. Tears pooled in his palms before slipping through his fingers. Shane could only wait in fear as Ilya had been taken to do an MRI to check for swelling and internal bleeding.

His parents called him and offered to come but Shane sent them home. He didn't know if having his parents here would be a good idea. As comforting as they were, Shane knew that he would also feed off of their worries. He didn't need to be any more worried than he was already—it would be terrible for the baby. God, the baby.

"I'm sorry for making you scared too," Shane spoke to his stomach. "Papa is going to be okay." *He has to be okay.*

Shane straightened his back and sat upright. He had to stay calm. It wasn't just him alone now.

An hour later, nurses wheeled Ilya into the room on his hospital room. The bed was inclined so that Ilya was practically sitting up with the help of pillows stuffed behind his back. He had a sling over his right arm and his face was slightly bruised from the impact. Ilya's sandy curls were matted and tousled at the same time.

"*It's my Shanya,*" Ilya gleefully sang as the nurses positioned the bed in its rightful place. The beeping of his ECG machine immediately started to quicken as Ilya's eyes landed on Shane.

Shane immediately stood by Ilya's side, holding onto his good hand.

"Sorry, he's been speaking Russian a lot," one of the nurses said with an apologetic look.

"It's okay. I've got it." Shane nodded as he intertwined his fingers with Ilya's.

"He should be good for now," the nurse continued. "He's on some of the more intense drugs so he'll be a little loopy for a while. We just need to make sure that his upper body stays more upright."

Shane thanked the nurses as they left. "*You scared me.*"

Ilya looked so delicate and so happy in his bed. Shane had to stop himself from running his hands through Ilya's hair for fear that he might make Ilya's condition worse. He just wanted to do something to help Ilya feel better—anything at all.

"I'm sorry, *my Shanya*. I did not mean to make you *so scared like that*. I was so excited to see you and your parents at the game," Ilya slurred as he mixed up the two languages.

Tears pooled in Shane's eyes as he thought about how much pain Ilya must be in to need such a high dose of painkillers.

"Looks like I'm out for the season, *Shanya*." Ilya's hand lightly tightened around Shane's.

"I'm sorry. I know you worked really hard this season."

“No, I’m happy. *Very, very happy.*”

“Why, *Ilyusha?*”

“Because I get to spend time with *my beloved and my little baby.*”

Not able to hold himself back anymore, Shane let his lips graze across Ilya’s cheek. Ilya hummed in content upon contact.

“*I get to stay home with my beloved* and I do not have to fly to stupid places,” Ilya continued.

Shane made a mental note that he should take some days off of work to take care of Ilya. The restaurant should be okay without him—Shane had made enough binders with protocols for his absence. There was no way he was going to let Ilya stay home alone with these injuries. Even if Ilya didn’t need the extra care, Shane needed to know that he was okay.

Maybe, they could take this time to finally go to the cottage together. While they originally planned to go after Ilya came back from Tampa, the plan was thrown out the window the moment they found out they were expecting. It would be nice to let Ilya heal in complete privacy.

After a while, Ilya dozed off. Initially, he tried to fight off the sleep, wanting to continue to talk to Shane, but Shane insisted that he get some rest to heal.

Shane had already sent an update to his parents about Ilya’s condition, to which they replied that they would be visiting soon. Now, he sat beside Ilya, listening to the steady rhythm of his heart from the machines—he couldn’t bring himself to do anything but that.

“Are you okay with having visitors?”

Shane looked up and found Harris standing by the door with a big bouquet of colourful flowers. Shane rose to his feet and welcomed Harris into the room. “He’s just sleeping right now but I’m sure he’ll appreciate the company. Thank you for helping me earlier. I’m sorry I interrupted you—you were probably working but I was freaking out.”

“It’s no trouble at all. We always want to do whatever we can for our loved ones, right?” Harris’s gentle green eyes shone as he spoke.

Shane nodded in agreement. “Still, thank you.”

Harris gave Shane a gentle side hug, his body radiating with a warm apple smell that calmed Shane ever so slightly. “So how is he doing?”

“The doctor said it could have been worse. ‘Just’ a concussion, a fractured collarbone, and two broken ribs.” Shane still couldn’t believe the gall of the doctor.

Harris winced. “Yeah, Price is a large guy, but I’ve never seen anyone fly like that after being checked before. It was terrifying.”

“It was.” For the sake of the baby, Shane tried not to dwell on it for too long. Ilya was alive and breathing—that was all that mattered.

Ilya started to stir. Within a few seconds, he went from groggy to utterly exuberant. “Harris, hello! You have come to visit me? I am honoured.”

“Hi, Ilya,” Harris chuckled. “Yes, I just wanted to make sure that you were okay.”

“Harris brought you flowers,” Shane added.

“Ah daffodils! Thank you. They are my favourite. How did you know?”

“Lucky guess.” Harris winked.

In a moment of courage, Shane spoke, “Harris um... Ilya and I are dating. We have been for a while now.”

“Yes, Shane is my boyfriend, and I love him very much, Harris,” Ilya exclaimed a tad too loudly.

“Thank you for telling me. I am honoured to know.”

Shane smiled freely. It felt good to finally let some people know about their relationship. It was scary and there were still a lot of things to be uncertain about, but it felt good. Ilya and Shane loved each other and it was as simple as that.

“Some guys from the team are in the lobby waiting to visit you. It’s Bood, Hayes, Dykstra, Barrett, and Haas. Do you guys think you’re up for that?”

Ilya eagerly nodded. “Bring them up!”

As Harris left to gather the team, Ilya motioned to Shane’s stomach and then held his pointer finger against his lips. Even in pain, Ilya could make Shane effortlessly laugh.

The team was just as loud as Shane had anticipated. They came rumbling into the room and were packed shoulder-to-shoulder as they stood by the foot of Ilya’s hospital bed.

Even in his delirium, Ilya could sense that they were perplexed by Shane’s presence. “He is my boyfriend, so he is here because he loves me. My boyfriend Shane.”

Shane’s face warmed up as the team stared at him with opened mouths. He couldn’t help but notice how Barrett’s face flushed as well, eyes darting towards Harris.

“No way! Congratulations, guys!” Hayes exclaimed.

Ilya winced at the volume of the Hayes’s name, which Hayes immediately apologized for.

“Looks like you have some competition at the grill, Bood,” Dykstra chirped.

“Hey, I could never compete with *the* Chef Hollander,” Boodram replied. “I’ll happily wave my white flag and eat your food, Chef.”

“Please call me Shane.”

“Bood’s food is good, but my Shanya’s food is the best,” Ilya said, receiving some fond looks from his teammates.

Shane never expected to see NHL players quickly accept him for who he was with such glee. Until this moment, there was still some part of him who was still stuck behind his childhood hockey rink, curled up in bloody ball. What happened to Shane in his youth was terrible, but he knew now more than ever that what happened was unwarranted and unacceptable. The Centaurs’ reaction should be the norm.

Shane couldn’t be prouder or happier.

“Oh yeah, Ilya,” Bood said. “I brought your stuff. Your phone has been ringing quite a bit.”

“Thank you, Bood. You are my favourite,” Ilya replied.

“I thought I was your favourite,” Haas quietly said with pink cheeks, which accentuated his youth.

“You are baby boy, Haasy. You are everyone’s favourite,” Ilya said matter-of-factly, making Haas blush to the tips of his ears.

Shortly after, the Centaurs left to give Ilya some peace and quiet. Despite fighting off sleep again, Ilya asked Shane if Shane could look through his phone for him. The doctors wanted Ilya to limit his screen time. There were several missed calls from Svetlana, as well as texts of concern from Marleau and a plethora apologies from Price himself, explaining that he did not mean to hurt Ilya. Ilya was well aware and did not feel any malice towards Price, stating that Price was a giant teddy bear of sorts.

Before Shane could finish reading all of Price’s texts to Ilya, Svetlana was calling again. Ilya urged Shane to answer.

“Ilyusha, thank god you answered. Are you alright? I was watching the game and saw what happened.”

“Yes, I am okay, Sveta.”

“Good. That means I can tell you that your footwork was messy and your situational awareness is shit. You are getting old and it’s very clear in your performance.”

Shane watched as Ilya melted into his pillows, clearly comfortable to talk to Svetlana without the same kind of performance that he put on with the Centaurs. The person who greeted with Centaurs was all Ilya, but this side of Ilya, the one who relaxed and allowed himself to chuckle softly was the side of Ilya Shane fell in love with.

“I’m booking off some time to come visit you. You cannot talk me out of this. You cannot be alone while you are healing.”

“I am not alone, Sveta. I have my beloved.”

“What? Ilyusha, how hard did you hit your head against the boards? You must have injured your head horribly if you think it’s okay to not tell your best friend that you are in love.”

“I am in love, Sveta. I am in love with Shane Hollander!”

“Ilyusha,” Shane hissed at the volume, making Ilya immediately shrink in apology. “We’re in a public hospital. We have to be quiet.”

“Shane?” Svetlana asked.

“Hi, Svetlana.”

“Oh it is you, Shane! I thought Ilya was having delusions from his concussion. You speak Russian?”

Of course Svetlana would be more surprised by his language skills than the fact that he and Ilya were in love with each other.

“Yes, I speak Russian,” Shane shyly replied.

“He only speaks Russian for me, Sveta,” Ilya nearly growled. “He learned Russian for me because he missed me so much.”

“Okay, I get it. Shane is your baby, Ilyusha. I will back off. I’m still coming to visit you.”

“We have much to talk about.”

“Tell me about it. You men and your secrets.”

As Ilya and Svetlana continued to chat, Shane looked at his own phone and decided that it was time for him to give Rose to call. They didn’t need to have an intricate plan just to catch up.

Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Ilya tries to adjust to being at home with an injury.

Ilya had never known torture like this before. He was on day four of being home recovering from his injuries. Even though it was his collarbone that was broken, his right hand—his dominant hand—was rendered completely useless in a sling. Every slight movement hurt his ribs and his head constantly throbbed with a headache. Worst of all, Shane was staying home with him, taking care of Ilya. The part about being coddled by his partner was not bad. No, Ilya enjoyed having Shane by his side. The real cherry on top of Ilya's existing torture was that Shane smelt sweeter than before—much more pungent than Ilya had ever smelled before—and Shane also craved Ilya's touch all the time.

In other words, Ilya was being cockblocked by his own body.

Shane was washing the dishes and Ilya just had to bury his face into the crook of Shane's neck. Using his good hand, Ilya rubbed Shane's softening belly. Immediately, Shane started pressing his ass against Ilya's already half-hard member.

"Sweetheart, you are killing me," Ilya groaned.

"I'm not doing much better over here. I want you so badly, *Ilyusha*."

If he could, Ilya would have immediately taken Shane right here in the kitchen, bending him over and getting him to scream Ilya's name over and over again. But that seemed like a distant dream. An extremely distant dream. Being cockblocked like this was the only grudge that Ilya held against Price.

In terms of the game, apparently both teams were shook by Ilya's knockout and played a poor game. The Raiders won with the skin of their teeth in overtime, the final score being 2-1. It was nice to know that Ilya was fondly considered by both teams.

Ilya's hand traveled down to Shane's crotch, finding that his penis was already hard underneath his sweatpants. Ilya did this to himself. Maybe if he hadn't touched Shane like this, then Ilya wouldn't be so painfully hard and horny now. Shane was quick to swat Ilya's hand away once he started palming at Shane's erection.

"We can't, Ilya," Shane moaned.

"Your hand and mouth say no but it doesn't sound like you want to stop."

Shane turned around, firmly biting his lip. “I don’t want to hurt you. You’re already in enough pain.”

Ilya carefully leaned over to kiss Shane, who was painfully restrained in kissing back. It did hurt to kiss—a sharp pain stabbed into his side at every slight movement—but it was even more painful to not kiss Shane. Love had truly turned Ilya in to a soft-hearted fool. He loved it.

“I have an idea,” Shane panted into Ilya’s mouth.

Shane sat Ilya down on their bed, letting Ilya rest against the mountain of pillows they had piled against their headboard. As Ilya settled into a position that was comfortable enough for him, Shane quickly stripped out of his clothes. Ilya could only watch as Shane revealed his slight belly, and he wanted to do nothing but take Shane by the mouth as Shane’s member bobbed free.

“Your idea is to torture me, yes?” Ilya swallowed hard.

“Not touching you is torture for me too,” Shane shot back as he kneeled by Ilya’s side.

Not wanting to jostle Ilya, Shane pulled down Ilya’s waistband just enough so that his erection could spring free. Ilya couldn’t restrain himself anymore, he reached out his left hand so that he could pull Shane to his mouth. Shane only gave Ilya a quick peck before swirling his tongue around the head of Ilya’s penis and licking the bead of precum that was forming.

“Fuck, Shane,” Ilya hissed, trying not to move his hips.

“You tell me if it hurts at any point, okay? I want to make you feel good, not hurt you.” The sheer intensity in Shane’s eyes as he spoke was nothing if not endearing to Ilya.

“Okay.”

Without a word, Shane got on his elbows as he took Ilya by the mouth. Ilya was utterly entranced watching Shane’s perfect pink lips bob up and down around him. Shane hummed in content as he took Ilya in deeply—so deeply that Ilya thought he could pass out from Shane’s sweet heat, or maybe that was the concussion talking. Using his free hand, Ilya guided Shane’s head as he moved. Shane only used this as motivation to take Ilya deeper than previously thought possible. It was probably throat-bruising for Shane.

“You take me so well, *my beloved*.”

Ilya tried to moderate his own breathing, trying not to heave so that he didn’t hurt his ribs. But seeing his pregnant mate like this made it nearly impossible to do so. Ilya firmly slapped Shane’s ass. The vibrations that came from Shane’s mouth as he moaned nearly made Ilya come.

Closing his eyes, the sensations were suddenly too much. “Shane, I’m going to come.”

Shane hummed and the vibrations finally sent Ilya over the edge. With ease, Shane swallowed Ilya's load and came up for air. His chest heaved up and down, and his lips were swollen too. Ilya could come again from just looking at how beautiful Shane was.

"Good?" Shane asked.

"Amazing. It's exactly what the doctor ordered."

"Good. Now Papa needs to sit back as Daddy takes care of himself."

Shane positioned himself opposite to Ilya and opened his legs, revealing himself completely to Ilya. Ilya moaned out of pure frustration and desire. His body itched to touch Shane. The fact that Ilya couldn't enjoy Shane's changing body was killing him. Shane was also going to kill Ilya just with how he looked at Ilya, as if he were the object of all of Shane's desire.

First giving himself a few languid strokes, Shane then leaned back to reveal more of his dripping entrance. His fingers circled around his hole before gently inserting one. Shane's other hand started to wrap around his chest, ultimately rolling his nipple between his finger and thumb.

"Fuck—Shane," Ilya breathed. His cock twitched in interest as he watched.

As Shane continued to open himself, he also started moaning Ilya's name. "Ilya. W-wished this was you. Your fingers stretch me out in ways that I can't."

Ilya ground his teeth together as he clenched onto his sling—his stupid fucking sling.

Shane immediately shuddered as he found his prostate, toes curling with pleasure. Ilya watched as Shane's breath quickened and his strokes became more desperate. Before long, Shane used his slick-covered fingers to stroke himself, completely abandoning his sensitive prostate. Ilya liked that Shane wouldn't be able to come untouched without his help.

In a moment of desperation, Ilya moved his leg so that his foot was pressing directly onto Shane's balls. He didn't even care that his ribs screamed in protest as he moved. Shane immediately melted underneath Ilya's touch but continued jerk himself off even more quickly now.

"*Ilyusha*, I'm going to—" Shane's muscles visibly clenched as he released all over himself.

It pained Ilya that he couldn't wipe Shane clean with his tongue. Shane must taste as sweet as he smells now.

"You really are going to fucking kill me, *my beloved*."

Shane only replied with a tired but smug grin. Ilya had taught Shane infuriatingly well, perhaps too well.

For the first time in their relationship, Ilya got out of bed earlier than Shane. As the mattress shifted with the absence of Ilya's weight, Shane turned but remained asleep. His dark hair fanned over his forehead as he remained blissfully unaware.

Ilya tiptoed out of the bedroom for fear of waking Shane up and went directly to the kitchen. It was extremely rare for Shane to sleep in, but maybe the baby was changing things for him. There were fewer and fewer instances of Shane throwing up now, though he still got nauseous from time to time, so he was able to sleep through the night without a hitch.

Even though his body was still healing slowly, he wanted to do something for Shane. Shane poured every waking moment into taking care of Ilya, so it was only fair. Plus, not being able to do anything made Ilya feeling infuriatingly helpless. Even the easy things—especially the easy things that he did without a single thought before annoyed him to no end. He couldn't even put on clothes without help.

At first, it was sweet how Shane attended to his every beck and call, but now, Ilya just wanted to do things himself. He wasn't irritated at Shane—he was irritated by the limitations of his own body and his stupid sling that always got in the way of everything

Ilya bent over to pick up a pot from one of their cabinets, except he didn't couldn't bend over at all. All he could do was bend his knees while keeping his torso impossibly straight. With some difficulty, he was able to get started on Shane's oatmeal. Today, it was going to be both of their oatmeals as Ilya didn't want to push his luck. Ilya found that he could hold the pot with his right hand without much pain, even if it meant that his left hand had to stir at an impossibly awkward angle. No matter how stupid it looked or felt, it was a win for Ilya.

Then, Ilya threw some turkey bacon in the air fryer. God bless the invention of the air fryer, Ilya thought. He was only able to get some slices out once he used his teeth to help him pry open the ziplock bag. Shane probably would have chided Ilya if he were here, claiming that it was unsanitary due to the bacteria from the uncooked bacon and that Ilya could get sick from it. It didn't matter. Ilya was going to make Shane some turkey bacon in whatever way possible because even though he didn't like to admit it, Shane had begun craving bacon. Ilya knew that Shane was worried about the highly processed nature of bacon and how that may impact the baby, but Ilya argued that it was more important to satisfy the baby's cravings. It wasn't like Shane was eating bacon for every single meal anyways.

"Fuck." Ilya winced as he tried to scoop the oatmeal out of the pot. He must have moved too quickly because pain shot through his body.

"What's wrong?" Shane padded into the kitchen wearing Ilya's shirt and the pyjama pants that his parents got them for Christmas. Sleep was still heavy on his golden brown eyes.

"Nothing," Ilya said as he carefully tried again.

"You don't have to make breakfast. I can do it, Ilya." Shane gently hugged Ilya from behind, his touch was ghostly against Ilya's skin.

“I need to do it. Please,” Ilya quietly added as he walked to the fridge.

“Okay. Do you mind if I make the coffee and tea?”

“That is fine. Thank you.”

While Ilya did need to prove to himself that he wasn't completely useless, he was also practical. There was no way that he would be able to reach for the moka pot or the special herbal tea from the top shelf without hurting himself. Ilya wanted to recover as quickly as possible for Shane and the baby.

As Shane busied himself with preparing drinks for the two of them, Ilya got greek yogurt from the fridge. He was able to top off the oatmeal with a dollop of yogurt and a sprinkle of frozen berries. For Ilya's own bowl, he needed help with opening the peanut butter and honey but then independently doused the oatmeal with both so that it would be edible for him. He didn't know how Shane ate foods with such “delicate” flavours.

“Thank you for making breakfast, *Ilyusha*.” Shane kissed Ilya's temple.

Ilya really wanted to lean into Shane's touch but he had to stay as upright and straight as possible for the sake of not hurting himself. He had to remind himself that he already had some major wins today so he should not get so frustrated. Instead, Ilya puckered his lips.

“Gimme kiss.”

Shane easily complied with a smile.

Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Shane and Ilya start announcing their pregnancy to their loved ones.

At thirteen weeks now, baby was hitting all of the necessary benchmarks and was exactly where they needed to be. Shane's body was immediately wracked with relief as he passed the first trimester—he sobbed as soon as the ultrasound technician told them that their baby was perfectly fine. They received confirmation from their carrier screening that their baby would not likely have dementia or any other concerning diseases, which Ilya was all but too happy to hear. Now, it was finally time for Shane and Ilya to announce the news to their loved ones.

Just as planned, the Hollanders would be the first to hear about the news. Shane and Ilya invited them over for their usual family dinner.

“Smells great, guys!” David said as they came into the kitchen.

“Thanks, Dad,” Shane replied as normally as possible, hoping that his nerves weren't showing.

Ilya slowly stirred the pot of Hayashi stew with one hand as Shane scooped rice into bowls. Ilya was still in a sling but he was healing and feeling better with each passing day. Shane definitely had a discernible bump now, so he hid behind one of Ilya's loose cable knit sweaters. It also helped that he had his back turned to his parents as they came in.

“We brought stuff for salad,” Yuna said.

Ilya turned to properly greet David and Yuna, receiving a warm hug and a peck on the cheek from Yuna.

Shane still didn't want to fully turn around, busying himself with ladling the stew on top of the rice. He knew his bump wasn't that big yet but these were his parents—they had x-ray vision when it came to Shane. They were the very people who knew that he had bruised ribs the moment they picked him up from practice when he was younger. One single glance now would probably be all it took for them to piece everything together.

“How are you healing up?” Yuna asked as she shuffled around the kitchen to prepare the salad.

“Very well. I have the best nurse, so it is impossible not to.”

Yuna cooed at Ilya's response.

As they ate dinner, Shane tried to ease himself into the conversations that they were having. He tried his best not to pick at his food even though his stomach was unsettled with anxiety. They were quick to talk about the Centaurs' performance without Ilya. The consensus was that his absence was a horrible hit to the team but they were still doing fine all things considered. The team had great players and a great coach to match. They certainly weren't going to make it into the playoffs, but that didn't seem to matter as that was never on the table for them this year. However, Shane thought it may be possible in the near future.

While they conversed, Ilya seemed to be perfectly fine at pretending everything was fine, smiling and laughing with ease. It slightly scared Shane to see Ilya doing this with such practiced ease—he didn't want Ilya to feel pressured to act as if everything was perfect around him, even if it were for a good surprise.

Shane placed his hand over Ilya's thigh, partly because he needed some comfort from Ilya and partly because he wanted to remind Ilya that he was here for him, too. In return, Ilya smiled at Shane, eyes crinkling with fondness. Shane knew that if Ilya wasn't incapacitated, he would be quick to reciprocate with placing his hand over Shane's thigh.

Once the dining table was cleared, Shane immediately shuffled towards Ilya's home office, which was never used, to pick up a white gift box with a forest green ribbon wrapped around it. Ilya kept his parents entertained as part of their planned distraction, discussing how excited they were to be heading up to the cottage in a few weeks time.

"What's this?" David asked as Shane set the boxes in front of them.

"We have a late Christmas present for you guys." Shane bit the inside of his cheek.

"It's February, Shane," Yuna teasingly deadpanned, causing Ilya to snicker.

"Well, it was a Christmas present for us so we wanted to share it with you," Shane said, deliberately ignoring Ilya's amusement.

Even though the closest holiday was technically Valentine's Day, there was no way that Shane could give his parents a Valentine's Day gift. The thought about the holiday made Shane worry that his parents might think about what happened between him and Ilya to create a baby, which no one ever needed to know. So, a horrifically late Christmas present was it.

As his parents untied the ribbon, Shane's skin buzzed with fear as hand naturally fell onto his stomach, feeling the curvature of his bump. Shane shot Ilya a nervous look but Ilya only looked inexplicably happy.

"Oh my god." Yuna lifted up the baby-sized jersey. It was an exact replica of Ilya's Centaurs jersey.

Shane had found online that they made jerseys for babies and was elated when there was one for Ilya. Ilya cried immediately upon seeing it and bought two so that they could keep one for themselves.

“Is this really happening?” David replied.

Shane looked at Ilya before they both said yes in unison.

Yuna shot to her feet and hugged the two of them at once, pressing kisses to their temples. “I can’t believe it.”

“Congratulations,” David said with wet eyes.

“Baby is thirteen weeks now and is as big as a lemon,” Ilya said proudly.

“Baby was also a complete surprise to us, but a welcomed one,” Shane added, beaming at Ilya.

“Oh my god,” Yuna repeated. “Wow. My babies are all grown up and are having a baby of their own.”

“I still can’t believe that you’re still together,” Hayden grimaced as he let Shane and Ilya through the front door.

“And I can’t believe that you’re still friends,” Ilya shot back.

“You guys, I thought we were over this,” Shane groaned. “You made so much progress last time.”

Even though his voice sounded normal, Shane could not have felt worse. He nearly puked from anxiety before they left the house because of how badly he wanted tonight to go well. Tonight was more important than Ilya and Hayden’s first meeting, so it was imperative that everything went well and everyone was happy.

“Shane, it’s not my fault you picked the worst person possible for your boyfriend! I accept him as your boyfriend but the jury’s still out for liking him as a person.”

“Funny,” Ilya said flatly. “Liking you as person was never a possibility.”

“Be nice,” Shane scolded Ilya. He made a face that only Ilya knew meant that Shane was threatening was something. Unfortunately for Shane, Ilya was still healing so having sex was not really on the table for them yet. Ilya was already being tortured and was, therefore, cranky and extra ornery towards Hayden.

“Please,” Shane added.

“I will try.”

“Thank you.” Shane squeezed Ilya’s hand.

Hayden retreated into the kitchen as Shane and Ilya lingered in the living room. The kids were glued to the TV as they watched some show called the *Octonauts*. Shane couldn't help but chuckle as he noticed that Arthur had been dressed along with his sisters, wearing one of their purple princess dresses and having their platinum blonde hair extensions messily clipped onto his hair. The little boy was completely unbothered by his attire and was utterly captivated by the underwater adventures happening on the screen.

"So nice to see you guys again." Jackie brightly smiled as she came from the kitchen with Amber strapped to her front.

Shane quickly pivoted to give Jackie a side hug as she tried to envelope him into a hug, which Jackie seemed to notice. "I didn't want to wake her up," Shane explained, hoping that she would buy it.

"Uh-huh," She said flatly before lightly giving Ilya a hug. "Hi Ilya, how are you doing?"

"Hi Jackie. Doing better, thanks. I will be in a sling for a few more weeks."

"Oh I'm sorry to hear that. I'll make sure the kids don't crawl over you then. They can give all of their loving to their Uncle Shane then. Speaking of the kids... Kids, are you guys not even going to acknowledge your Uncle Shane and Uncle Ilya?"

Ilya turned to Shane with a smile. "Uncle Ilya."

"If I'm Uncle Shane, then you have to be Uncle Ilya. It's the law." Shane smiled back.

"What law? There are no laws for boyfriends."

Shane flushed upon hearing his words. While they were only boyfriends on paper, Shane felt like they were so much more than that already. They were mates—life partners.

Like clockwork, the kids scrambled off of the couch and swarmed them. Jackie gave them all a warning to be gentle with Ilya, causing the twins to immediately ask him questions in the most kid-like fashion.

"What's that around your arm?"

"How long do you have to wear that thingy? Can I draw on it?"

"Does your arm have a boo-boo? Does it hurt a lot?"

"Want me to kiss it better? My kisses always help Arthur and Amber. It's like magic."

While Ilya entertained the girls, Shane picked up Arthur with a slight grunt. As he progressed in his pregnancy, he couldn't help but notice how his body was changing. Aside from the obvious, his lower back almost always ached with a dull pain, his chest felt tender, and he just always felt like he was on the edge of being overly emotional—as long as it was an emotion that Shane could feel, he was going to feel it deeply. It was horrible to feel so out of place in his own body.

“I missed you, little man,” Shane said as Arthur immediately wrapped his arms around Shane’s neck.

“Missed you.” Arthur’s breath fanned against Shane’s neck as he spoke.

It felt different to be holding Arthur now that Shane was pregnant. It was hard to explain exactly what changed but it was a good change. Somehow, he just felt more connected to the child in his arms. Maybe it was because he could imagine that in a few years time, this would be him holding his own child.

“Did you and your sisters play dress up?” Shane ran his hand over Arthur’s head, feeling the contrast between Arthur’s natural, silky hair and the plastic extensions.

“I’m Rapunzel!” He eagerly replied.

“Yeah, Arthur is Rapunzel, I’m Belle, and Jade’s Tiana,” Ruby explained right before the girls hugged Shane, arms wrapping around his torso and Arthur’s dangling legs.

Then, time seemed to stop. In loud and clearly articulated words, Jade screamed with all her might: “Uncle Shane, you’re getting fat!”

“Yeah, you have a tummy like Mommy!” Ruby said, equally as loud.

Shane froze underneath their touch. Ilya had the same dumbfounded expression that Shane probably had on his face. They were going to say something to the family after dinner when the kids were a little bit worn out. Of course they forgot to account for the kids and their unpredictable and unfiltered mouths.

“Ruby and Jade Pike!” Jackie exclaimed. “You cannot just call your Uncle Shane fat. That is not nice. Apologize to him right now.”

In unison, the girls immediately apologized: “Sorry, Uncle Shane.”

“What are you sorry for?” Jackie asked.

“For calling you fat. Was not nice.”

It was frightening to see how the girls spoke concurrently as if they had rehearsed their apology beforehand, but Shane gladly accepted. “Thank you, girls. I appreciate your apology.” Shane looked at Ilya, who nodded in agreement. “There’s um, actually a reason for that. Your Uncle Ilya and I are having a baby.”

“I knew it! The moment you puked at our house, I just knew it! Congratulations!” Jackie exclaimed in utter glee before giving them both proper hugs.

There was a loud metallic crash from the kitchen, so startlingly loud that it awoke Amber. As she started to cry, Hayden scrambled towards them at lightening speed with a pale face. The girls’ faces contorted with confusion as Jackie led them elsewhere with a crying Amber. She also took Arthur from Shane’s arms before leaving.

“You’re pregnant?” Hayden asked.

Shane’s heartbeat quickened. He didn’t know how Hayden was going to react. Even though the news was shocking, Shane hoped that Hayden would accept it well. After all, he was one of the very few good friends that Shane had in his life—he was Shane’s best friend.

Ilya’s warm hand found its way around Shane’s back, holding his waist in support.

“Don’t you guys think this is a bit fast?” Concern was etched into Hayden’s face as he stood with crossed arms.

Shane ignored how deeply Ilya breathed beside him. “Yes, the baby was a complete surprise to us and we haven’t been together for that long, but we’ve been in love since university, Hayden. I can’t think of any better person to spend the rest of my life and raise a baby with.”

“Since university?” Hayden’s blue eyes had never looked more fiery.

“Since first year,” Ilya confirmed.

“How come I’ve never heard you talk about him until recently?”

“It’s complicated, Hayd.” Shane gave himself a second to calm down and compose himself. “But you know me—you know how much I’ve struggled before and how much I got in the way of myself. A lot of that struggle was because I kept denying myself of Ilya. Please try to understand.”

Hayden pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. “I really am trying, Shane. I’m just worried about you, man. That’s all.”

“I appreciate that, but you really don’t have to worry. I’m in good hands with Ilya.”

“Big, strong Russian hands,” Ilya grunted with amusement as he tightened his hold around Shane’s waist.

“Dude, you only have one functioning hand right now,” Hayden said with exasperation, but Shane could tell that he wasn’t as tense. “Do not get me riled up when I’m trying to be nice to you.”

“It is the collarbone that is broken, not the hand. Still, with one hand, I’m taking very good care of Shane,” Ilya replied as Shane nodded in agreement.

Hayden took a deep breath, one that seemed to last for several seconds too long. “Okay. Okay! Congratulations, you guys. I’m happy for you.”

Shane immediately wrapped Hayden up in a hug. Hayden’s arms immediately reciprocated with a slight squeeze and a pat on Shane’s back.

“Thank you, Hayd. I really mean it. Your opinion means everything to me.”

“Me too, bud. So, wow, there’s really a baby in there, huh?” Hayden asked after they pulled away, probably having had felt Shane’s bump in the contact.

“There is.” Shane beamed.

Afterwards, dinner with the Pikes went as smoothly as possible. There was a little bit of conflict during dessert time as Jade accidentally spilt melted ice cream over Ruby’s dress. But Jackie and Hayden, the seasoned parents they were, quickly replaced her dress with another princess’s dress before she could have a full on meltdown. Shane went home with a full heart, and Ilya returned with a sling covered with every single sticker the children had in their collection, heart equally full.

Even though he had been witness to Shane’s talent many, many times, Ilya was still amazed every single time Shane stepped into the kitchen. Today, Shane had really pulled out all the stops and cooked up a feast for the entire team. There was a seven-layer dip, hummus, potato skins, jalapeño poppers, nachos, fried chicken sliders as well as pulled pork sliders, and more. Everything was made completely from scratch. Ilya thought it would be funny if Shane made something on the grill but Shane insisted that the barbecue was all for Bood—he wasn’t going to ruin it for Bood.

Shane spent three days preparing for the party. He would come home from work and immediately start working on components of dishes. Ilya worried that Shane was overworking himself, as he had seen how tired Shane had been lately due to the pregnancy. Still, Shane insisted that he was fine and wanted to do it. The party was important to Shane because the team was important to Ilya, so he wanted to make a good, official impression as Ilya’s boyfriend. Plus, Ilya really couldn’t complain since Shane being in the kitchen—being completely in his element—was very sexy to Ilya.

“Can you taste this for me? I think something’s off.” Shane pouted as he held up a small spoonful of coleslaw for Ilya to taste.

“It tastes perfectly fine to me,” Ilya replied after chewing.

“Really?” Shane took another bite and grimaced.

“I think Baby’s making Daddy’s tastebuds confused.”

Ilya couldn’t help but reach out and rub Shane’s belly. He loved how much rounder it had become lately. It filled him with delight knowing that he and Shane had a baby on the way. It was also an added bonus that it pained Ilya much less now to move around, which meant that he was able to touch Shane more than before.

“Maybe we should come up with a nickname for this little one. Constantly calling them ‘Baby’ is a little weird,” Shane mused.

“*Potato*.” It was the first thing Ilya could think of. He already liked calling Shane whatever noun he could think of, so the baby, by extension, would get the same treatment.

“Potato? You want to compare your baby to a tuber in the ground?”

“Hm. I will think about it. Do you have ideas?”

“No. If thinking of a nickname is this hard, I don’t know how we’ll manage with coming up with a real name.”

Ilya kissed Shane and watched as a blush formed underneath his freckles. Even after all these years, Ilya was utterly obsessed with Shane’s freckles and couldn’t get enough of them. He couldn’t wait until spring and summer when they will turn darker and multiply.

“We will manage, *my beloved*. We will come up with the perfect name. Maybe we can call them *baby*—*malyshka* for now.”

“*Malyshka*,” Shane tested the name. “I like it. *Malyshka*, you’re going to be officially meeting your papa’s team today! They’ll be coming any minute now.”

Ilya kissed Shane’s temple before dropping his knees. After pushing Shane’s sweater out of the way, Ilya kissed his stomach and rested his forehead against the bump. He could stay in this position forever. Shane instantly started combing his fingers through Ilya’s hair.

“*Malyshka*, we will tell everyone about you today. They will be so happy to hear about you.”

“I love you,” Shane said once Ilya rose to his feet. His twinkling eyes were framed with faint dark circles.

“I love you, *my Shanya*.”

Within minutes, the Hollander-Rozanov household was bustling with the entire Centaurs team. Laughter and chatter rang clear through the halls. There were more beers and ciders than anyone could ever need in a lifetime. Ilya never thought he would be able to see his house with so many people in it.

Although Shane was initially nervous, Ilya watched as Shane interact with the Centaurs, gradually melting into easy conversation with a smile on his face. The rest of the team, who weren’t able to visit Ilya at the hospital, were surprised to see Shane but easily accepted him as Ilya’s boyfriend. Having Leaf + Sake as a staple for the team really helped them familiarize themselves with Shane, Ilya supposed.

Ilya was happy to see everyone getting along. He liked seeing how awestruck Haas and the younger players were to be inside “the legend” Ilya Rozanov’s house. It amusing to watch the WAGs practically walk their towering partners on leashes as soon as they got too rowdy from excitement. His face wore a smile as he watched his teammates fawn over Shane and his brilliant cooking. But, Ilya felt close to nothing in his body. He was happy, yes, but he didn’t feel it. He felt pretty fucking empty. This was supposed to be one of the most happiest

moments in his life and he felt nothing. It was like his brain had the concept of happiness but his body lost the signal to feel it.

Ilya had talked to Galina about this and she nodded with her usual understanding look as she listened. She called it depersonalization, and Ilya hated it—he hated that such a thing even existed and hated the fact that he felt it so deeply.

After escaping a light-hearted conversation with Bood about the proper way to cook pulled-pork, Shane found his way back to Ilya and settled by his side. “Are you ready to tell them, Papa?” Shane whispered.

Ilya stiffly nodded before huffing out a preparatory breath. He straightened out his shoulders and fixed his mother’s crucifix. “Listen up, everybody! The rumours are true: Shane Hollander and I are in love.”

The Centaurs immediately burst into laughter, as if what Ilya said wasn’t the most obvious thing in the world already.

“We are so in love that the world decided to gift us with a baby. Shane is pregnant!”

“Surprise!” Shane laughed, hugging Ilya’s side.

The volume in the house was astronomical, bursting with congratulations coming from every mouth. Soon, everyone was swarming around the two of them.

“Congratulations, you guys! I was going to say, if you aren’t going to marry Shane, one of us will have to. I’m sure one of the guys will be more than happy to do so.” Wyatt patted Ilya’s back.

Ilya smiled in response. Spending the rest of his life with Shane was always the plan.

When the party resumed to normalcy and everyone settled into their separate conversations, Ilya found himself climbing up the stairs and walking to their bedroom. He sat on the edge of their bed and almost hunched over when pain shot through his side. Immediately, Ilya shot upright and somehow managed to irritate his collarbone at the same time.

“*Fucking hell,*” Ilya hissed. His hand clenched around the scratchy material of his sling. He hadn’t felt this much pain from his injuries in a while.

Without any warning, Ilya burst into tears. Hot, raging tears streamed down his face.

If this is what he was like when surrounded by friends and loved ones, what was he going to be like when the baby came? Was he going to just watch as his baby grow up in front of his eyes and feel nothing? Was he going to be as emotionally absent as his father was?

When they had announced the pregnancy to Shane’s parents, Yuna’s words clung to Ilya for days—Yuna had called him her baby as if Ilya were her real son. Ilya had felt unbelievably warm but he didn’t feel as happy as he felt like he should have. He finally had the mother figure in his life that he had been craving for since he was twelve, and Ilya just felt happy.

That was it. He should have been elated, relieved, or some other fucking emotion that he could feel deep down in his bones. Not this surface-level bullshit he was confined to felt.

Ilya just wanted to enjoy his life. He knew he deserved none of the things that he had—not Shane, not the party he threw for Ilya, and certainly not the baby they were welcoming into the world—but Ilya thought he could at least be just selfish enough to bask in the life he thought he would never be able to have.

“I thought I would find you—hey what’s wrong?” The mattress sunk underneath Shane’s weight as he sat next to Ilya.

“Nothing.”

“This is not nothing, Ilya. *Tell me.*”

Ilya couldn’t bring himself to look at Shane. He turned his head away and fixed his gaze at the door as tears continued to flow.

“You can tell me, Ilya. We’re a team.” Shane placed his hand on Ilya’s shoulder. His warmth immediately seeped into Ilya’s skin.

“I’m sorry,” Ilya finally choked out.

“What are you sorry for? You have nothing to be sorry for, *Ilyusha.*” Gently, Shane placed his hand on Ilya’s chin and guided his face so that Ilya was looking directly into Shane’s warm brown eyes.

“You threw an amazing party and I couldn’t enjoy it properly. I am crying upstairs like a child.”

“You are not crying like a child, and there is no proper way to enjoy a party.” Shane smiled sweetly. “If anything, I only came up here because it was getting way too loud for me. The Centaurs are all great people but they wouldn’t know an inside voice if it hit them in the face. I could be talking into a megaphone down there and I still wouldn’t be able to hear myself.”

Ilya coughed out a wet laugh. “I am scared.”

“What are you scared about?”

“I feel... I don’t know—English is too hard for me right now.”

“*Then talk to me however you feel comfortable,*” Shane replied in Russian as he wiped away Ilya’s tears. His accent was nearly gone now and could easily be mistaken for a native Russian.

“*You are too good to me.*” Ilya weakly smiled.

“*You are the same to me too. I’m spoiled rotten by you everyday. Malyshka too.*”

Ilya placed his hand on Shane's stomach. He needed to be strong for the two of them—even if strong looked like being utterly ridiculous and vulnerable right now.

“I feel like I am not really here. I am happy but I feel like I should be so much more than that—I should be bouncing off of the walls and screaming to the world how perfect my life is. But... I can't feel it. It's the depression, Shanya. Just when I thought I was winning, it comes creeping back in.”

As Shane's eyes began to water, the cracks in Ilya's heart began to deepen. He never wanted to make Shane miserable.

“You are winning, Ilya. Every single day that you wake up and live your life is a day that you win—it doesn't matter how you do it. Maybe the dosage for your SSRIs isn't high enough or you could go see Galina more frequently. I could even go with you, if you'd like. Whatever to make you feel better.”

Ignoring the searing pain in his sides, Ilya reached for Shane, who quickly climbed onto his lap. They kissed deeply and tenderly.

For Shane and their *Malyshka*, Ilya was willing to do whatever it took to get better.

Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Shane and Ilya both learn that as long as they have each other they can face anything together.

Ilya's phone incessantly buzzed on his nightstand. Shane groaned as he flipped over to gently shake Ilya awake. Shane didn't want to be awake right now. Last night's dinner service was insane and his lower back and feet were killing him the entire time. They certainly weren't feeling any better now either. Not to mention that he started getting horrendous heartburn alongside his usual nausea.

Ilya mumbled something incoherent with closed eyes before lazily pawing at his nightstand. "Hello? Harris, please slow down. I cannot understand so early in the morning." Ilya put his phone on speakerphone before lying on his back again.

"Sorry—right. I'm so sorry to be calling you so early in the morning but have you been on social media lately?" Harris said quickly.

"No—why, Harris?" Sleep was still heavy in Ilya's voice.

Shane immediately sat up, ignoring the throbbing pain in his body. His heart was pounding way too quickly for him to acknowledge the pain. Every possible scenario ran through his mind as he awaited for Harris's answer. Each possibility made him feel sick.

"There have been photos circulating online of you and Shane. There are ones of Shane and you in the hospital and ones of you walking in the hospital parking lot together after being discharged. I'm so sorry."

Shane shot up and ran to the bathroom as vomit rose up in his throat. Immediately, he emptied the contents of his stomach into the toilet and his eyes watered from the sheer force in which it happened. It had been so long since he had such vicious morning sickness and it was just as bad as he remembered.

As soon as the nausea settled down, Shane's mind started buzzing again. He didn't regret going to the hospital to be there for Ilya at all—he needed to be there. He just didn't expect that the world would expose them at such a critically vulnerable time of Ilya's life. Now, the everyone was going to be inspecting their lives and try to play detective.

Shane put his head between his knees as he sat on the cold tiles of their bathroom floor. It was a difficult position to be in since his bump got in the way, but curling up like this made him feel better.

Nausea started coursing through his body in crashing waves again.

Shane should have known better by now—nothing ever went according to his plans. He should have known that because everything up until now went too smoothly between him and Ilya that something bad was bound to happen.

“*My beloved*, are you okay?” Ilya knelt beside Shane and brushed some of Shane’s sweat-matted hair away from his forehead.

Shane hummed in response, afraid of what would happen if he opened his mouth.

“It’s okay. Everything will be okay.”

“You don’t know that,” Shane said with his hand covering his mouth.

“No, I know so. You are safe and healthy. *Malyska* is also safe and healthy. And I am too. Everything is okay,” Ilya spoke with the calmness of a monk and pulled Shane into a hug, not caring about Shane’s ill state at all.

Ilya had been cleared to stop wearing his sling and everything was officially as right as rain as of a few days ago. Hewas just prohibited from doing any heavy lifting or hockey for the next month.

“I’m scared of what will happen,” Shane admitted. “What will happen to you and your career?”

Shane was only confident that what happened to him in his youth would not happen to Ilya. Firstly, no one would have the gall to start a fist-fight with Ilya and think they would win. Secondly, the world was different now. The NHL already had an active and openly gay hockey player. Still, worries swarmed in his mind—everything could come crashing down in a moment’s notice. Ilya’s entire life’s dedication could poof away just as quickly as Shane’s did.

“As long as I have you two, I am okay.”

Shane stopped himself from kissing Ilya. There was no way that he was going to kiss Ilya with morning breath and the lingering tastes of last night’s dinner in his mouth. Instead, he settled his weight against Ilya’s chest.

“Are you not the slightest bit scared?”

“A little, yes.” Ilya shrugged. “But we didn’t do anything wrong. If anything, I am angry that people took pictures of us without us knowing.”

Underneath the several looming layers of nausea and anxiety, Shane was furious. For the second time in his life, he had been outed against his will. This time, he had been outed to the entire world. Apparently being omega and gay was just groundbreaking news that everyone felt entitled to know right away. Ilya had been outed too, so Shane was furious on his behalf as well.

After brushing their teeth, Shane and Ilya sat at their dining table to look at the damage that had been done. Shane protectively held onto his stomach as they scrolled through Instagram. Just like Harris said, there were plenty of pictures from the hospital. Ones of Shane hunched over in the waiting room, the two of them in Ilya's hospital room, and the two of them walking to Shane's car. There were even blurry and extremely zoomed in photos of Shane and his parents wearing their Rozanov jerseys at the game. People were commenting about Shane's restaurant and how they are an openly queer-friendly place. Netizens even dug up Shane's old hockey videos.

Aside from the completely invasive nature of the entire debacle, the views of Ilya and Shane were mixed. It was all but unanimously agreed that they were in a relationship—it was hard to deny the romantic nature of their relationship considering they were holding hands in half of the photos. The differing opinions were about whether or not it was okay to have these photos released to the public. Shane was shocked to see that any fans felt they had the right to know about Ilya's personal life.

Not being able to sit any longer, Shane got up and started making Ilya some coffee. As the moka pot bubbled on the stove, Shane gave himself some time to breathe and calm down for the baby. He wasn't as anxiety-ridden as he was when he first heard the news, but he was nowhere near normal.

Suddenly, something fluttered in his stomach, making Shane freeze. He waited with bated breath, hoping to feel it again. It did, just slightly lighter this time.

"Ilya," Shane whimpered as his hand rubbed over where he felt the flutter.

Instantly, Ilya shot up to his feet and ran over. "What's wrong? Are you okay? Is *Malyshka* okay?"

"I think I just felt *Malyshka* move for the first time."

Ilya's face immediately softened. "Oh, sweetheart. *Malyshka is getting big and strong, aren't you?*"

It was just fantastical thinking but Shane replaced his hand with Ilya's hand, hoping that he would be able to feel something too. Shane himself had barely felt anything at all. Still, Ilya looked at Shane and his belly with nothing but adoration.

Maybe Ilya was right. Who cared about what was happening in the world when he had Ilya and their baby? Realizing this only made Shane worry slightly less about Ilya's future in the NHL. Ilya was probably already on rocky ground considering that he was on the Injured Reserve List for his brutal injuries. Even so, the three of them were going to make things work.

As Ilya spoke on the phone with his agent Farah, Shane's phone rung. He quickly finished the last bite of his oatmeal before picking up.

"I called as soon as I saw. Are you okay, Shane?" Rose's voice was rife with worry.

"Saw what? I'm not sure what you're referring to." Shane knew he shouldn't have with everything going on, but he couldn't help joke with Rose.

"The posts—oh Shane. I'm so sorry, you shouldn't have found out about this from me."

"I'm kidding, Rose. We saw them earlier this morning after the Centaurs' social media manager called to inform us."

"Excuse me, I'm pretty sure I called Shane Hollander. Who am I speaking to?"

"This is Shane Hollander speaking." Shane huffed out a laugh.

"How are you not panicking? The Shane I knew would have thrown up from panic already and would be spiralling as we speak. Are you okay? Baby too?"

With the way that Rose's schedule worked, she wouldn't have been able to see Shane and Ilya until Shane was almost due. So, as a compromise, they sent Rose a package with baby items and faceted her as she opened the box. She immediately started sobbing with joy and was absolutely elated to be an aunt.

"And I did, but I'm feeling fine now. *Malyshka* is completely fine too. In fact, I just felt them move for the first time this morning."

Thinking about it now, Shane was oddly very calm. Rose was right. If this had happened even just a year ago, Shane would have had a panic attack that sent him straight to the ER. Everything was different now—Shane had someone standing by his side who made sure that he stayed on his feet wherever they went.

If he had to be completely honest, there was a minuscule part of him that felt relieved that his and Ilya's relationship was out in the open now. There was no need for them to hide anymore—they didn't have to have their date nights in secret or refrain from touching each other in public anymore.

"Aw, Shane. That's amazing. So you're really fine?"

"I think so. Ilya and I are just angry that it happened and we're just waiting to see how the league will react. His agent seems optimistic that everything will be fine since Scott Hunter came out so publicly and received lots of support."

"Yeah, Hunter did a lot of heavy lifting there. Is there anything that I could do for you two?"

"You calling is more than enough. Thank you for being such a great friend, Rose."

"The *best* friend."

“I’m not arguing with that. Now, can you tell me about this new movie you’re in? What’s this about Rose Landry being an FBI agent and *still* getting kidnapped?”

“Ugh don’t remind me. I need to find new roles to play. I cannot keep playing a weak damsel in distress.”

“You’re not weak in this one—you’re an FBI agent.”

“Of course, how could I forget? But I really mean it, Shane. I need to find my new niche.”

Shane and Rose kept talking and chatting as if they never left university, and time and geography didn’t separate the two. Worry slipped away with each word exchanged.

The rest of the day passed by in an inexplicable blur. The Pikes brought over food for Ilya and Shane to eat so they wouldn’t have to worry about cooking for the next two days. Svetlana called and threatened to personally hunt down the individuals who took the pictures and hit them with legal action. The Centaurs’ group chat on Ilya’s phone absolutely blew up, with everyone showing their unwavering support for the couple. Coach Wiebe came to the house and talked to Ilya to assure Ilya that he was on their side and would help them navigate these trying times. Lastly, Shane’s parents came by to visit and Yuna went into full momager mode, critiquing what happened and planning what could be done next.

By the end of the day, Shane and Ilya could only lay on the couch, thinking about all of the support they didn’t fully realize they had in their lives. Ilya felt like this was all a dream, especially with Shane lying on his chest and fiddling with Ilya’s fingers as they relaxed.

“Are you really okay after all that happened today?” Shane asked.

“Yes.”

Ilya couldn’t be more confident about his answer. He wasn’t even angry anymore. As far as he was concerned, he could never return to the world of hockey after today and still be okay. All that mattered to him was with him in the living room right now.

Shane craned his head up to look at Ilya. “Maybe we can do what Mom said? We can post the response that Farah crafted on Instagram but we could also announce the pregnancy to get some sense of control?”

“Okay.” Shane could ask Ilya anything right now and he’d still agree.

The two of them sat up from the couch with Ilya helping Shane on his feet. They decided that it would probably be best if they went into the kitchen to do what they had planned.

They leaned Ilya’s phone against a fancy bottle of Italian olive oil and posed so that Ilya was standing behind Shane, Shane’s stomach was revealed, and both of them had their hands on

his belly. As the timer on the camera counted down, Ilya nuzzled his nose against Shane's scent gland. He didn't care that the photo wouldn't show anything but Shane's belly and their hands—this was Ilya's happy place.

After a few photos were taken, Ilya and Shane stood in the kitchen, still in each other's arms. They soaked in the peace and quiet of their home. Shane turned around and rested his head against Ilya's shoulder. His bump was quite a bit bigger now, so Ilya smiled as Shane's stomach settled against his own torso.

"Hi," Ilya said as he traced his finger over Shane's freckles.

"Hi," Shane replied shyly.

Ilya wrapped his arms around Shane and started humming. He couldn't recall the name of the song but its slow melody was forever engraved in his heart—it was the very tune that his mother always hummed when she was doing monotonous, everyday things. On rare occasions when Ilya couldn't sleep, she would also sing this song to lull him to sleep. He never allowed himself to search up the song for fear that once he heard the original, his mom's voice would forever be lost to him.

Slowly, Ilya took took Shane's hand and waist and slowly rocked them along to the beat of his song.

"What are you doing?" Shane buried his face in Ilya's neck, a blush rising up his neck.

"I'm dancing with *my beloved*."

"I don't know how to dance."

"Yes, you do. You're doing it with me right now. Isn't that right, *Malyshka*?"

"You two are going to be a dangerous pair one day. I can already see you ganging up on me."

"Yes, we will smother Daddy with our love all the time and give him surprise kiss attacks," Ilya said before planting several kisses upon Shane's face without ever stopping their dance.

Shane laughed. "I love you."

"*I love you*."

Ilya didn't know if he would have been able to handle today as well as he did without the help of Shane. When the sky fell this morning, his world didn't end because Shane had held up the sky and hung the sun, moon, and stars for Ilya. Shane shielded him from everything and gave him power to face everything head on.

Everything he had right now—all of Ilya's happiness—was all due to the man who bashfully danced with him in their kitchen and flared up in pink when he accidentally stepped on Ilya's toes.

Ilya wanted to remember this moment forever. He had been on the mend again, all due to Shane's support, a little extra medicine, and more assistance from Galina. He took in how perfectly Shane's calloused hands felt in his own; how Shane was scared shitless to be dancing but still smiled without restraint; how their little baby *Malyshka* was squished in between them as they swayed in their half-lit kitchen; how easily Ilya smiled and laughed at Shane's bashfulness; how they could finally be together after all of these years apart.

He needed to remember every detail so that when he could feel the darkness creep back in again, Ilya could remember just how perfect his life was and hang on.

Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Shane and Ilya go to the cottage.

Chapter Notes

This is not a drill. We are going to the cottage!

Finally, after several weeks of postponing, Shane and Ilya were going to their family cottage. In light of everything that has happened recently, Shane thought it would be good for them to have some privacy. Hayden agreed too as the restaurant seemed to be swarming to paparazzi and crazed fans lately. It was definitely not safe for Shane to be there.

Ilya drove as Shane sat in the passenger seat, trying to ignore the pain in his lower back. At twenty weeks along now, he couldn't take any pain-relief medication and it was killing him—he couldn't take any pain-relief since he found out he was pregnant, but the pain wasn't as bad or as insistent as then.

“Are you okay, *my oyster*?” Ilya said, suddenly noticing Shane slightly raise himself from his seat.

“Yeah, that bump just really hurt my back.” Shane winced again as Ilya swerved around a pothole.

“I can pull over, if you want. We can take a break.”

“No, no. It's okay. I'm fine. Please keep driving. We're almost there anyways.”

Ilya shot him a nervous glance but did as he was told.

After thirty more gruelling minutes, they finally pulled up to the familiar sight of the cottage. It was definitely showing a bit of its wear and tear, but it was still home to Shane. Ilya helped Shane to the door, insisting that he guide Shane to help him avoid slipping on the ice, and ran back to the car to retrieve their belongings and groceries.

It had been years since Shane last came back, but everything was just as he remembered. There was the old couch where he and his dad used to stay up late to finish their puzzles, the oak dining table where games nights got too competitive, the small kitchen where he and his

mom used to cook together, and much more. The cottage was filled with nothing but fond memories for Shane and he couldn't wait to create more with Ilya.

"That is everything, I think," Ilya huffed as he gently placed their bags on the floor.

"Thank you for doing that." Shane kissed Ilya's cheek. "Once we put everything away, I'll show you around."

"I would love nothing more."

The two of them only managed to put the groceries away before they were both too eager to do anything else. Hand-in-hand, Shane showed Ilya every single room and recounted some childhood memories that occurred in said rooms. Ilya watched Shane with wide eyes as Shane spoke, listening to every detail.

"And this is my room—our room now."

The room was on the smaller side and it seemed even smaller now that there was a queen-sized bed stuffed in it. Once Shane had hit his teens, it was abundantly clear to him and his parents that it would be impossible to fit a hockey player comfortably in a twin bed. There weren't too many decorations in the room, just a couple of books (mostly about hockey) and a picture of him and his father holding up a large rainbow trout they caught on a previous visit.

Ilya immediately pounced on the bed and gestured for Shane to join him.

"Really? Is that the first thing you want to do?" Shane laughed despite his own feelings.

"No, pervert. Lie down so I can give you a massage," Ilya said with a sincere smile.

"Okay, fine."

Shane lied down on the bed with a pillow cushioning the areas around his stomach. His stomach wasn't huge yet but it still wasn't the most comfortable to lie on it. Doing so also made Shane feel terribly guilty about squishing the baby.

With firm hands, Ilya massaged the tension away from Shane's lower back. As Ilya's thumbs slowly made their way down Shane's spine, unspeakable sounds flowed from Shane's mouth. Shane was too comfortable to care about the sounds he made—he had never felt relief like this before.

"Oh my god, Ilya," Shane sighed into his pillow, earning a hearty chuckle from Ilya.

"It feels good, yes?"

"You are great with your hands."

Shane almost blacked out from pleasure as Ilya's hands found their way to his tailbone. There was constant tension and pain there and Ilya seemed to make it disappear within seconds.

“Wait, why did you stop?” Shane asked as Ilya’s fingers vanished from his back.

“Patience, *my beloved*. Let’s flip you over so I can massage your feet.”

Slowly, Shane flipped over with some difficulty, and Ilya immediately took Shane’s socks off and got to work. Just like before, it felt heavenly. Shane’s feet were almost always in a perpetual state of swollenness now.

“Have I ever told you that you’re my favourite person?” Shane melted into Ilya’s touch.

“You could mention it some more,” Ilya said with a slight flush.

“You are—I mean it. *Malyshka* is so lucky to have you as their papa, and I just know you’ll be their favourite person too.”

It was almost funny how Shane was worried that he would never be able to connect to his baby months ago. Now, it was like *Malyshka* was a part of him, even if Shane couldn’t feel them as strongly as he had hoped.

Ilya climbed on top of Shane to give him a kiss, making sure to support his weight on his arms so that he wouldn’t crush Shane. Shane eagerly kissed Ilya back, swiping his tongue across Ilya’s lips. Ilya easily reciprocated by inserting his tongue into Shane’s mouth, tasting and exploring every part of him. Even if it wasn’t Ilya’s intention to start anything earlier, Shane had never wanted to have Ilya so badly right now. The massage was great but wasn’t enough—he needed more of Ilya.

Slowly, Ilya moved down to Shane’s scent gland. Shane instantly started shuddering as Ilya’s teeth scraped against the delicate skin. He remembered that when Ilya had marked him, he nearly came just from the blinding sensation. Now sucking Shane’s gland, Ilya’s hands traveled all over Shane’s body, feeling the new, developing curves.

Shane sharply breathed in as Ilya’s fingers closed around his nipple. He seemed to be extra sensitive around there nowadays.

“Does that feel good?” Ilya asked, momentarily stopping.

“Yeah, it’s just a lot.” Shane nodded.

More gently this time, Ilya started to apply more pressure around Shane’s nipple as he captured Shane’s mouth once more. Shane involuntarily bucked his hips at the incredible sensations coursing through his body. He also gripped at the hem of Ilya’s shirt, trying to pull it off.

“Off,” Shane gasped. “I want everything off.”

At lightening speeds, Ilya tore off his clothes and helped Shane take off his too. His weight immediately settled back on top of Shane and he returned to doing what he was doing prior, as if he was never interrupted. Shane wrapped his legs around Ilya, trying to pull him closer and give him the hint that he needed to be penetrated. Right now. It was already hell for both

of them to not have their usual intercourse while Ilya was healing. Now, Shane needed Ilya to compensate for their lack of activity.

“Ilya, please.”

Not needing Shane to beg this time, Ilya tapped Shane’s legs to signal him to let go. “On your knees.”

With the grace of a baby giraffe, Shane got on all fours and waited with anticipation as Ilya repositioned himself. A moan escaped his mouth as Ilya parted his cheeks and swiped his tongue across. Just as hungry as Shane, Ilya eagerly worked his tongue into Shane. He even seemed to be getting drunk off of Shane’s slick with how he groaned in delight as he ate Shane out. Shane couldn’t help but push himself against Ilya’s face, hoping that he would go into Shane even more deeply.

Shane nearly cried in delight when Ilya started inserting his fingers. The baby was making him more sensitive, but they were definitely making Shane louder too. Ilya seemed to be happy with the praise that he was receiving from Shane.

Finally, after what seemed like forever, Ilya aligned himself against Shane’s hole and slowly pushed in. In unison, they both groaned out of sheer pleasure. After all this time, Shane still couldn’t get over how good Ilya felt inside him without any protection. He was going to miss this once the baby was here. There was no way he was going to have sex with Ilya without both birth control and condoms after the baby was here. He wasn’t ready for another one yet.

“Is okay?” Ilya panted.

“More than okay. Move, please.”

As Ilya repeatedly thrust into Shane, Shane lowered himself onto his elbows. He felt Ilya so deeply that he felt like Ilya could start rearranging his organs or jostle the baby. Ilya held onto Shane’s hips more firmly as he quickened his pace. Slack-jawed, Shane rode the high of all of the pleasure coursing through his body and started to stroke himself.

“Shane, are you—I’m going to soon.”

“Right there will you.”

Shane focused on how hard Ilya was pounding into him and how hard he was breathing because of Shane. He clenched around Ilya as Ilya’s moves became more forceful yet sloppy. Soon, they were both coming, nearly in unison. Most of Shane’s cum went onto his belly, which he was grateful for since he didn’t want to dirty the sheets already.

“Bathroom is out in the hallway, to the left,” Shane sighed as he felt the mattress dip.

Soon, Ilya returned with a warm and wet wash cloth and gently wiped Shane off. Shane almost purred in delight as Ilya gently wiped the cum from his sensitive entrance.

“That was quite the introduction to the cottage, wasn’t it?” Shane laughed.

It was really too bad that they came to the cottage in March. There wasn't much for them to do. They couldn't enjoy the water or bask in the sunlight as they would in the summer. If it were still winter, they could enjoy the snow and do some more winter-appropriate activities. As it stood, the cottage in March was absolutely covered in melting slush in the day and frozen ice in the night. Shane didn't mind this as much as he normally would have—he knew that they would probably come back in the spring before the baby was born and then probably once every year from then on.

Ilya, on the other hand, was simply happy. He didn't seem to care about anything but being here with Shane in his childhood cottage. Currently, he was wandering around the house and was becoming increasingly moved by traces of Shane's childhood. Everything seemed to be a wonder to Ilya.

"Shane, is this yours?" Shane froze but melted once he saw Ilya holding up his old skates. Just the one skate was tinier than Ilya's hand.

"Yeah, I can't remember how old I was when I wore them though."

"Probably older than you were in the photo your dad gave me for Christmas," Ilya cooed. "*Malyshka* will definitely have even smaller skates than these. They will be on the ice with their Papa and Daddy as soon as they can walk."

"Speaking of *Malyshka*, would you like to join me so that we can find out whether they are a boy or a girl?" Shane grinned as he held up the envelope that their doctor had given.

He already had to exercise all of his patience to not open it already—his heart was pounding against his ribs from excitement.

Shane and Ilya already discussed the the gender of their baby several times. Each time, the consensus was that as long as *Malyshka* was happy and healthy, their gender didn't matter. Either way, Shane and Ilya were going to show them the ice and how exhilarating it can be to glide across it with a hockey stick in hand. If they didn't care for hockey, that was okay too but the family was at least going to try it together first.

Ilya immediately hopped over the couch and joined Shane, leaving Shane's baby skate delicately placed on the coffee table. "And then we can finally start coming up with names for *Malyshka*." Ilya absentmindedly reached out to touch Shane's stomach.

"I can't wait. We need to keep in mind that this baby's name is going to end with 'Ilyich Hollander-Rozanov' or 'Ilyinichna Hollander-Rozanova.' Either way, this kid is going to be very Russian."

"You want our baby to have my name?" An endearing pout settled on Ilya's face. Shane always thought that Ilya's dichotomy was as stark as it was impressive.

“Of course I do. *Malyshka* has the best papa in the entire world.”

“You really know your Russian.” A smug grin wormed its way onto Ilya’s face.

“I’m in love with a Russian. It would be a disservice to my *Ilyusha* if I didn’t know this.” Shane’s face was warm as he admitted this.

“If we have a girl, I would like to just keep it Rozanov. Is that okay with you?”

“Whatever you want—I mean it.” Shane handed Ilya the envelop. “Whenever you are ready, Papa.

Ilya took a steadying breath before opening the envelope. In it was only a slip of paper with the doctor’s sloppy handwriting. There was just one word: Boy.

“We’re having a boy!” Shane immediately felt his eyes water as he tightly hugged Ilya.

“*My little Malyshka is a boy.*” Ilya engulfed Shane in his arms before kissing him. “Thank you, Shane. I love you and *Malyshka* so much.”

“Me too, *Ilyusha*. *I love you two so much.*”

Neither of them refrained themselves from crying. Their faces were both wet with tears as they held each other for several moments. This was all becoming so real. They were going to have a little baby boy together—a baby boy who they already loved and cherished so much.

Shane rubbed his belly, trying to imagine what it would be like in four months time to hold *Malyshka* in their arms. He already couldn’t wait, but he could wait four months if that meant that the baby could continue to grow and develop safely.

“What do you think about August? August Ilyich Hollander-Rozanov.” Ilya’s features were still rosy from crying as he spoke.

“Are you thinking about August because that’s when the baby is due?” Shane laughed, thinking about how pure Ilya’s thought was.

“Oh, I did not think about that. Maybe not August then.”

“What about Viktor? Hmm wait no, that sounds like an old man.”

“Viktor has a very cute nickname,” Ilya hummed as he entertained Shane’s idea. “Vitya or Vityusha.”

“I don’t think that suits *Malyshka*.”

“I think you’re right,” Ilya agreed as he smoothed his hand over Shane’s stomach.

“*Malyshka, can you tell your Daddy and Papa what your name is?*”

Shane laughed as Ilya placed his ear against Shane’s stomach as if Ilya could actually hear what their baby was saying. As Ilya waited for an answer, Shane combed his fingers through

Ilya's curls. He wished so much that *Malyshka* would get these curls—it was one of Shane's favourite parts of Ilya.

"I think *Malyshka* is sleeping, Shane. He did not answer me," Ilya said with complete seriousness.

"Maybe he'll tell us in the morning when he's awake then."

Shane sat upright in their bed as soft snores fell out of Ilya's mouth. It was still dark out and he didn't know what time it was, just that it was too early to be awake. He couldn't sleep. His heart pounded as he kept his body still.

So far in his pregnancy, *Malyshka*'s movements were all too subtle. The doctor said that the baby's movements would be small—it would feel like bubbles rising in his stomach or slight muscles stretches. After the first initial movement he felt when their relationship was exposed, Shane felt all of those but always second-guessed himself, saying that it was probably his own body rather than the baby. But, as he came back from his second bathroom break of the night, he was sure he felt it. A little kick on the side of his stomach.

Shane kept his body as stiff as a board, awaiting any sort of movement. He felt like he was already on the edge of crying when he felt the first movement, but now his eyes were already hot with welling tears.

Then he felt it. An undeniable little kick. The dam broke and tears started freely falling.

Shane ran his fingers through Ilya's hair, gently scratching his scalp. "Ilya, wake up." His voice was nasally and hoarse.

Ilya groaned and slowly opened his eyes. "*My beloved*, what's wrong?"

Shane took his partner's hand and placed it over his stomach. "*Malyshka* is moving."

Hearing this, Ilya instantly perked up. He propped himself with his arm and kissed Shane's belly, which made Shane's heart flutter and got him even more emotional. At first, he hated how emotional he had become, but now he didn't mind it because there was no fighting any part of the rollercoaster of emotions that he was on. He had succumbed to the hormones.

"*Hello, Malyshka, my little tomato*," Ilya cooed in Russian, hand firm over Shane's stomach as he waited for movement. "*This is your papa speaking. Are you trying to make your presence known? Your daddy and I can't wait to meet you. We love you so much.*"

"Tomato?" Shane asked, undeniably fond of the little nickname.

"Yes. Why not?"

Ilya kept his eyes set on Shane's round stomach, sleepy hazel eyes fixated with a look of adoration and anticipation. Shane couldn't help but fondly brush some of Ilya's hair away from his forehead. His hair always inexplicably stuck out in all sorts of different directions every morning. Ilya leaned into Shane's touch, though he still kept his focus on their baby. God, Shane loved him. So much.

"I love you, Ilyusha."

Ilya's eyes met Shane's, gaze immediately softened. In no time, Ilya climbed over Shane's legs and started pressing kisses onto Shane's face, somehow still keeping a hand on his stomach.

"I love you. I love you so much. I love you, Shane," Ilya said between kisses.

Immediately, there were two kicks, both positioned right underneath Ilya's touch.

"I think he likes it when you show your love to his daddy."

"I like it too, my pumpkin."

"Ilya, the baby is not the size of a pumpkin yet," Shane chuckled. *"That's terrifying."*

"No, not yet. Maybe tiny little baby pumpkin."

Shane could not help but give Ilya a kiss. It was a quick but deeply sweet peck. He did have a strict policy of no kissing before teeth were brushed in the mornings, but how could he not kiss Ilya right now?

Ilya rubbed soothing circles over Shane's belly. "Now please calm down so that your daddy can get a little bit more sleep. It's much too early for him to be awake."

Shane couldn't believe that he was lucky enough in this lifetime to fall in love with Ilya and have his baby. He was the luckiest.

Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Shane and Ilya discover the magic of the cottage.

Chapter Notes

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

April 2017

Ilya obnoxiously smacked on his nicotine gum as the bitterness settled in his mouth. He wanted to a cigarette so badly right now, but showing up to class and presenting a final project reeking of cigarette smoke wasn't professional.

What was truly not professional was being a part of a group project and not doing jack shit—Ilya wouldn't know that kind of unprofessionalism because he was the one carrying the entire team on his back. He had to do research about two different, rival companies that he had never heard about and discuss their marketing approaches, HR policies, hiring protocols, and some other bullshit that should have been done by four people.

As he stood outside of the classroom, waiting for his useless team members to come with their pathetic excuses of why they couldn't contribute to the project, Ilya tugged on his tie—it was suffocating him. For some reason, students who studied business and commerce just had to be professionally dressed for presentations. It was an idiotic practice he couldn't understand.

Everyone who had ever had the pleasure of meeting Ilya would say that he was a man who was too confident for his own good. Ilya would say that was true. There were more than a couple of instances where his brazen confidence got him into trouble, especially on the ice.

However, there was one sore area for Ilya: his language abilities. Usually, he didn't care. Everyone could understand him well enough, just as he could understand them. Girls fawned over his “exotic” accent, and boys wished that they could have his accent to attract girls or impress other guys. But, when it came to school, there were areas of his English that was painfully lacking, despite his astronomical improvement over the past few years. For one, Ilya found that whenever he got nervous, as he always did for presentations, his Russian accent got thicker and English grammar just went out of the window—it was a dumb thing that happened to him no matter how good his English was. This frustrated Ilya to no end because he didn't half-ass anything, even when it came to his education. Ilya Rozanov was very much so an all-or-nothing man—one who was about to look like a bumbling fool in front of his entire class.

It certainly didn't help his nerves to know that he had several eyes of the hockey world on him right now to make sure that Ilya held up his end of the bargain to join an NHL team in the future.

As Ilya readjusted his tie for what seemed like the millionth time, a familiar figure ran up to him. In a steady jogging pace, Shane came up to Ilya wearing a white lab coat and had his protective goggles sat on top of his head. Immediately, Ilya's heart started to race even faster than it was before.

"You are supposed to be in lab, yes?" Ilya tried to hide how happy he felt by gently chewing his gum.

Shane was supposed to be in his 3-hour Chemistry lab right now, which was halfway across the campus.

"I know, but we have a ten minute break so I ran over," Shane said with a slight pink glow. "Now close your eyes and hold out your hands."

Ilya blinked. Shane came all this way just to see him?

"Come on now, I don't have all day! Ten minute break, remember?" Shane's eyes creased into crescents as he smiled.

Ilya happily complied and held out both of his hands. He felt as Shane's cooler hands brush against his own as he placed a few lighter items in his hands. Ilya wanted to reach out and just hold Shane's hands—that would be better than anything that Shane could give him. But, Ilya supposed that seeing Shane was already more than enough. It was the highlight of his shitty day.

"What is this?" Ilya asked as he felt the rigid plastic packaging around the items.

"You can open your eyes now, Ilya," Shane laughed.

Shane had given him a handful of small KitKats, but none of the flavours seemed familiar to Ilya—the flavours were all written in what he assumed was Japanese. It didn't matter. Shane had purposely gone out of his way to give Ilya a gift. He was going to remember this forever.

"These are specialty Japanese KitKats that I found at an Asian grocery store. There's sweet potato, cheesecake, matcha, and strawberry. Um I know you have a presentation right now so I thought you might like a pick-me-up of sorts. Rose always likes having something sweet before she does a performance or presentation as a good luck ritual, so um—you know, I thought it'd be nice for you to have something too. My mom also said that since you did so well this season, you might be under a lot of stress from the league to keep performing well. So, the chocolates are also an encouragement to keep going."

Ilya wanted to kiss Shane so badly. He just wanted to hold Shane by his flushed, freckled cheeks and give him the sweetest kiss. Instead, he could only express his thanks: "Thank you, really. Is very sweet of you."

Shane bashfully looked around, almost as if he were expecting to find people staring at them. Ilya wouldn't be surprised if others were looking at Shane—he was one of the most beautiful people that Ilya had ever seen.

“You're welcome. So, I should probably go now. Gotta get back to my lab. See you, and good luck!”

As Shane scurried off, Ilya examined the KitKats. The packaging seemed to be much cuter than the KitKats they got in Canada; they all had cute patterns and on the back there was a blank space with a cartoon pen next to it. On every single KitKat that Shane had gifted Ilya, there was a small note written in Shane's clean and perfect handwriting.

“Good luck!”

“You got this!”

“You're going to do great!”

“A+ from your tutor.”

Ilya immediately spat out his gum in the trash can and ate one of Shane's KitKats, already feeling tremendously better.

Present Day

Even though Ilya was awake, he felt like he was still dreaming. The sun was slowly making its presence known in Shane's childhood bedroom with its golden rays, and Shane was still sleeping next to him, wearing Ilya's shirt, and had his hand protectively sprawled out over his stomach. Nowadays, it was pretty typical for Ilya to wake up earlier than Shane. Shane often woke up multiple times throughout the night and needed to sleep more all because of their *Malyshka*.

Ilya took a mental picture of the sight before him before kissing the top of Shane's head. Even if Shane was asleep, Ilya wanted to respect his rule for no mouth-to-mouth kissing before brushing their teeth.

Gently, he placed his hand on top of Shane's warm belly. He couldn't believe they were going to have a baby boy. Ilya was going to make sure that *Malyshka* didn't get an ounce of the treatment that Ilya had as a child—Ilya was going to ensure that he was nothing like his father until his own dying breath. This boy was going to know nothing but love for his entire life.

“Good morning,” Shane spoke groggily with squinted eyes.

“Good morning, *my bookshelf*. Did I wake you?”

“No, just time for me to wake up, I guess. How long have you been awake?”

“Not long. Just a few minutes.”

“And you were staring at me the entire time? Creep,” Shane said with a faint smile.

“Can blame you me? I have the most beautiful boyfriend who is pregnant with our beautiful baby.”

“You think I’m beautiful even though my feet are always swollen and my body is expanding like a balloon?”

“The most beautiful,” Ilya said sincerely, causing Shane to blush.

“You’re not too bad yourself, you know.”

“Oh I know so. Very beautiful and handsome. Make all of the ladies and Shane Hollanders blush constantly.”

Shane shoved Ilya’s bare chest before nuzzling his face into the crook of Ilya’s neck and scenting him. Ilya couldn’t get enough of Shane’s scent nowadays—even more so than usual. Shane’s sweet, autumnal scent undoubtedly started to developing a milky aroma to it.

“What’s on the agenda for today?” Ilya asked as he held onto the back of Shane’s head.

Ilya had some plans himself but he also wanted to know what Shane had in store for them.

“Just want to spend the day with you.” As Shane spoke, the cold tip of his nose brushed against Ilya’s neck.

“Sounds perfect.”

As Shane did his prenatal yoga in the living room, Ilya really tried his best not to stare from the kitchen. Pre-pregnant Shane doing yoga was already a lot for Ilya to handle, but seeing Shane pregnant with their baby and doing yoga made Ilya exercise a lot more self control than he thought possible. Whenever Shane raised his hands, a sliver of skin would be revealed, showing his cute belly. When he bent over, Ilya could see how his ass has filled out even more in the past few months. And when Shane posed, Ilya couldn’t help but notice the musculature that Shane still carried in his body. It made Ilya absolutely crazy, almost feral.

Instead, Ilya flipped pancakes with a white-knuckling grip around the pan handle. It wasn’t healthy to be this obsessed with Shane all the time. Except, how could he not be obsessed? Ilya wanted to be with that man for the rest of his life. If anything, Shane had made Ilya realize how crazy his own father was for trapping his mother in such a loveless marriage.

What was the point of marriage if there was no love? There were logical answers, of course, but none of them seemed logical enough for Ilya. Love should be the only reason.

“You’re very active today,” Shane spoke quietly. “Are you doing yoga with Daddy?” Shane was now standing upright and holding his stomach with a bright smile on his face.

Ilya’s heart swooned but he continued with making breakfast. He wanted Shane to have fond memories of him and *Malyshka* alone too. Ilya would get to create plenty of those once the baby was here.

Shane padded into the kitchen and placed Ilya’s hand on top of his stomach. “Ilya, feel our little *Malyshka*. He must be so excited right now.”

Ilya couldn’t believe that he was honoured enough to share this memory with Shane. Sure enough, as soon as Ilya’s hand made contact with Shane’s skin, he felt a few subtle kicks. Feeling their baby would never get old to Ilya.

“He must have your strong legs,” Ilya said. “*Please be gentle with your daddy, Malshka. He’s already doing so much work growing you.*”

“It’s okay, I like it.”

“You say that now, but wait until *Malyshka* develops your thighs and kicks you nonstop.”

“Okay, I like it for now.”

For a few moments, they stood there in the kitchen feeling how active their baby was. It was insane to Ilya that he was able to feel *Malyshka* move for the first time only a few days prior and now he was practically bouncing around Shane’s stomach.

“Do you think you will teach *Malyshka* Japanese or French?” Ilya asked Shane.

“But you hate French, Ilya.”

“He will have his daddy’s amazing brain, so it will be natural for him to learn many languages, even if his papa hates one of them.”

Shane shot Ilya a look. He was supposed to look serious but his face was full of joy. “I’m not as fluent in Japanese as I am in French, but I’d love to teach him both.”

“*Malyshka* and his siblings will be the smartest babies in the world—they will know four languages.”

“Siblings? Ilya, how many babies do you think I’m carrying?”

“Just the one, but we will have more in the future, no?”

“Oh, I-of course we will. How many do you want?”

“I want however many you would like.”

Ilya was not the one carrying the baby, so it was all up to Shane. He would be happy just with *Malyshka*, but maybe two or three children sounded nice too.

“Not as many as Hayden has,” Shane laughed. “Just enough to fill our car sounds good.”

“A car full of little Hollander-Rozanovs sounds amazing.”

At Shane’s request, they were making something Russian for dinner tonight. Based off of the ingredients they had, Ilya suggested shchi, a cabbage soup. Shane already started making the beef broth from scratch shortly after breakfast and it had been simmering on the stove the entire day, perfuming the cottage with its hearty flavour.

Ilya grated carrots while Shane finely chopping onions and garlic. By the time Ilya was done grating one carrot, Shane had already moved onto cutting the cabbage into thin strips. Even though Shane was as fast and efficient as ever, Ilya noticed that Shane’s face was taut with a stern expression—the one that he wore when he was pushing himself or thinking too hard. His brows were bunched up and his gaze was a tad too sharp. Ilya worried that maybe Shane was feeling too nauseous or uncomfortable but didn’t want to say anything about it.

“*My beloved*, I can stir the pot. Do we have some dill?” Ilya asked, trying to redirect Shane from the stove, where the smells were the most potent.

He knew Shane would not agree if Ilya asked him to go sit down so this was the best that Ilya could come up with. Wordlessly, Shane passed Ilya the wooden spoon and retrieved a bunch of dill from the fridge before washing it. Ilya loved that they could work so harmoniously well together in the kitchen. Their skill discrepancy was off the charts, but they always seemed to know exactly what each other needed without saying much.

Ilya nervously glanced at Shane who started to finely mince the dill. His face was still frozen in the same expression. Ilya’s own chest felt tight but he didn’t pay too much attention to it. Turning the stove to low heat, Ilya pressed his chest against Shane’s back and hugged him.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Shane replied flatly.

“Is lie. You are thinking about something.”

“Really, nothing is wrong, *Ilyusha*,” he said with more conviction this time.

“Okay. And how is our little *Malyshka*?”

“Finally sleeping, I think. My stomach is finally still now.” Ilya could hear the smile making its way up to Shane’s face. Good. He wanted Shane to be as happy as possible.

“Yes, he needs to sleep lots to grow big and strong.”

Ilya turned away to stir the sautéing vegetables to make sure they didn’t burn—Shane’s warmth was replaced by the warmth radiating from the stove. The key was caramelization, Shane said, which was going to take quite a bit of time.

As the soup simmered on the stove, Shane and Ilya set the table together. Shane grabbed the utensils while Ilya grabbed the sourdough. It was supposed to be eaten with rye but neither of them were particularly fond of it.

“Oh, I forgot about dessert,” Shane said with disappointment as he set the spoons down.

Ilya kissed Shane. “I know what I want for dessert.”

“Fuck off. Not that kind of dessert, Ilya.”

“Why not? That kind is my favourite. You know—the kind where you just grab every sweet thing from the pantry and just eat it all.”

Shane dramatically rolled his eyes and walked away.

As they ate dinner, their usual comfortable silence fell upon them, but Shane didn’t look comfortable at all—he shifted in his seat and still wore the same tense expression. Ilya wondered if it was because the dill tasted too strong and nauseating. Ilya thought the shchi tasted perfectly fine, though he himself couldn’t quite enjoy it to its fullest extent due to his worries.

Ilya reached out and settled his hand on top of Shane’s on the tabletop. Immediately, Shane stilled and looked at Ilya with so much adoration that Ilya didn’t know how to deal with it. Just with that one look, Shane immediately calmed Ilya’s nerves.

“I love you, *Ilyusha*.” Shane smiled, eyes a little watery.

“I love you too, *my Shanya*.” Ilya fiddled with his pocket.

Shane flipped his hand so that they could intertwine their fingers together. “I could have never imagined that we would ever get a second chance at love again, Ilya. Even if I didn’t know it back then, I lost my heart to you the moment you asked me to define words for you in our stupid English class, and I have never stopped loving you since. I would not have survived any of the things we just went through together if it were not for you. You made me a better person, and you make me want to continue to be a better person for you and for *Malyshka*.”

Ilya’s heart dropped to his stomach. He knew exactly what was going to happen—he knew what the next few words coming from Shane’s mouth would be, and he didn’t know if he was ready.

“Will you, Ilya Grigoryevich Rozanov, marry me?” Shane seamlessly pulled out a golden ring and held it between his fingers.

“Shane Hollander. I can’t believe you,” Ilya said, feigning composure and trying to settle his own heart.

Shane’s face quickly morphed into panic.

Ilya pulled out the black velvet box that sat in his pocket like a stone for the entire evening and placed it onto the table. He opened the box to reveal a golden band inside that he bought the morning after they confessed their love.

“You stole my thunder, Hollander.”

“Oh thank god, I was going to vomit.”

“You thought I would say no?”

“No—it’s just scary you know?”

Ilya chuckled. He knew the feeling all too well. The nerves weren’t from the potential of rejection, it was from the beginning of a new chapter for the two of them. They were going to be proclaiming to the world even more than they already had that they were each other’s. Though, to be fair, they were already more married than most people.

“So what do you say?” Shane choked out a watery laugh.

“Of course—yes. And you? Will you marry me, Shane Hollander?” Tears were streaming down Ilya’s face but his smile was impossibly large.

“What do you think? I’m carrying your baby.”

“I need words, Shane.”

“Yes. If it’s you asking, I will say yes in every lifetime that we have together.”

Shane grabbed Ilya by the collar of his shirt and pulled him into a deep kiss. They smeared their tears across each other’s faces but neither of them cared.

“I have a date engraved on your ring,” Shane said as he passed Ilya his ring.

10-01-2014. The first day they met.

Immediately, Ilya pulled Shane into another kiss. “*I love you*. I think we could not be more compatible, yes?”

Shane laughed. “I think I would have to agree.”

“Are you going to make your fiancé put on his own ring?” Ilya smirked. He couldn’t believe it. Fiancé.

Shane beamed but slid the ring onto Ilya’s finger. It fit perfectly.

“Um, I may or may not have took a string and wrapped it around your finger while you slept to measure your ring size,” Shane said shyly.

“Funny, I did the same thing.”

“No, you did not! I would have noticed.”

“No, I didn’t, sweetheart.” Ilya smiled at his fiancé. “I guessed but I hope it will fit.”

Ilya carefully removed the ring from the box and helped Shane put it on. It was slightly loose, but it was good because Shane’s fingers would likely swell up as the weeks passed by. Post-pregnancy, Ilya could easily get it resized.

They kissed some more, gradually moving to the couch as their they craved for more. To prevent either of them from tripping in their intensity, Ilya picked Shane up and carried him for the last few steps to the couch. Ilya sat down with Shane on his lap and rested their foreheads together.

“I didn’t get to give you my big speech,” Ilya said breathlessly, directly looking into the warmth of Shane’s eyes.

“Tell me.”

Ilya took a deep breath. “I walked alone a long time on this world without knowing what true happiness looked like, and then I suddenly found it in a dingy classroom in the form of a grumpy, feisty kitten. Even though I am far from a perfect man and I still have many struggles, you, Shane Hollander, are the cure for everything wrong in my life. You have brought me more happiness that I deserve and I do not want to spend even a day without you.”

As they pulled up to their house, Shane texted a couple of messages on his phone. Ilya noticed that Shane had been on his phone more than usual for their last days at the cottage but didn’t think much of it. Shane and Hayden had made an arrangement for Shane to take over more of the administrative work for the restaurant so that Shane wouldn’t have to go to work in person as much. They still didn’t think it was safe for Shane to be out in public by himself, and with his growing body, it was increasingly harder for Shane to be in a high-stress environment like a kitchen with narrow workspaces.

The moment they entered the house, something felt off. Ilya immediately dropped their bags on the floor. The house was quiet but there was energy buzzing through it that unsettled him, not to mention there were a lot more scents than usual.

“Shane, get behind me,” Ilya muttered before reaching for the lights.

As soon as the lights turned on, rainbow confetti rained down on them.

“Surprise!”

“Fucking hell,” Ilya blurted out in complete shock. He could feel his heartbeat in his throat.

In front of them stood Yuna, David, Jackie, Hayden, and Svetlana. Svetlana, with her beautiful rusty curls and bright smile, held up a large sign that said “Congratulations” in her cursive handwriting. All of his loved ones and Hayden were right there.

Ilya looked over at Shane who watched him with bashful glee. “What’s all this?” Ilya asked.

“It’s your engagement surprise.” Shane nudged him to go to their loved ones.

“It’s our engagement, *my Shanya*.”

“Okay, it’s our engagement surprise.”

Still in shock, Ilya took Shane’s hand and they slowly walked over. Immediately, Yuna and David engulfed Ilya into a warm hug.

“This is your official welcome to the family, Son,” David chuckled.

“But you were a part of our family the moment Shane brought you home,” Yuna pointedly added.

“Thank you,” Ilya mumbled through tears.

He had a family. A family that was more than just him, Shane, and their *Malyshka*. He didn’t know if he could have ever anticipated this. It was the best surprise that Ilya could have ever been thrust into.

As soon as they parted, Ilya felt a light tap on his shoulder.

“Excuse me. Did you forget about me? I did come all this way just for you,” Svetlana said with a forced neutral expression.

Instantly, Ilya wrapped his arms around Svetlana. Her rich caramel scent immediately filled his nose. He couldn’t believe that she was here. Svetlana had taken a new marketing job with the Raiders and was probably buried with work considering that the playoffs were on the horizon.

“Thank you, *Sveta*.”

“I couldn’t not come. Your *Shanya* flew me out here for you. You chose well, *Ilyusha*.” Svetlana patted Ilya’s back.

“I am lucky he chose me,” Ilya replied earnestly.

Ilya fiddled with the golden band around his finger as he looked at his entire world before him. Shane showed Jackie and Hayden his own ring with a hand on his stomach, talking

about how much of a surprise it was for them to propose to each other at the same time. Yuna and David were talking to Svetlana about her new job and what that entails.

Ilya's chest felt inexplicably warm and full.

"Thank you, Mama."

Chapter End Notes

Hollanov are finally engaged! What did you guys think about the simultaneous proposals? Did you see it coming? I hope I did the foreshadowing well enough so that it wasn't a complete surprise but still shocking.

We're also nearing the end of this fic! Again, I'm so, so grateful for all of you who have read it. I have poured my heart and soul into writing this over the past two weeks. I hope you guys enjoyed reading it as much as I did writing it.

Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

As Malyshka's due date approaches, things become very real for Shane and Ilya.

It was on a random Tuesday morning that Shane realized that he had never formally moved out of his apartment. It wasn't very like him to forget about something so critical, but he supposed that pregnancy brain was getting to him. How could he think about his apartment when his glasses found a permanent spot on the Ilya's nightstand by Shane's side of the bed and sonograms proudly hung on the fridge door? How could he think about going back when this was his home now?

Shane supposed that he had lived in Ilya's house for so long that he didn't think about the apartment anymore. Almost all of Shane's clothes and important belongings were here anyway. But, it would be a good financial move to officially move out of the apartment.

Quietly, Shane snuck up to the nursery and watched as Ilya sat on the floor and built *Malyshka's* bassinet. They were in the final stretch now, with his arrival coming in ten short weeks, and Ilya was assembling almost everything for the nursery. Shane suggested that they hire someone to decorate and furnish the nursery, but Ilya insisted that he wanted to do everything himself. Shane helped where he could of course, but Ilya had become increasingly worried about Shane overexerting himself. His worries had become more and more intense over the past few days where Shane's belly really seemed to have pop out of nowhere.

"These English instructions make no sense," Ilya mumbled to himself with furrowed brows.

"Do you need some help?"

Ilya's shoulders jumped as he noticed Shane's presence in the doorway but quickly settled down. "Yes, I need some moral support from *my beloved*."

Shane trudged over and settled down in the rocking chair with a grunt. As much as Shane hated to admit it, it was becoming more and more difficult for him to move and feel comfortable. *Malyshka* was in the ninety-eighth percentile and Shane could definitely feel it. Shane could only imagine how big he was going to be in a few weeks—he would probably take up the entire room by that point.

"You would think that this part is for the top, but no, it is a net for the bottom, Shane," Ilya grumbled.

"Thank you for doing this," Shane said while putting a hand on Ilya's shoulder. "If you want to stop or if you'd like me to do something, please let me know."

“No, I am having fun.” Ilya shrugged as he continued to fiddle with the bassinet’s parts.

As Shane settled in the chair, his stomach tightened, a strong discomfort rippled through his abdomen. He tried to not wince but a small grunt left his mouth. Ilya immediately whipped his head over to Shane and placed his warm hands over Shane’s thighs.

“Are you okay?” Ilya asked, voice laced with concern.

“Mhm just a Braxton hick. A strong one.” Shane breathed deeply.

“Are you sure? I can call the midwife.”

“*Ilyusha*, I’m fine. Really.” Shane placed his hands over Ilya’s as the pain dissipated. Still, Ilya’s concern did not waver. “Can I have a kiss, please?”

Happily, Ilya lifted himself off of the floor and planted a kiss on Shane’s lips. Then, he held Shane’s belly. “*Please stay in Daddy’s stomach for a little longer, Malyshka. Although we can’t wait to meet you, we can manage waiting for another ten weeks.*”

“Ten weeks?” Shane laughed. “Dr. Patel said that since *Malyshka* was so big, it would be likely he’ll come sooner with an early induction. Do you want me to give birth to a toddler-sized baby, Ilya?”

“Hm okay, *we can wait another eight weeks for you.*” God, another eight weeks of being pregnant.

“That’s more like it. Um I actually came here to ask you something.” Shane shifted in his seat.

“What is it? I’ll do anything,” Ilya replied immediately.

“Could you please help me move out of my apartment? I think it’s time we said goodbye to it.”

Ilya heartily chuckled. “You did not already move out of it? I thought you permanently moved in here. This is your house, *Shanya*.”

Shane’s face warmed. “I do think this is my house, but I’d like to not have this apartment still in my name.”

“Okay. I will help you move.”

The apartment was a lot smaller than Shane remembered it. The kitchen was microscopic compared to the kitchen they had at home. Shane ran his finger along the magnetic strip where his knives hadn’t hung from in months, feeling the cool metal underneath his

fingertips. Just off to the corner sat his small dining table meant for two. He could still picture how scared shitless he was when he initially invited Ilya over to talk. Funny how fast the night changes.

Gradually, Shane started boxing up the items in his pantry while Ilya took care of Shane's larger possessions.

Thankfully, the apartment came fully furnished so they didn't have to worry about the furniture. Needing to sell or toss them would have been a publicity nightmare for the two of them. Although Shane and Ilya weren't as alarmed about being wrapped up in another scandal anytime soon, they were still unbelievably cautious about being watched by the public eye. They didn't want to have *Malyshka's* face anywhere in the public.

Shane couldn't help but think about his life in this apartment—the many years that he spent living in here and doing just marginally better than surviving. He was happy. After all, he had his family, he had his friends, and he had his restaurant. But his life was just work, sleep and exercise for many years—he lived and breathed the restaurant, pouring his soul into it.

Picking up the photo he and Hayden took at their Corden Bleu graduation, Shane noted how blissfully happy the two of them looked. If only that Shane knew how much happier he would be in the future.

"Do you want me to put that in the trash pile?" Shane could hear the smirk in Ilya's voice as Ilya approached him from behind.

"Ilya, he was at our engagement party. He popped a confetti popper for you."

"I think that was for you, yes?" Ilya's arms snaked around Shane's belly.

"I think you two are just too proud to admit that you're both friends," Shane chuckled.

"Me friends with Hayden Pike? I don't think so."

"Okay, okay. You're not friends, but I'm definitely not throwing this away. It's a good memory—we just graduated here."

Ilya rested his head on Shane's shoulder as he rubbed Shane's belly. "You never told me why you became a chef."

Shane leaned into Ilya's touch, feeling his warmth and smelling his rich coffee aroma. "It wasn't any special reason."

"I'd love to hear it."

"When I was in recovery, my therapist suggested that I try out making new foods so that I could replace my controlling behaviour when it came to the kitchen. Every few days, I had to try out cook a dish that I had never heard of before. Eventually, I just fell in love with cooking. Plus, being in the kitchen is one of the only times where my mind is quiet, so it was really more for my mental health to be in the kitchen all the time," Shane explained.

“You are very brave. It’s true.”

“Thank you.”

Shane had come a long way. He didn’t even think about food that much these days, at least not in the way that he used to. Now, the only concerns about food were how he could procure his cravings. *Malyshka* seemed to love pickles and sour cream for some reason.

“You know,” Shane continued, “when I was younger, I spent so much time in the kitchen with my parents. I have so many good memories of cooking with them. I’d love to do the same with you and *Malyshka*.”

As if he were listening, *Malyshka* kicked, causing both Shane and Ilya to laugh.

“I think *Malyshka* and I would like that very much,” Ilya said. “We can make oyakodons and piroshkis together.”

Shane hummed in content.

How did they start from being classmates and end up engaged and waiting for their baby’s arrival? Shane and Ilya were one of the least likely pairings that anyone could have anticipated. Shane himself still didn’t understand it completely. But, feeling Ilya’s strong arms, Shane knew one thing for sure: Ilya was a strong man who was beyond kind and loving—it was impossible for Shane to not fall in love with him.

“I think there are about two more boxes of stuff to pack. Why don’t you take a break on the sofa?” Ilya said as he wandered towards the bedroom.

“It’s okay, I’m not tired yet. Walking around is actually helping a bit with the Braxton hicks.”

Ilya looked at Shane as if Shane had just tripped and fell in front of him—his expression was inexplicably hurt and concerned at the same time.

“I’m pregnant, Ilya, not dying,” Shane softly offered. “I can still do things with *Malyshka*.”

Ilya pressed his lips into a thin line but conceded.

Even if his belly was getting in the way of everything and even though his body was constantly tired and sore, Shane didn’t like feeling so helpless. In a few weeks time, when his body was going to be plump with his baby, he knew he was going to be almost completely useless. So, he wanted to take this time now, when he was still mobile, and be of use.

Shane continued to box up the photos he had around his apartment.

Now that Shane was fully moved in and there were children running around the house, everything just became real. It was as if everything that happened since bumping into Ilya at a grocery store many months ago until now felt like a blissful dream. Now, he was engaged to Ilya, living with him, and they were going to welcome one of their own children into this world in mere weeks. Shane was very much so in the real world now. It was terrifying.

Hayden and Jackie had a family emergency that required them to drop the kids off at Shane and Ilya's place for the day. They've been here for all but an hour and the reality of parenthood had practically slapped Shane across the face. He was very aware that whatever he did with the children today would be exemplary of what he would be like as a parent.

Jade and Ruby whizzed past Shane, chasing one another in the living room as Arthur sat next to him. The pout that Arthur had when Shane told him that he could no longer lift him up nearly killed Shane. Instead, they opted for lounging on the couch together with the TV playing old Disney movies as Arthur absentmindedly leaned against the swell of Shane's stomach.

"Baby *Malyshka* is moving," Arthur hummed, patting the spot where he just felt him.

Shane ran his fingers through Arthur's chestnut hair. "He is, isn't he?"

"Can I play with him soon?"

"He'll be here soon but it'll be a while until you can play with him. He'll be just like Amber when she came. Do you remember how tiny she was?"

"Yeah, so tiny, tiny. Can't wait for little man to be here. I will have a boy to play with. Mommy and Daddy said that I can't have a baby brother."

Shane held back his laughter. It was good that the Pikes weren't having another child. He didn't know if they could handle five kids—four seemed plenty. "And he's very excited to play with you too! See, he's already trying to say hi to you!"

"Hi *Malyshka*," Arthur loudly whispered to Shane's stomach.

On cue, *Malyshka* kicked once more. Ilya was definitely right—*Malyshka* had definitely inherited their legs as his kicks were nearing painful now, especially when they were directed at Shane's ribs. Ilya kept insisting that he inherited Shane's legs but Shane thinks, between the two of them, clearly Ilya had the thicker thighs—he had the ass to prove it.

As Arthur continued to watch TV and Shane watched over him and the twins, Ilya emerged with a very awake Amber. "I think she misses her mama too much to go to sleep. Isn't that right, *malysh*?" Ilya bounced Amber up and down, causing her to squeal in delight.

It never failed to amaze Shane how natural Ilya was with children. The man he loved was born to be a father—an amazing father. Shane, on the other hand, had more doubts about himself than he originally thought possible. He tried to remind himself that it would be exactly the same as when he worried about connecting with *Malyshka*—that it was all in his head and everything would be okay. But there was no way for Shane to know that for sure.

All he knew for certain was that he was going to be the boring, strict dad while Ilya was going to be the fun, cool dad.

Because of his fears, Shane reached out to hold Amber from his spot. He needed to prove to himself that he could be a good, fun dad too.

“Be good to your Uncle Shane. He is carrying your cousin,” Ilya sternly lectured a babbling Amber before handing her over.

“*Ilyusha*, she’s a baby. I’m sure she’ll be fine.” Shane had Amber comfortably leaned against his bump as he cradled her.

“Yes, baby with strong legs and an iron grip. She would not let go of my hair when I tried to put her in the crib.” That explained why the hair at the front of Ilya’s head was straighter and frizzier than the rest. “Be careful with your hair.”

Shane made sure to support Amber’s head, neck, and bum as he carried her, pretending as if she were a newborn infant, but it was hard. Amber was old enough to be toddling around and squirmed in his hold. Beside them, Arthur was completely unaffected by his sister’s presence and continued to lean on Shane.

“If you don’t go to sleep now, you’ll be cranky later. You won’t be awake enough to enjoy your mommy and daddy coming back, you know?” Shane cringed at himself as the words left his mouth. Of course he was lecturing a baby about the importance of sleeping enough.

Amber grabbed Shane’s hand and started gnawing on it as she was still teething. Her little shark-like teeth gnashed against his skin.

Shane kissed her little forehead and started rocking her back and forth. He was worried they were heading into dangerous territory—if Amber wasn’t going to fall asleep soon, Shane was. It was nearly impossible for him to get a good night’s sleep as no position was ever comfortable enough to lay in for hours on end. Still, he tried to hum the melody that Ilya often hummed these days to try and lull her to sleep. Slowly but surely, Amber’s eyes started to close her green eyes. After a while, Shane stopped rocking and humming, just letting Amber nap.

“My little man, could you please get your Uncle Ilya for me?” Shane gently nudged Arthur, who immediately ran off and came back dragging Ilya by the hand. “Thank you, Arthur.”

“You got her to fall asleep, *my apple*,” Ilya said fondly.

“And now your apple really needs to pee. Could you please take her to the crib?”

With surgical precision Shane passed Amber off to Ilya. Then, with the grace and body of a hippo, Shane crawled off of the couch to relieve himself. As soon as he returned to the living room, the girls ran up to him in alarming speed and were begging for attention. They were bursting with so much energy, Shane didn’t know what to do—it was overwhelming that he couldn’t even really hear what they were wanting to do with him.

“Jade and Ruby, let’s use our inside energies and voices alright?” Shane pleaded.

Still, the girls were jumping up and down, nearly bumping into him several times.

“Girls.” Ilya’s voice boomed from the kitchen, instantly startling everyone. “Please calm down, yes? We have to be gentle and calm around Uncle Shane and the baby.”

The twins immediately scrambled to the couch and sat themselves next to Arthur. Shane quickly thanked them and waddled to Ilya, who was breathing hard as he prepared the children their afternoon snacks: apple slices, pretzels, and string cheese. He had never seen Ilya like this before.

“Wanna talk about it?” Shane gently asked.

Ilya continued cutting an apple into even slices. “It’s fine. There is nothing to talk about.”

“*Ilyusha*.” Shane placed his hand on Ilya’s set jaw.

“I was... scared—scared that you might fall over and you and *Malyshka* would get hurt if the girls got too excited,” Ilya said, looking off into the distance with a hollow expression.

Shane guided Ilya’s hands onto his stomach. “You feel that? That’s our baby right there—he’s perfectly fine. I’m fine, too. You have nothing to be worried about.”

Ilya took a deep but shaky breath. His hazel eyes flittered as they focused on Shane. “I’m scared that I won’t be able to be a good father. I just want to be a good Papa and a good husband.”

Shane almost laughed. What a ridiculous idea! There was not a single doubt in Shane’s mind that Ilya would be a bad father. It was himself Shane was worried about, and that’s exactly what he said: “Can I tell you a secret? I’m terrified too.”

Ilya’s watery eyes crinkled ever so slightly. “Why? You’re the responsible one.”

“That’s exactly why I’m scared. I’m worried that I will be so strict that *Malyshka* will hate me.”

“He will not find you to be too strict—he will think that you’re boring.”

“Thanks, that really helps, Ilya,” Shane deadpanned.

“No, I love your boring. You and your family are all the same kind of boring. You’re all loving, dependable, and everything I never had growing up.”

As Ilya’s words settled, Shane’s heart sunk and tears started to form in his eyes. Ilya never explicitly told Shane how bad his childhood was, so Shane was only aware of Ilya’s mother and small snippets that came through in conversation. Shane just knew that Ilya’s childhood was nothing like his own. Immediately, Shane pulled Ilya in as close as possible without his stomach obstructing the way and gave him a hug. Slowly, Ilya’s hands closed around Shane’s back.

“You are going to be the best Papa in the entire world, *Ilyusha*. I mean it. I have always envisioned you to be the best father to our children—the one who our kids will love endlessly and run to whenever they need someone.”

Ilya messily wiped away his tears. “Thank you.”

“I have no doubt that *Malyshka* will know that his papa loves him more than anything else in the world the moment he is born.”

“You too.” Ilya visibly swallowed the lump in his throat. “You are already so loving to him that I don’t know what to do with myself. You grew *Malyshka* part by part, and I am sure that you will continue to give him the world as he grows.”

Shane kissed Ilya. “We’re both scared, but we’ll figure this all out together, right?”

“Yes, *my beloved*, we will.”

Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

It is finally time for Malyshka's arrival!

Shane uncomfortably sat at the edge of their bed as Ilya slipped into his athletic wear. As his lower back pulsed with pain, he watched as Ilya pulled his tight long-sleeves over his rippling abdomen. Shane was never not amazed at how Ilya could have the diet of a child and still carry as much musculature as he did. He briefly thought about how his body was going to take a lot of work to return to normal but didn't dwell on it for too long. His body grew their baby so it was inevitable to undergo tremendous change. It was an added bonus that Ilya seemed to love Shane's pregnant body—he couldn't seem to get enough of Shane's belly or how his chest had really filled out.

"Such a pervert." Ilya winked as his gaze met Shane's.

Clearly having been caught, Shane's face flushed. "Is it a crime to enjoy my fiancé?"

Ilya bent over and sweetly kissed Shane. "Are you sure you want to come today? The arena isn't particularly comfortable."

Even though training camps didn't start until two weeks later, the Centaurs were all but eager to start the season. They were going to have practice in the morning—it was really just going to be an informal session for the players to break out their skates and fraternize—before heading over to Boodram's house for a barbecue. Shane didn't know if he had the energy to go to the barbecue but he wasn't going to miss this practice for the world.

"I'm sure. *Malyshka* and I will be watching Papa the entire time."

Even though Shane was thirty-eight weeks pregnant and absolutely bursting at the seams, he wanted nothing more than to watch Ilya on the ice. It was going to be the last time that Shane would see Ilya in his element in person for a while. He wasn't even technically due for another two weeks.

"Are you sure you'll be okay to be back?" Shane asked.

According to his doctors, Ilya had healed up wonderfully from his injuries. However, Shane was worried about Ilya as everything was fundamentally different for him now. As he recovered at home, Ilya didn't have to directly face the outcome of their forced outing—he didn't have to deal with paparazzi, journalists, and fans the way that Scott Hunter did when he came out mid-season. Even though the reception of Shane and Ilya's relationship and pregnancy was mostly good, Shane just couldn't help but worry.

“Yeah, it will be fine,” Ilya nonchalantly replied as he sat down beside Shane.

There was also the matter of Ilya’s citizenship. Shane knew that he had applied for Canadian citizenship months ago, which was all but a few months away from being processed, but he didn’t know if Russia was still a sensitive matter for Ilya. Shane never wanted Ilya to not have the choice to go back to his home country. After everything that happened, Ilya didn’t really have a choice anymore—being queer in Russia was as dangerous as it was criminalized. With Ilya being so publicly known, he would probably be arrested the moment he stepped onto Russian soil.

With a deep sigh, Shane held Ilya’s hand.

“Everything I have ever wanted or needed is here,” Ilya replied, sensing Shane’s turmoil.

Before Shane could utter a word, his stomach tightened, causing him to squeeze Ilya’s hand firmly as he braced his body for the pain. Braxton hicks had become increasingly normal in the past few weeks, especially last night. But they were definitely becoming more intense and frequent—veering towards contraction territory. This may have been a contraction, Shane thought. Dr. Patel had told them that Braxton hicks weren’t supposed to be painful like this.

“Shane.”

“I’m fine. I’m fine,” Shane said through gritted teeth.

“I don’t have to go today. We can stay home.”

“No, I want you to go, Ilya. I want to see you on the ice.” Already, the pain was starting to dissipate and he could talk with more ease.

Ilya nervously looked at Shane but backed down once he saw that Shane wasn’t going to yield. “Okay, we’ll go. But the moment you feel any discomfort, we are coming home or going to the hospital. I’m going to make sure that the hospital bag is in the car.”

“Ilya, it is. There are hospital bags in the car, by the front door, and in the garage. And *Malyshka*’s carseat has been in the car for weeks already. You made sure of that,” Shane replied with a smile.

“You’re carrying our baby, *Shanya*. I have to make sure that everything is perfect for you two.”

Ilya pecked Shane’s cheek before following through with his threats.

Shane smoothed his palms over his stomach. “I know you really want to come out, but could you please stay in there for at least today? It’s going to be Papa’s last time on the ice for a while and even though he won’t admit it, I know he’s very excited to play today.”

In response, *Malyshka* kicked right at Shane’s ribs with a sharp pain. It was impossible for him not to kick Shane’s ribs now as he had dropped and was facing head-down now. Shane just hoped that *Malyshka* would make good on his promise.

As they pulled up to the arena, Ilya right in front of the entrance. Before Shane could even react, Ilya turned off the engine and ran out of the car to open the door for Shane.

“My lovely prince, we have arrived.” Ilya said, holding out his arm.

“You’re ridiculous.” Shane gratefully took Ilya’s hand and climbed out of the car with some help.

Ilya escorted Shane all the way inside of the arena where Harris was bouncing on the balls of his feet. Harris was probably filming the arrival of all of the players for social media but thankfully put his phone away for them. No one needed to see how horrifically big and tired Shane was right now.

“You guys, welcome back!” Harris exclaimed. “We’ve missed you a lot.”

“Hi, Harris. It’s nice to see you too.” Shane smiled. It was impossible not to smile at Harris, even if Shane was the embodiment of discomfort right now.

“Hello, Harris,” Ilya replied. “I’m going to go park the car. Are you guys going to be okay?”

Shane nodded while Harris cheerfully replied: “All good! We’ll just head down to the ice now.”

Slowly, they headed over. Well, Harris walked slowly to allow Shane to waddle at his frustratingly sloth-like pace. Shane immediately sighed out of relief the moment the cold air of the rink hit him. He was always a tad too warm now. Harris led them to their seats close to the ice where there was a Centaurs branded pillow and blanket already there. Shane’s chest swelled as Harris handed them to him.

“Ilya put you up to this, didn’t he?”

“How dare you insinuate that I’m not thoughtful enough to do this?” Harris laughed. “No, he did. He texted me weeks ago to make sure that you would be as comfortable as possible.”

“Of course he did. Thank you, Harris. That was very sweet of you.”

Slowly, Shane sunk down in his seat and tried to get as comfortable as possible. Even if he wanted to get out of this chair, it would be extremely hard for him to do so, so he was just going to have to make peace with the aches rippling through his body. Because of the change of position, another contraction immediately tensed up his abdominal muscles. It was definitely sharper than the last one. Shane deeply breathed to ease himself through it, which Harris immediately noticed.

“Are you okay?”

“Hm I’m fine,” Shane talked through the pain. “Other than feeling like a Zamboni, I feel completely fine.”

The contractions, however uncomfortable they were, were still irregular and the fact that he could talk through them was a good sign. He and *Malyshka* were going to make it through practice.

“Please let me know if you’re uncomfortable. I can get something for you or get Ilya off of the ice.”

“You sound a lot like him.” Shane managed to muster a chuckle.

In a few short moments, the Centaurs filed onto the ice. Fully decked out in his hockey gear, Ilya was first out of the tunnel, hopped onto the ice, and immediately skated over to them.

“Still okay?” Despite his concern, none of Ilya’s excitement was dimmed.

“Baby is still in here, last time I checked. Now go have fun! *Malyshka* wants to see his papa.”

From the ice, the rest of the team happily waved to Shane and Harris, shouting their hellos and warm welcomes. Shane eagerly waved back. He loved that Ilya got to play with a team of great people.

“But you will tell me if anything happens?” Ilya’s hazel eyes sternly looked at Shane.

“Of course I will. Don’t worry.”

Hesitantly, Ilya skated back to join the rest of the team.

“I still can’t believe there’s people out there who think he’s an asshole,” Harris mumbled.

“I know, but can you blame them? He likes to get under their skin under the ice, and he’s really good at it too.”

Only Shane knew the full extent of Ilya’s softheartedness. While Ilya did tease Shane to no end, there was no one in the world who loved him quite like Ilya did. And now that man, who was gliding on the ice while shooting occasional nervous glances at Shane, was about to become a father.

As Wiebe gave them a lovely welcome back speech, Shane massaged his stomach where it was still feeling tense. He was going to get through this practice one way or another—he owed it to Ilya.

Shane wasn’t stupid, he knew that he was going through the tell-tale signs of early labour, but there was no reason to worry until he moved into active labour. There was no point in going to the hospital now if they were just going to wait around anyway. Might as well let Ilya have some fun first. Yuna had said that she laboured for nearly two days straight until Shane came, so he was expecting something similar with *Malyshka*. Plus, Shane even had the energy to tease Harris for the way he was ogling at Barrett, which immediately made Harris flush. So, all things considered, Shane was going to be okay for the time being.

The Centaurs started with some light warmups, passing pucks and shooting them into the goal in quick succession. Ilya moved across the ice as if he had never left, scoring every single puck that he shot. Shane had the pleasure of watching how hard Ilya worked to train his body to prepare himself for the season. They both knew that Ilya was going to miss part of it for their baby, but Ilya mentioned that part of the strength-training was for *Malyshka* too. He wanted to be able to lift up his baby and build up his stamina as much as possible—as if an NHL player didn't have any strength or stamina.

Ilya easily beamed at Dykstra who patted him on the back, shooting him a mouthguarded smile. Seeing him so happy made all of the pain and trouble of coming here worth it for Shane.

As the team ramped up into drills, now competing three vs. three, the contractions started becoming more intense. Shane gripped onto the blanket that Harris provided and tried his best not to make a face or let any sounds escape through his lips. It was hard not to arch his back from pain, as that was where the pain radiated most from, even more so than his stomach and pelvis. Still, Shane tried to remain as calm as possible. Even when Ilya glanced over for the nth time, Shane gave him a thumbs up.

Looking at his phone, the contractions were about ten minutes apart. Not entirely alarming so the hospital wasn't necessary yet.

“Shane, are you feeling okay? You're looking a little pale.”

As if a paid actor, a singular bead of sweat rolled down the side of Shane's face. Shane didn't have the strength to wipe it away.

“It's ok-”

Before Shane could finish his sentence, a warm gush of liquid noticeably pooled around his legs and started dripping onto the floor. It was happening.

“I'm going to get Ilya okay?” Harris asked as Shane sat still in shock. “Ilya!”

Immediately, Ilya bolted over and threw his stick and gloves on the ice. “Are you okay? Is something wrong?”

“Water just broke,” Shane said, voice impossibly quiet.

“Okay. It is happening. We're leaving right now.”

Shane scrunched up his nose. “Please go shower first. I don't want *Malyshka* meeting his father when he is covered with hockey germs and sweat.”

Though the cold was masking some of the smells, Shane knew first hand how dirty and pungent hockey was. He didn't want to carry that smell with him in the hospital room.

Ilya deadpanned at Shane. “You cannot be serious right now, Shane.”

“*Please*. We can wait.”

Harris helped Shane up to his feet as Ilya scrambled to take the world's fastest shower. Shane was still too shocked to be embarrassed about how wet his pants were—he practically peed himself in public.

As they walked, Harris guiding Shane, the Centaurs cheered. "Good luck! Bring home our baby Centaur!"

The familiar scent of the awful arena soap hit Shane moments after he and Harris made it to the entrance. Ilya's hair was still dripping as he ran up to them. He muttered that he was going to get the car. With bated breath, Shane waited for Ilya, feeling yet another contraction coursing through his body. This time, he didn't try to hide it. A low moan came out of his mouth as he clutched onto his stomach.

"Breathe, Shane," Harris encouraged.

Shane stiffly nodded and tried to breathe in as calmly as possible. "Thank you for being here, Harris. You really didn't have to."

"Yes, I do! We're all one big Centaurs family. If anything, I'm honoured that you're letting me be here."

"I'll make sure you're one of the first people to see him."

"Thank you, Shane," Harris said with watery eyes.

Ilya pulled the car up in front of them and Harris's hands were immediately replaced by Ilya's. They walked up to the car together.

"I'm going to get the chair all wet." Shane frowned while looking at the leather seats.

"It's okay, Sweetheart. I'll get the car cleaned. I can even get a new car if that's what you want. Right now, we're just going to focus on bringing *Malyshka* into the world, okay? Thank you so much for your help, Harris."

Ilya slowly sat Shane down in the passenger seat and started the car with alarming speed. They waved a quick goodbye to Harris and sped off to the hospital. The entire time, Ilya held Shane's hand and took steadying breaths to guide Shane. Even when Shane crushed his hand as another contraction came through, Ilya didn't waver and just kept encouraging Shane.

"I'm so sorry." Shane burst into tears.

"What are you sorry for? You have nothing to be sorry for," Ilya replied with shock etched in his face.

"I really wanted you to have a good time at practice today."

"*My beloved*, I had an amazing time, and now I'm going to have one of the best days of my life with *Malyshka* on the way. You have nothing to be sorry for." Ilya kissed the back of Shane's sweaty hand.

Despite his words, the guilt in Shane's chest didn't quite go away. It was, however, overpowered by panic. "Did you happen to call Dr. Patel?"

"Yes, I called her and your parents right before I showered. They will all meet us at the hospital."

"*I love you,*" Shane sighed.

"I love you too," Ilya replied, prying his eyes away from the road just long enough to make eye contact with Shane.

The rest happened in a blur. They were quickly admitted into the hospital and Shane's soiled clothes were replaced with a stiff yet scratchy hospital gown. Dr. Patel stated that he was already five centimetres dilated and eligible for an epidural, which he immediately asked for. She then left them to allow Shane to dilate some more.

Now, in their dimly lit room, Shane hunched over his hospital bed as Ilya firmly pressed onto his lower back, applying some pressure to relieve the pain ripping through him. Shane did his best to focus on breathing and picturing their baby in a few short hours, but it was hard.

"Curse you and your hockey player genes," Shane mumbled. "This baby is huge because of you."

"I'm sorry, *my beloved*. I don't like to see you in so much pain," Ilya steadily spoke, continuing to press Shane's back. "I would do anything to take it away."

"I want to switch a position. This one isn't helping at all."

Even with the help of the epidural and Ilya's counter pressure, the pain was unlike anything that Shane had ever gone through before. It was like his body was slowly exploding and falling apart at the same time. With the two of them standing face-to-face, Ilya supported Shane's upper body weight as Shane leaned on him. She gently swayed side-to-side, hoping to help dilate Shane some more. Shane managed to muster a slight smile as Ilya started to hum.

"I'm sorry for being so mean to you," Shane whispered.

"You weren't being mean to me at all. It is true. My dumb hockey genes probably made *Malyshka* huge."

"But your genes are probably going to make him beautiful." Shane wasn't particularly comfortable enough to keep talking, but speaking with Ilya seemed to help distract him from everything going on. Between having a slight laugh with Ilya or screaming out in pain, Shane would much rather choose the former.

"It is your genes that are going to make him the most beautiful, Sweetheart. I hope he has your freckles."

"I hate to break it to you, Ilya. Babies don't come out of the womb with freckles—it takes a couple of years to develop."

“Doesn’t matter. I still want him to have them later.”

“I still don’t get why you like them so much.”

“I can’t explain it. They are what stood out to me the moment I saw you, and I have been obsessed with them since.”

Shane lifted his head to meet Ilya’s eyes for just one moment. “You saw my freckles and immediately thought, ‘wow, this man is so hot?’”

“It’s the truth. I thought you were the most beautiful person I had ever seen.”

“Weirdo.” After a few moments of silence, Shane added: “I was too stubborn to admit that you were attractive at first, but I could never forget your eyes or your curls.”

Ilya ran his fingers through the hair on the back of Shane’s head. He was sure that his hair was all matted with sweat but Ilya didn’t seem to mind at all.

“Look at us,” Shane lightly chuckled. “We were so obsessed with each other and thought we’d give it a go at giving the world more of us.”

Only Ilya could ever get Shane comfortable enough in a moment of terrifying pain to joke around.

As another contraction coursed through his body, Ilya held Shane through every second of it, holding him and whispering encouragements in his ear.

“I think that is less than four minutes from the last one,” Ilya noted.

The baby was coming very soon. Shane’s chest lurched and he was suddenly very aware of how low *Malyshka* sat in his body.

“I can’t do this, Ilya. I’m scared.”

“I know. It is very scary, but you are brave. You are so brave and you can do it. I will be here with you for every step of the way. Just like you said before, we will get through this together, yes?”

Shane nodded with hot tears rolling down his face.

“You are not alone. I am right here.”

With careful maneuvering, Shane was back on the hospital bed. Dr. Patel soon came in and confirmed that Shane was fully dilated and could start pushing as soon as the next contraction came. The nurses helped position Shane’s legs onto stirrups and his bed was inclined so that he was practically sitting up.

Terrified didn’t seem like a sufficient word to describe how Shane felt. Whatever emotion was coursing through his body, it was all-consuming. Just this morning, Shane was still

heavily pregnant and it was just the two of them. Now, they were both going to become fathers. Everything was progressing way too quickly.

The pain of his fingernails digging into the back of his thigh felt like nothing compared to the amount of pressure Shane felt below as he pushed. It was nearly impossible not to scream. Ilya didn't once complain about how Shane was crushing his hand. Instead, Ilya calmly spoke words of encouragement and rubbed Shane's shoulders. Somehow, Ilya had even magically procured a damp cloth and blotted Shane's forehead with it.

"Okay, Shane. Push, push, push, push," Dr. Patel said from the foot of the bed.

With every ounce of energy in his body, Shane pushed through the pain, hoping that every push would bring their baby boy closer to his arms.

"You're doing so great, *my beloved*. I'm so proud of you," Ilya spoke as Shane's chest heaved for air.

"I can see the head!" Dr. Patel exclaimed.

With a quick peak, Ilya seemingly melted. "He has your hair, Shane."

"Really?" Shane panted.

Sweat and tears rolled down Shane's face in unison as he tried to recover from pushing. Shane was exhausted and he wanted to give up, but he couldn't. Even if he felt the fatigue and pain deep in his bones, he desperately wanted to meet their baby, who apparently had his hair. Any amount of pain would be worth that.

Before Shane could catch his breath, another contraction constricted his muscles, forcing him to push. If Shane thought the pain was bad before, he was dead wrong. The sheer agony of feeling his baby's shoulders stretch through him was more excruciating than he could have ever imagined.

"Ilya," Shane cried as he pushed. "It hurts so much."

"I know, I know, but you are doing so well. You are so strong and brave. *Malyshka* is almost here. Just a few more pushes."

"You're doing great, Dad," Dr. Patel added. "Just one more push. Try to be a little gentle with this next one—you're close to tearing but you're not there yet."

Ilya continued to dab the sweat away from Shane's face, even planting a kiss onto Shane's temple.

"How's your hand?" Shane weakly asked, feeling his body prepare itself for yet another contraction.

"You're asking me about my hand?" Ilya said with slumped shoulders. "You're the one who's giving birth, *Shanya*. I'm completely fine."

Shane wasn't sure why he was asking. The blinding pain was making his brain numb and foggy.

With what Shane hoped was the last contraction, Shane pushed while keeping Dr. Patel's words in mind. It only took seconds before it felt like the baby slipped out of him.

"Congratulations, it's a boy!"

The deafening silence of the room that followed Dr. Patel's exclamation rang in Shane's ears like tinnitus. Shane felt like he couldn't breathe.

"Is he okay?" Shane cried.

Ilya glanced over and watched. As he couldn't see past his own legs, Shane observed how Ilya's worried eyes followed the movement in the room.

Then, cries erupted in the room—the sounds of their baby rang out loud and clear in their ears. Shane sobbed as Dr. Patel placed their *Malyshka* onto his chest. He was covered in some vernix caseosa and blood, but Shane didn't care at all. With shaky hands, Shane rubbed the soft skin on *Malyshka*'s back.

"Hi baby," Shane cried. "Welcome to the world."

"He's perfect," Ilya said, eyes watery. "You did so good."

"No wonder I had so much heartburn," Shane laughed as his fingers grazed across the baby's full head of hair. It was just a tad lighter in colour than Shane's hair but it was showing signs that it would probably be textured like Ilya's hair.

"Papa, would you like to cut the umbilical cord?" Dr. Patel asked.

With careful hands, Ilya cut the umbilical cord with a pair of sharp shears. Even though his body was trembling and shaking like a leaf, Shane kept his eyes on *Malyshka* and watched as he calmly opened his eyes for the very first time. It was a little hard to see but Shane was sure that he had blue eyes.

"*Ilyusha*, he has your eyes."

"He does?" Ilya's face melted into sheer bliss as he examined their baby.

Despite all of the pain, seeing Ilya and their baby together made everything worth it for Shane. He would go through this unspeakable pain again in a heartbeat if it meant that he and Ilya could keep expanding their love and family.

A nurse with blonde hair and bright scrubs walked up to the bed. "Dads, would it be okay if I took the baby for a moment to get him checked up?"

The absence of their baby's weight and warmth from Shane's chest was immediately palpable. Even as Shane delivered the placenta, all he could think about was when his baby

would be returned to his arms. He worried that *Malyshka* would be cold and scared without his daddy and papa by his side.

After what seemed like forever, the nurse returned with *Malyshka* all bundled up. “Baby is perfectly healthy. He is eight pounds and fifteen ounces.”

“I am so sorry, *Shanya*. That must have really hurt.” Ilya shot Shane an apologetic look.

“I told you. He inherited your big hockey genes,” Shane laughed.

“Would you like to hold him?” The nurse asked Ilya.

Ilya looked at Shane, who nodded in encouragement. Ilya had already waited more than long enough to feel their baby in his arms. The moment *Malyshka* was placed in Ilya’s arms, Ilya cooed and lightly bounced him up and down. Shane was right all along: Ilya was born to be a natural father. Shane didn’t doubt it for one second.

Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Shane and Ilya experience fatherhood.

Even though Shane's body was impossibly tired and sore after giving birth, he knew that his parents had been anxiously waiting for the delivery of their grandchild. Ilya had messaged them to let them know they could come up. Shane couldn't do anything but rest his eyes as he waited for them to come.

"How is my baby doing?" Yuna whispered as she and David came in the room with a large teddy bear. Both of them already seemed a little bit teary eyed.

Immediately, Shane found himself in his mom's arms and then his dad's in rapid succession. Shane made sure not to move too much or to jostle his IV around, but he couldn't help but hug his parents back. He had never felt so grateful for everything that his parents did to bring him to the world.

"Tired," Shane groaned with a hoarse voice as his parents hugged Ilya too.

"You did the hardest thing in the entire world, Shane," Yuna said. "Of course you're going to be tired."

"Is there anything we can do for the two of you?" David asked.

"We're good, Dad. Ilya made sure that we would have everything that we could possibly need. Would you like to meet your grandson?" Shane tried to muster up a smile.

"Of course we would."

Slowly, Ilya rolled over the bassinet with *Malyska* still asleep inside. His parents immediately walked over and fawned over the new baby. Ilya looked impossibly proud as he showed off their baby.

"Oh he has your lips, Ilya, and Shane's nose too," Yuna cooed.

"You two have made a beautiful baby," David added.

"He's perfect, isn't he?" Ilya beamed.

"What's his name?" David asked.

Ilya looked at Shane to provide the answer. They had chosen a name while they were at the cottage but kept it a secret the entire time. No matter how much anyone begged, they just kept calling their baby *Malyshka*.

“Michael Ilyich Hollander-Rozanov, or Misha for short,” Shane replied.

“Misha. What a wonderful name.” Yuna wiped away a few tears.

“Mikhail Ilyich Hollander-Rozanov just seemed a little too much—too Russian—so Michael it was,” Ilya chuckled. “Would you like to hold him?”

David and Yuna eagerly nodded and took turns holding their grandson after thoroughly washing their hands. Both of them remarked how big of a baby Misha was, which Shane was all too aware of. Apparently, Shane weighed eight pounds ten ounces when he was born, so Misha wasn’t too far ahead. He could only assume that Ilya was a big baby as well. Despite all of this commotion, Misha was blissfully unaware of his grandparents’ presences and remained unbothered and asleep. He probably got that from Ilya.

Shane reached out for Misha before he was put back into the bassinet and quickly had his baby in his arms. He was already missing having Misha inside of him, though he was also thankful. Shane couldn’t believe that he had carried such a large baby for so long—it was a miracle that he didn’t give birth sooner.

“We won’t bother you two for much longer. Call us if you need anything, and I do mean anything. We’ll come by the house once you two return to help out and drop off some meals too,” Yuna said.

“Thank you.” Ilya smiled.

Yuna wrapped Ilya in another hug. “Anything for you two. And thank you for taking such good care of them. I really appreciate it.”

It never got old to Shane to see his parents be so loving to Ilya. What was he so scared of when he first introduced them? It was as if Ilya had always been their son.

Ilya’s eyes began to water. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s *everything*, Ilya. But you also have to take care of yourself, okay? I won’t stand seeing any of my sons getting hurt.”

Ilya nodded.

“You two take care, okay?” David said before they left.

As soon as Ilya saw them out the door, he found his way to Shane’s side. The two of them couldn’t get enough of Misha and couldn’t help but study his tiny features even more than they already had. Shane patted the space beside him and Ilya gingerly joined him on the bed, though he was squished to the side. Despite this, Ilya let Shane rest on his chest and wrapped his arms around Shane and Misha.

“I still can’t believe he’s here,” Shane whispered, letting his fingertip trace Misha’s faint eyebrows.

“You did amazing, *my beloved*. Thank you.” Ilya kissed Shane’s temple. “Thank you.”

Shane hummed in acknowledgment and leaned back into Ilya’s embrace.

The first meal after giving birth was nothing short of blissful. Shane requested that Ilya order burgers and milkshakes with extra fries, and maybe a can or two of ginger ale. (It had to be from a can, not a soda fountain because it was extra crisp that way.) He was finally hungry and did not want his first meal to be plain and salty hospital food.

After the first bite of burger, Shane nearly moaned in delight. He had been too nauseous from pain in the past few days, so he couldn’t really keep anything down. Now, he could eat practically anything that he wanted.

“That good, huh?” Ilya watched in amusement.

“Amazing. The best thing I’ve ever put in my mouth.”

Ilya smirked but swallowed the comment he had come up with. Instead, he kissed Shane’s cheek.

Shane scarfed the entire meal down in mere minutes, his body hungrier than he had thought. He sipped on his ginger ale as Misha started to stir beside him. Immediately, Shane rolled the bassinet closer to him and gently patted Misha’s tiny body to soothe him. Still, Misha whimpered and his face scrunched up before letting out a cry.

“Are you finally hungry?”

A nurse had come by previously to show Shane how to help Misha latch but Misha just wouldn’t—it seemed like he wasn’t hungry at all. Still weak, Shane was sure to be slow and careful as he scooped Misha out of the bassinet. As Misha cried, Shane unclasped his hospital gown and guided Misha to his chest.

With open-mouthed nasally whines, Misha continued to cry without attempting to latch on. His lips grazed against Shane’s nipple several times without any luck. Shane desperately wanted Misha to eat, not only for his baby to get sustenance, but also for himself. This was a monumental moment for the two of them that he just wanted to get right.

“Come on, *Malyshka*. Let’s get some food in you, huh?” Shane pleaded.

Coming out of the ensuite bathroom, Ilya immediately noticed the commotion and came to Shane’s side. He rubbed soothing circles into Shane’s shoulder as Misha cried and failed to eat. Ilya’s presence did help, but Shane just felt so helpless—he couldn’t get this one thing

right. It should be easy. It should be second nature for both him and Misha. Panic started to bubble up in Shane's throat.

"Misha," Ilya warmly whispered. "Please eat."

Almost immediately, he latched on and started suckling. The sensation was unlike anything that Shane could have expected. It was strange but extremely fulfilling. Misha finally had started breastfeeding.

"He likes to listen to his papa," Shane chuckled. He couldn't take his eyes off of Misha and how his chubby cheeks moved as he drank.

"Hmm I think he just likes to please his daddy the way his papa does."

After several minutes of feeding, which included a very necessary change to Shane's other breast, Misha was done his first meal. Ilya offered to take Misha and slowly walked around the room as he burped the baby over his shoulder. Even though Misha was medically classified as a large baby, he looked impossibly tiny in Ilya's arms—he was a tiny bundle and Ilya's hand covered the entirety of Misha's back. And despite his overall strength and stature, Ilya was so gentle with the baby, giving firm but tender pats. Watching Ilya like this made Shane feel like he was falling in love all over again.

The first time Ilya changed Misha's diaper, Ilya was scared shitless. He was already scared of messing up the entire ordeal, but once he saw the sight before him, his fear shifted into something else entirely. From the many books that he and Shane had borrowed and bought, Ilya had read that baby's first poo would be strange. But he never expected his baby's diaper to completely black for his first change. Upon seeing it in person, Ilya immediately asked the nurse who was guiding him if this was normal.

"It should not be this colour, yes?" Ilya asked with panic.

"It does look scary but this is completely normal," the nurse lightheartedly replied. "This is the baby passing everything he had in the womb. Their excretions will be this colour for the first few days and then will become what we think of as normal shortly after."

They were in the ensuite bathroom giving Misha his first diaper change while Shane was sleeping and recovering. The nurse, a woman with sandy curls and green eyes, calmly walked Ilya through every single step and was completely unnerved by Ilya's panic. Ilya really tried his best not to think about how much she reminded him of his own mother.

Shane did so unbelievably well in the delivery. Ilya didn't know what he could possibly do to thank Shane for bringing their baby into the world—everything just seemed too insufficient. He supposed that all he could do for now was take care of Shane and Misha to the best of his ability, which was what he planned to do all along.

Ilya skeptically accepted the answer and focused on Misha, who was calmly looking up at them with his curious hazel eyes. He wasn't even disturbed when Ilya unwrapped him from his swaddle. Misha was a very calm baby, which Ilya had to attribute to Shane, despite Shane's protests. Ilya wasn't sure what he was like as a baby but he was sure that he was nothing short of a whirlwind.

Looking at his baby, Ilya still couldn't believe that they had such a perfect baby who looked like the perfect blend of the two of them. Just like Yuna said, Misha had his lips but Shane's nose. He also had Shane's paler skin and thick thighs, which Ilya adored. Ilya couldn't wait to see how much more Misha looked like his dad as he grew. And he couldn't wait to see how he took on both of their personalities either.

"We have to be gentle with babies but they are a lot more sturdier than we think," the nurse continued. "So, Dad, I'm going to have you take this wet wipe and just gently wipe away the rest of the excrement. We want to make sure that we use scent-free wipes or a wet washcloth works well too, and we always wipe front to back."

Ilya did as he was told, making sure to memorize each and every detail. Still, Misha did not cry. Even when Ilya lifted his legs to get a better angle, Misha only tiredly and slowly blinked at Ilya. Maybe Misha was competing for world's calmest baby. After all, he did have both Ilya and Shane's genes, which only meant that Misha was going to be extremely competitive. Ilya felt sorry for the babies that Misha was secretly competing with—he was going to leave them all in the dust.

"You're doing great! So now we'll just dry off baby Michael and then apply some cream so that he doesn't develop a rash later on. Just a thin layer will do."

Despite the nurse's words, Ilya squeezed a little bit too much cream onto his fingers. He constantly forgot how little Misha's body was and would, therefore, only need a minuscule amount. He wiped some of the excess off with a wipe and started to rub it over his baby's smooth, delicate skin.

"And now we'll just slide the new diaper underneath him and fasten it. Just like you're doing! Wow, you're a natural."

"I think this is just beginner's luck," Ilya said as he made sure the diaper was secure around Misha.

"No, no, you're doing great, Dad. And that's it! We'll probably give Michael his first bath tomorrow. We typically don't give newborns baths right away because their umbilical cords can be too sensitive and prone to infection. If you need anything, even if it's not to do with diapers, please just give us a call."

"Thank you very much for your help," Ilya said as he put Misha into a onesie, which had a little bear on it.

After picking him up, Misha made small noises in Ilya's arms, which made Ilya's legs feel like jelly. Still, Ilya persisted and walked out with the nurse. In his bed, Shane was awake

now. His hair was matted against his forehead and his eyes were framed with dark circles. Ilya hated that Shane had to suffer so much. Seeing him like this made Ilya's heart wrench.

"There are my boys," Shane said with half-opened eyes.

"I'm sorry—I did not mean to wake you." Ilya rocked Misha in his arms.

"You didn't. I couldn't really sleep anyways. I'm still a little too uncomfortable to doze off."

"Do you need anything? I can get the nurse to come back to get you checked out."

"It's okay. It's just my body trying to adjust to giving birth to our gigantic baby boy," Shane lightly laughed.

Ilya kissed Shane's forehead. "Do you want to hold him?"

"Maybe later," Shane groaned, already looking like he could fall asleep at a moment's notice.

"Rest, *my beloved*. We will both be here when you wake up."

With a small hum, Shane closed his eyes.

Ilya stayed by his side until Shane's chest steadily rose up and down. Then, he stood by the window, watching the fluffy white clouds float along the cerulean blue sky. His mother's crucifix sat heavily against his sternum as he held onto Misha.

The clouds suddenly parted and its warm rays shone upon the two of them. Ilya knew that his mother was watching over them, just as she had for Ilya's entire life. He just wished that she could have been here.

"Your grandmother would have loved you, just as she would have loved your daddy."

Misha looked absolutely tiny in his carseat and was engulfed by the hand-knitted blanket that Yuna had made for him. He passed his carseat test with flying colours because he was an unbelievably unbothered baby. Now, after two days of recovery, they could finally go home.

Ilya ran to their car, which had a mountain of tickets on it that he promptly hid, and drove to the entrance of the hospital, where Shane and Misha were. Just as he did when they arrived, Ilya parked the car and slowly guided Shane to the car. This time, Ilya also firmly held onto the carseat that carried their baby by its handle. The carseat easily locked in while Shane got comfortable in the backseat.

"Ready to go?"

"All set, Papa!" Shane gave Ilya a thumbs up, which Ilya saw through the rearview mirror.

The entire ride home constituted of Ilya glancing up at Shane through the mirror several times. Each time he looked up, he couldn't help but gush over how fondly Shane looked at their Misha. Shane's eyes were filled with nothing but utter love as he gently patted Misha's stomach. Ilya wondered if Misha was awake—he was sleeping when they left. But, as they came to find out, Misha often woke up by himself and just stared at the room until someone noticed him. He only really cried if he was hungry or needed a change.

As soon as they arrived home, Ilya immediately sensed that their house was different. It was clean. Their house was by no means dirty or messy in any sense of the word—even deep into his pregnancy, Shane made sure that everything was as meticulous as possible, so much so that you could practically eat off of any given surface. However, the morning before Misha's arrival, Ilya had left a dirty plate by the sink and there was a pile of half-folded laundry on the couch. Now, they were gone and everything seemed even cleaner than usual. David and Yuna must have come by and cleaned up everything for them. Eventually, Ilya even found a little post-it note on the fridge that said that David's famous chicken parmesean was in the freezer for them to eat at any time.

As much as he tried to accept it, Ilya really couldn't believe that this was his life now—he had a family. Ilya made a mental note to treat his in-laws to a nice dinner or vacation later to show his gratitude, though they deserved so much more than that.

While Shane settled on the couch, Ilya rolled over the bassinet he assembled months prior and settled a very sleepy Misha into it. Ilya gently pushed the bassinet back and forth to lull him to sleep. Shane settled into Ilya's side with a soft sigh.

Looking around, Ilya felt like the house that he had bought on a whim long ago finally felt like home to him. He had his love—who he thought was always going to be out of reach—nuzzling against Ilya's neck, and his baby was sound asleep. Ilya could just picture it now: in a few years time, there would be little feet pattering around the living room as Ilya chased their children around and playfully wrestled them on the very couch they sat on now. Or, in the kitchen, Shane would be standing by the island, absolutely covered in stains, and teaching their children to cook. Shane would probably be abhorred by the mess they were creating, but would still enjoy the memories they were creating.

Ilya couldn't wait for the future to come. All he wanted to do was spend his time with his family.

"I love you," Shane sleepily sighed.

"I love you too, *my Shanya*."

Chapter 33: Epilogue

Chapter Notes

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

Seven Years Later

Ilya looked at the collection of granola bars at the grocery store. He didn't understand why children's granola bars had so many flavours: regular chocolate chip, caramel, s'mores, cinnamon bun, banana bread, and even cereal-based ones like Lucky Charms. They were all confusing as they were fun.

Shane didn't like the kids eating most of them as he called them glorified candy bars. Instead, Shane made homemade granola bars for the kids on most weekends so that they would have a healthier alternative with much less sugar. Still, Ilya liked to treat the kids to some of these candy bars on special days. It was Misha's first game in the U9 division tomorrow, and Ilya wanted Misha to have a little bit of a pick-me-up before the game started. Just like both Shane and Ilya, Misha had took to hockey like a fish to water. Unfortunately for Shane, Misha had also developed a sweet tooth just like his papa, so chocolate granola bars with peanut butter chips were very necessary. After all, someone wise once gave Ilya a sweet treat before an important presentation, which he aced, so a sweet before important events were as crucial as they were nonnegotiable.

As Ilya walked through the aisle, box of granola bars in hand, he made sure to put an extra bounce in his step. It took him forever to finally get Emi to fall asleep in the carrier as she was at the age where she was teething and absolutely resisted sleep. So, he was going to make sure she stayed asleep. Looking down, her chubby cheeks were pressed firmly against Ilya's chest and her tiny sandy curls peaked out from the sides of her pink hat. She had no signs of stirring, so Ilya continued bouncing through the aisles, even if doing so made him look like a madman.

"You're silly, Papa," Mari laughed, trying to imitate Ilya's walk.

"Oh am I? I don't think it's silly to walk like this." Ilya smiled at the way his daughter's blue eyes crinkled in delight.

"Ilya," Shane said in a low voice as he pushed a cart beside Ilya. In his hand, Shane clutched onto a long, handwritten grocery list.

After all of these years of being together, Ilya loved that he could still embarrass and annoy his husband, especially out in public. Having kids only made teasing Shane that much more exciting and easy to do—the three of them, soon four, were on the same mission to make their Daddy as happy as possible and were willing to do that however possible, even if it meant some embarrassment was involved.

"I'm just making sure that little Emi stays asleep, Shane," Ilya said, trying to pronounce Shane's name the same way that Shane had said his.

“Okay, fine. Hey, Misha, let’s not get too far ahead, yeah? You need to stay where Papa and I can see you.”

“Sorry, Dad. I was just looking at the ingredients on the crackers.”

Up ahead, Misha was squinting at a box of Triscuits. Even though Misha had inherited Ilya’s hazel eye colour, he had inherited every part of Shane’s farsightedness too. He already wore glasses at school and whenever he read at home, but he didn’t like to wear them when they were out and about. In this sense, Misha was the exact same as his daddy, who still refused to admit that he needed glasses more often than he wore them.

“That’s alright, *malyshka*. We can get those if you’d like,” Shane replied.

“Can we get these too?” Mari ran up to them with a package of birthday cake flavoured cookies. “Papa and Daddy like these, right?”

“Sweetheart, your Aunt Jackie and cousins are coming over later. They said they’ll be bringing the dessert. If you put those away, you might be able to eat Aunt Jackie’s cake,” Ilya explained.

Without much of a fuss, Mari ran and placed the cookies back into their rightful place. She always did love her Aunt Jackie’s cooking, especially her chocolate lava cake. Mari seemed to love wearing Jackie’s lava cake as much as she loved eating it, seeing as she got it all over her face every single time she ate it. The twins liked to tease that she loved the cake so much that she wanted to become one with it, which wasn’t entirely wrong. Ilya just needed to make sure to save some energy later to wrangle Mari into taking a bath later tonight.

“You always seem to forget that Hayden will be coming too,” Shane said with amusement in his voice.

“Hmm I wonder why. Must’ve just slipped my mind. Oops.”

“You still hate him? Even after you guys bonded like that?”

Ilya shuddered in disgust.

Shortly after having Mari, Yuna and David offered to take care of the kids so that they could have a double date with the Pikes. It turned out that fatherhood had softened in Ilya in ways that he couldn’t have anticipated—it made him weak to alcohol. He was weak to watery Canadian alcohol! After just one drink, he found himself singing to “A Thousand Miles” at the bar with an arm slung around Hayden, who was equally drunk. Shane and Jackie both made sure to take plenty of photos and videos, and they still brought it up whenever they pleased, which was constantly. Ilya was never going to live it down.

“Please, *my beloved*, enough with the reminders. I am too happy right now to be reminded of that.”

Shane flashed a pleased smile before retrieving the next item from his list.

There was absolutely nothing in the world that could take Ilya's happiness away from him. Looking at his children and husband in the grocery store with him, Ilya felt like he was the luckiest man in the world—everything he could have ever wished for, he had. Though there were still occasional hard days where he couldn't climb out of bed, he had four separate reasons to help him conquer the darkness.

It was funny how years ago, he wondered if coming to Ottawa was a mistake. Ilya was so lost and didn't know that he carried so much on his shoulders. Everyone told him that he had made the single worse career move possible in the entire history of the NHL. Now, he knew that coming here was the best decision he could have ever made. Here, Ilya found his love again and built his family—he owed everything he had to the place he called home.

Chapter End Notes

Just like that, this fic is done! This was the very first fanfic (or even work of fiction) that I have ever completed, so I am very thankful for everyone of you who stuck through it and read until the very end.

I'm not entirely ready to let go of this story yet. Inspired by the format of the beautifully written one-shot stories by @hollanov_1410 ([Our House](#)), I've decided to also write some one-shots too! These will cover both parts of Ilya and Shane's past that I didn't get to delve into, as well as their future with their children. Please look forward to those in the near future!

Update: the first one-shot is officially up! It follows Misha through the years as he protects his baby sisters: [Misha The Gentle Giant](#).

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!