

wiC\$h liC\$t

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by [safeandsound13](#)

Summary

Ilya tries to soft-launch the idea of retirement to Shane.

Or:

“Don’t have panic attack,” he starts with a squeeze of his fingers around his, which is probably a bad place to do that, the starting. He makes an effort to speak faster, “After we win Cup, I quit.”

There.

“Quit what?” Shane searches his eyes, bouncing between left and right and back.

Ilya can’t help but laugh at his husband, as if the concept of ‘quitting’ and ‘hockey’ in the same sentence has never occurred to him before. It probably hasn’t. While he takes a deep inhale, Ilya adjusts his hold on the bag of ice on his angry, swollen knee that is in the middle of a suicide mission in protest of Ilya playing a professional sport in his late thirties. “Hockey.”

Notes

the worm in my brain was starving for so long it's latched onto any shilya crumb like shane on his macrobiotic diet stumbling on to a sweaty cold can of ginger ale so this is solely inspired by "i just want you, have a couple kids, got the whole block looking like you. we tell the world to leave us the fuck alone.....and they do!!! wow!!!!(genetic)"
#settledownacousticversion & to the tay haters—girl... whatever!!!

thank u to mallika for beta-ing, my lover forever but not in the way ilya or taylor meant it but a secret third thing

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



“—that deke, because if Haas had tightened up that pass a little on third shift and Sekido-Jones moved up faster, we could keep cycling...” Shane hashes out almost on auto-pilot, putting his car keys down on the console table next to their front door. They’re in their Ottawa apartment, as is routine during the season, and despite Christmas slowly creeping around the corner, there’s still bats and spider-themed shit all over their walls and furniture. They need more naps, more restorative electrolytes mixed with top-shelf painkillers and hail mary’s, more physical therapy and deep tissue massages and medical-grade KT-tape bought in bulk, now than they did when they were shiny and twenty and their joints didn’t protest every time they thought of breathing.

Or at least Ilya’s do. Shane is irritably in shape, and only ever needs his designated eight hours of sleep to wake up with a will to live. They don’t have enough *time* to put ‘taking down the fucking Halloween decorations’ on their to-do-list this time of the season, but if they leave it long enough Yuna might stage an intervention and put David to work. It’s kind of their go-to game plan nowadays. Ilya’s husband’s post-hockey game rambling is very cute, but his knee is killing him, and there’s an insistent twinge in his back, and he’s *so* fucking exhausted, and he might have hallucinated saying Shane’s name out loud, so he does it again as he falls down on one of their green kitchen table chairs with a wince, “*Shane.*”

His husband pauses while hanging his coat in their closet, pulling up his shoulders closer to his ears. “Yes?”

“Come,” he assures him softly with a fond look Ilya hopes conveys what he knows is true—*nobody is dying, even if it might feel like that at first, sweetheart, but I promise, we will be okay*—and then tougher when Shane looks between Ilya and Ilya’s haphazardly kicked off Reebok sneakers by the door. His instincts are probably screaming at him to fix the mess first, but they’re at civil war with honoring his husband’s request. “Shane, sit down.”

Ilya presses the sweaty icepack the doctor at the rink gave him to the other side of his resentful knee (but *hey*, they won, so it was worth it), pushing out the chair kitty-corner from his with his other foot, jutting his chin at it. “*Please*, sit down.”

When he’s tired he starts slurring a little, and his accent gets heavier, and his English gets worse. Very annoying, that even after living more than half his life in not-Russia, it’s still his baseline when he’s not a hundred percent on. Shane speaks the basics and then some by now, so Ilya could probably get away with doing this in Russian, but Shane is going to need to hear this in plain, basic English. No room for anything getting lost in translation. Preferably before David comes to drop off Anya—although he’s walked in on worse things.

Shane sinks down in the chair slowly, palms on top of his spread thighs. He looks at Ilya questioningly, an edge of fear in his big brown eyes. His right cheekbone is a mottled deep red and dark blue from a misplaced elbow earlier tonight, and Ilya’s thumb twitches on top of the table from the need to reach out and touch the freckles muddled under it.

Ilya covers one of his hands with his own, knowing he is just going to have to bite the bullet before Shane starts spiraling and imagining he's about to petition for a divorce. "Don't have panic attack," he starts with a squeeze of his fingers around his, which is probably a bad place to do that, the starting. He makes an effort to speak faster, "After we win Cup, I quit."

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"Hockey."

Shane's eyes widen almost comically, and Ilya bites his lip briefly to keep from smiling, which he's too run down to anyway. The truth bursts out of him like a dam breaking loose: "I'm exhausted. I cannot do this anymore. I'm thirty-eight. My body hurts. It is falling apart. I want to never see inside of gym again. I want to throw away skates and, and stick tape, and burn all mouthguards even if plastic smells bad. I want normal, regular pancakes with butter, *God*, I want the fucking butter so bad, and, and *real* milkshakes. No fucking protein powder or I kill myself. I want to sleep for six weeks. I want to get three more dogs. I want to only use plane for vacation to see you in tiny shorts in Spain or Greece or, or Bali. I want to get fat," he groans longingly at the thought, throwing his head back. "I want to get fat so bad."

Once back upright, Ilya watches a million and one little thoughts and feelings shutter over Shane's face, notices his Adam's apple bob up and down as he swallows tightly. His hand squeezes Ilya's back, and it's damp from sweat. "I can't quit," Shane says quietly, resigned.

Ilya leans forward, chucking the dripping bag into the sink so he can cup Shane's cheek instead. His thumb runs up the curve of it, Shane's eyes closing briefly, lingering, leaning into his touch. His dark lashes brush the tip of Ilya's finger and his heart twinges in his chest. Softly, Ilya wonders, "Are you never tired?" *Wrong thing to say*, Ilya thinks as soon as he says it. Of course he isn't. He's superhuman, made out of creatine powder, lean meat and yoga positions. "Shane Hollander," he whispers, saying it like an awed color-commentator on a MHL livestream. "Five cups, 'bout to win sixth. What you always wanted. So many records broken, so many barriers overcome—Sekido-Jones! He joined the Centaurs because of *you*. Gold medal with Canada without husband because he wasn't Canadian enough yet." He grins mirthfully, trying to soften the blow of—well, *everything*. This is a lot for Shane, he knows it is. It's a lot for Ilya too, but he's had longer to come to terms with it. "You know how Canada has stupid saying about leaving on high notes? Probably stupid saying for reason."

"Not really," Shane answers his first question, definitely still stuck there. His dark brows furrow together, as if the answer to all of this is obvious. "Your knee will get better."

Ilya sighs heavily. "Is not my knee. Or my hip. Or my ribs, my head, my ankle, my groin. Or my fucking right wrist. Or the back that wants to kill me. Is everything." Every morning he wakes up and his body still functions normally, he's genuinely surprised. But it's not *just* that, because ignoring physical pain is in the textbook description of being a pro-hockey player,

and he's always been good at bearing down and going on. He's just lost the *why*. His hand waves around wildly, "If I have to take one more beating by rookie half my age, I might slit my throat with my skate. Am old like Scott Hunter was when Admirals won only Cup ever." Ilya deflates visibly, reaching out to briefly pinch Shane's chin between his fingers, then adds, softer, "And I want to take Rose up on offer. Remember?"

"I remember," Shane murmurs, nearly a whisper. His head shakes imperceptibly, fingers curling into a fist, eyes darting around the room rapidly: in resolve mode. "We could still do that if we keep playing. My mom loves a good project. My parents would help—"

"I know. Don't want to do that though," Ilya smiles apologetically, because he really *is* sorry, forehead tilting forward to Shane's. "I want to be home."

Shane leans into his touch fully, eyelids fluttering shut, drawing strength. They stay like that for a moment, before something worse seems to occur to Shane, eyes springing open. "Do you want me to retire too?"

"*Net*," Ilya presses, frowning slightly as he pulls back from his husband. "I want you to do what's best for you."

To all of the fucking credit in the world, Shane is so earnest in his consideration of what Ilya is saying. His eyes flutter shut, his teeth worrying on the inside of his cheek. After a few quiet moments, he looks up at Ilya and whispers, "I'm not ready."

Ilya's forehead knocks into Shane's shoulder as he drops it. He inhales sharply—lemon and the bodywash from their shower at the rink and their laundry detergent—and then mumbles into his collarbone, "Is okay. I can just be trophy husband, *da*? Uh.. WAG?"

"I'm sorry," Shane laments sadly, his fingers twisting into the curls at the back of Ilya's head.

"Is really OK, Shane. I know you're not ready. Not yet. You will be." Ilya drags himself upright and kisses Shane's forehead, the edge of his eyebrow, the bridge of his nose. He presses Shane's face in his shoulder this time, offering any comfort he needs. His knee cries out from the strain as he shifts forward, but he doesn't give a fuck. Lips against the crown of Shane's head, he muses, "For the record, Hollander, I think you could play for another ten years and still be the best. If that's what you want." He smacks a loud kiss against his hairline, teasing. "You're best hockey player alive, now that I'm retiring."

Shane chuckles softly, and then after a beat, fingers curled into Ilya's shirt right at his waist, mutters into his neck, "I don't want to play without you."

"I know," Ilya hedges, and he's sympathetic, he is, but he can't lie to him. "But you will have to." He noses along Shane's temple, shifting a palm under his grey GymShark sweatshirt at the small of his back and meeting bare, heated skin. "After we win Cup, okay? I had fun, but want different things now."

Shane pulls back, eyebrows raised with sincere curiosity. "You want to get fat?"

“What? You will not love me anymore when am fat?”

His husband narrows his beautiful eyes at him. “Don’t ask stupid questions.”

It’s quiet for a moment, arms wrapped around each other as they both adjust to this idea of a new reality in their near future.

Ilya watches carefully for any micro-shift in Shane’s expression. “At Christmas... We talk to Rose?” His tongue darts out to wet his bottom lip. “You want?”

Shane blinks rapidly, as if warding off images, and then a smile slowly spreads across his face, a little shy. “I want nothing more.”

Ilya tsks, but it’s fond and unbothered, tips of his fingers pressing into Shane’s spine. “We both know that’s lie, Hollander. You will always want hockey most.”

He can see the cogs start to turn in Shane’s head, which is part of the—well, it’s not a plan. But it’s not *not* a plan. It’s... Showing Shane there’s a light at the end of the tunnelvision. Ilya would feel bad about it, but anybody who’s ever been as tired as he is right now would understand.



“I’m so happy I get to do this for you guys,” Rose gushes, her hands on top of one of each of theirs across the table. The table at the cottage is set with placemats and napkins in soft shades of red and green, serving plates of glazed ham, *kimbap*, caramelized brussel sprouts, potatoes au gratin, and *pelmeni* in the middle polished off almost entirely. The TV in the living room is playing a mix of songs, a country cover of Last Christmas droning on while the lights from the six foot tree separating the two rooms covers them in a glow of slow-blinking rainbows. Her nails have tiny mistletoes on them, and Ilya fixates his gaze there to get his chest to feel a little less like it’s going to combust—nerves, excitement, love, gratitude, disbelief, the fear of God, all that shit. “I’m going to be the hottest and youngest and coolest aunt in the world.”

“If at any point—” Shane starts, voice trembling imperceptibly to anyone who doesn’t know him, but Rose is already shaking her head.

“I know,” she affirms, patting his hand in assurance. Her hair is currently dyed a dark brown with serious bangs for some fancy French arthouse film she’s wrapping up filming early in the new year. She’s playing a Belgian lesbian single mother who’s trying to get back into the men’s world of laser beam welding. *Oscar bait*, Rose had told him, probably because of the expression on his face hearing that. *And no kidnapping sadly*, she added for Shane’s benefit. “But I won’t, okay? I want to do this. I want to give you guys your family.”

Ilya's mouth feels close to the Sahara desert, and he might cry any second now, so instead he deflects. "Dumb Canada laws won't let us buy gift, but if I leave keys to pink Ashton Martin DBX 707 on table and you happen to take them and drive car home to Hollywood—"

Rose laughs, lowering her voice conspiratorially. Her cheeks are flushed, eyes shiny. "I'm gonna tell you guys a secret. That last X Squad: New Gen where I was back from the dead for a two minute hallucinatory cameo earned me more than you guys did for an entire season of hockey." She mimics an explosion with her fist, right by her temple. "Combined."

A car is stupid, anyway. Rose deserves daily baskets of fresh fruits and cheese flown in from the Alps, and 17 million Canadian dollars, and a nightly visit by the ghost of Orgasms Yet To Come, and her name and face on a Billboard in every metropolis in the world, and probably that Oscar, too. He doesn't know what could ever be *enough* anyway. It's too much. And they probably could never thank her properly for the sacrifice she's making, but anything she needs, ever, he's got her. Even just for trying to make this happen for them.

After finishing a healthy and noisy sip of her white wine, that has a straw in it for some reason, she continues while her tongue is actively battling to get that straw back in her mouth, "I'm just like, a really great, altruistic person who loves good karma, and you guys even more, and wants to see you have everything your little pure gay hearts desire."

A few years ago, Rose off-handedly told Shane she didn't want kids, so if there was anything she could do to help them out—donate an egg, or carry the egg, or steal a baby from a bad person—she would do it, no questions asked. "*Or a few, but like, without judgment.*" They talked about it at the time but they had only both been with the Centaurs for a year at that point, so they shelved the idea of it for later. They had Cups to win, Metros to embarrass, a league to dominate as a power couple, etc., etc. But *it* had been less in the back of Ilya's mind for the last year, and more at the forefront, like an obsession. Like flashes of a future he wanted *now*, not later, not on a shelf getting dusty waiting for them to be ready. Tiny, sticky fingers, and loud carefree giggles, and hopefully brown eyes and freckles and a thousand questions he doesn't immediately have answers for, but he'll do his best to look them up, and he'll do his best to be the dad he never got to have.

"Me most right," Ilya teases. The song changes to *Lovers Rock*—Ilya's playlist, because Shane still doesn't know who Phoebe Bridgers is despite claiming to be gay, but edited out all the Eastern European breakbeat dubstep and any hiphop song with a BPM higher than eighty for regular-stimulation purposes—snow flakes pressed against the tall glass windows of their cottage in a kaleidoscope of white looking over the dark lake. This, tonight, is everything he thought he'd never have.

Rose points a sharp fingernail at him, narrowing her eyes playfully. "Yours is only half pure and half gay, and you know Shane has a special place in my heart," she faux-fumes before transitioning into real-gushing, pressing her wine glass against the left side of her sequin-covered chest. His husband flushes, because of course he does. "Is Svetlana going to be jealous? The rankings have been updated. I'm officially the better Straight BFF for doing this."

Shane and Ilya laugh, and it's the latter who settles down first, rolling his eyes fondly. "Sveta too busy having big, American family with big idiot American hockey player. What? Four,

five babies now?” He looks over at Shane for confirmation as he blows a lackadaisical raspberry.

“Three,” Shane fills in, squeezing Ilya’s knee under the table. There’s a permanent flush high on his cheekbones now, and a dazed glaze over his brown eyes, and Ilya knows it’s not just the singular glass of wine he allowed himself to have, but also the impossibility of what they want so badly now so close within their grasp. He’s on the cusp of being overwhelmed, evident by the way he keeps biting the inside of his cheek. Ilya kisses his temple and covers Shane’s fingers with his, just to let him know he’s here. “But the twins are due in August, so it’ll be five then.”

Ilya curses, because *five* is sort of crazy, “Worse than Pikes. Straight people like dogs.” His mom used to always say if a woman’s feet were warm, it’d bring forth fertility. It’d explain why Sveta’s Uggs are like the third person in her and Ugly American’s marriage no matter the season. Ilya is rooting for the Uggs.

“Only... six more to go and she has herself a hockey team,” Rose helps, counting them out on her fingers, her blue eyes widening considerably and comically with each one added.

“They will be bad hockey team,” Ilya pledges, filling his and Rose’s glass with what’s left in the wine bottle. One of his curls falls in front of his eye as he shakes his head lightly at the thought of Svetlana’s offspring being like a second-coming of the Admirals, unfortunately. Sergio would probably kill himself. “Their sperm donor 89th best hockey player of MHL.”

Shane snorts, and it’s a little off still, but at least he smiles over at Ilya in that shared competitive kinship kind of way, which is good. “I *know* it kills her.”

Later, after they have finished off most of the dishes (Shane won’t sleep otherwise) and another bottle of wine, they spread out in front of the fire they started in the living room. Ilya’s on one end of the L-shaped couch, his feet in Shane’s lap who’s on the other end. There’s twelve-hundred pillows the last time Ilya counted, but God, they’re comfy.

Rose is on the floor when she leans over the coffee table to reach for Ilya’s plate. “I will make an appointment at the fertility clinic as soon as I get back home and let you guys know when you have to come in,” she informs them while stealing a piece of cheesecake crust, which he forgives her for. Not much to lift from Shane’s rabbit meal—he doesn’t ‘do’ dessert, and is instead eating mini rice crackers—anyway. Rose licks her thumb clean, off-handedly inquiring, “Have you guys already talked about who you want the biological father to be?”

“Me,” Shane blurts at the same time Ilya says, “Hollander.”

“Ilya insists,” Shane explains sheepishly, scratching his ear and evading direct eye-contact, while his husband rolls his eyes. “My genetics too good. Not fair to rest of tiny baby population.” Also, there’s too many bad Rozanov genes. Their child will be perfect regardless, obviously, but giving them Shane, and a little Yuna, and a bit of David is their best shot at being loved and actually being happy too. He smirks, lifting his socked foot up to poke at Shane’s face, or at least pretending like he is, because Shane predictably slaps it

down before he even gets past his chest. “And also the freckles. I want the baby to have them.”

Shane groans while throwing his head back against the couch, an arm slung across his face, and Rose giggles, obviously charmed by Ilya and his unending fascination with his husband’s prettiness, and not at all drunkenly. She rises to her feet to push Ilya’s feet away and ungracefully crash down beside Shane on the couch, legs folded up under her ass. Anya gives a little warning yip from her place right in front of the fire, but is too lazy to actually follow up on her protective threat. Rose hugs Shane’s arm to her chest, pressing her cheek against his while using her other hand to tap his nose fondly, “I will put it on top of the check list, underline it in red. Twice. Highlight in yellow. Freck-*uhl*ssss.”

“Rose Landry,” Ilya booms with a laugh, and maybe, Ilya will admit this, they shouldn’t have sneaked those glasses of champagne while doing the dishes. Shane—their voice of reason—was getting the fire started by himself to decompress in peace, and Rose and he giggled while repetitively exchanging soaking plates in soapy water with taking sips straight from the bottle under a half-damp dishtowel. *Invisibility cloak*, Rose had whispered furtively on a hiccup, which Ilya had thought was the funniest thing he’d heard since Hayden Pike was crowned second place on People Magazine’s Unconventionally Sexy short-list. “I must say thought of you being pregnant with Shane’s baby haunted me for many nights and many days and many mornings and evenings back in the day.” He jostles her thigh with his foot before sitting up with his elbows on his knees as he smirks cockily. “Even if Shane had to think of me to get it up and come inside you.”

(Look, Ilya never enjoyed hearing about Shane’s sexcapades with *Rose Landry*, but he didn’t hate eventually being able to move away from the vague, stupid ‘not compatible’ and finally pry ‘I had to keep my eyes closed and think of Boston or I’d go flaccid’ from his husband. Arguably a much better explanation. Apparently Shane used a lot of variations of ‘*no that’s okay, babe, tonight is about you*’s because obviously nobody knows their way around Shane’s dick like Ilya does. No notes, really. He loves being an expert, the *only* one.)

Shane throws one of the pillows at his face, the tips of his ears already burning red. “Ilya!”

Rose is smiling, eyes twinkling as she looks up at Shane with her chin on the round part of his shoulder, playfully squeezing his waist with her other hand until he jolts. “Ahhhh... our hashtag Hollandry era.”

Ilya clamps the pillow that tried to take him out to his lap while laughing, stupidly giddy with the beauty of *possibility*, and this night, and Rose, and his stunning, highly shame-prone husband who he loves so very much. “*But* I am forever grateful you are doing this for us. I am happy at the thought of you being pregnant with Shane’s baby and no longer suicidal. It is amazing.”

He is going to love the *fuck* out of that baby.

“You’re very welcome,” Rose retorts, imitating his accent and twirling her hand in the air. She turns back to Shane, no longer keeping his arm hostage. “Every now and then someone will post a candid of us at a yoga studio or brunch and comment about how they know we’re endgame.” She gets a little mischievous smile on her face, Ilya’s favorite because it means

she's about to tease the fuck out of Shane and he embarrasses so cutely, it's everything. "What do you think, Hollander, we could always skip the doctors and do it the natural way, like old times? Maybe you could show me how much you've improved."

It happens in lovely little predictable surefire increments—Shane freezes, a complete blank slate, then reboots with a shake of his head, brown eyes widen, he swallows hard, he opens his mouth, closes it, he turns as red as a cute tomato, he reconsiders what she said like he might've misheard her, he winces at what must be a painful flashback, he glances at Ilya's poker face with big eyes round from panic, and then he takes her seriously anyway, because he *did* hear her correctly he realizes, and then he's stammering, so earnestly: "Sorry, uhm, Rose, I—I love you but, I don't, I don't think—"

Rose cuts him off with a boisterous, cackling laugh, kissing his cheek with a loud smack. "You're so adorable, it's kind of crazy."

It's Ilya who nearly makes her pee her pants. "Aw, it's okay, Hollander. I hear from internet cuckchair is super 2030. Could be fun, no?"



Bright unceasing lightflashes make Ilya squint his eyes at what must be at least eighty reporters in the press room. He's wanted to roll his eyes twelve times already, and the questions haven't even started. One of them finally pipes up, "You recently shocked the hockey world with the news of your retirement at the end of the season. What will this mean for the team, especially now that Hollander won't have you on his line?"

When they were thirty-four, their fourth season with the Centaurs, Ilya missed the back-end of the season because of, funnily enough, a disastrous game against Boston. He got smacked into the boards by some Croatian import twice his size—which is already impressive, especially for a Croatian—after winning a face-off, and fell awkwardly on his shoulder. The move was legal, the fall just bad luck. He needed two surgeries, weeks of grueling, nearly unbearable rehab, and nowadays, the joint can unfortunately still pinpoint exactly when it's about to rain.

In all honesty, Ilya had wanted to retire then. The only difference is that he thought he was going to have to. No choice to make, because his body gave up on him after the years of cold torture he'd put it through, and thus, he wouldn't even have to tell Shane. Some team doctor would sit across from them in some stuffy office, fold his hands on top of the desk and look at them all seriously. *Rozanov, you can never play again if you want to ever use your arm again.* Shane would feel bad for him, Ilya would get some really good pity sex out of it, and Shane would know in his heart it wasn't Ilya's conscious decision to quit. It was just his time. This was something done *to* him.

But then his shoulder did heal, and there was no team doctor telling him his dream was over, and it was then he slowly started realizing that the dream the doctor would have

hypothetically been crushing had long been over. Hockey hadn't even ever been the dream, excelling at it had been. They'd won a Cup the previous year, their first Cup together on the same line and team, and Ilya was sure there were still ways up from there, but he no longer cared for them. *There* was already pretty fucking fantastic. He'd had enough of *there*.

But Shane... Ilya could tell from everything—rocking in the waiting room chair while they waited for a nurse to come prep him for surgery, scouring the internet for physical therapists specialized in shoulder mobility, the continuous complaining about how much Dillon sucked and how good it was going to be when Ilya came back to send him back to the minors, the constant taste of metal when they kissed—he couldn't deal with even the semblance of the idea. He needed Ilya at his side, still.

Shane wasn't ready then, but Ilya thinks he might be now. Shane just doesn't know it yet.

Ilya knows Shane's special *modus operandi* by now, better than he does himself, he thinks sometimes. First, there's the panic, then fighting facts, the dissociation when coming to terms with a new possible reality, followed by the endless research about that new reality, then finally—reluctant acceptance.

Once it's there, that acceptance, and he's figured out how he feels about it, bad or good, he goes for it and never looks back. Sometimes, Shane just needs to be shown there's a world beyond and outside of his own head. A little push.

And this time that means life after hockey. And maybe a therapist, to help with the fixation thing. He's been talking to Yuna about it.

Ilya covers the mic with his palms as he clears his throat quickly, chewing his watermelon flavored gum a few times. In his mind, when he imagined sitting here, talking about the end of his hockey career, he thought it might hurt. Like pressing a nasty bruise, pain first, but kind of weirdly and inexplicably nice after. Instead, Ilya can't fucking wait for it to be over. The season, this three-or-four-nightly circus, the stench of sweaty grown men and their dirty socks and nasty cups that no known full-body deodorant known to men could cover up (there's those who have tried). So he smirks, in a way he knows they'll eat up. He's an expert at playing this role by now. "This means Centaurs will suck a little more. They will still win, just not easy like now."

The crowd of vultures breaks out in a million questions at once, and he catches Shane's eye from where he's standing at the back of the crowd against the wall with a Rolex ballcap pulled low over his damp hair, chewing the inside of his cheek. Ilya's smirk only widens.

"What prompted this decision at this point in your career? Is there an injury at play, or any other factors that have contributed to it?" The reporter Farrah pointed out in the sea of faces asks him with a pen in her hand hastily scribbling along the notebook in her lap.

Boring question. Shane will love it.

Ilya leans towards the microphone, ignoring the static-y noise it produces when he adjusts it, before casually rolling his gum between his teeth and raising his eyebrows in a way that he knows comes across as if he's an asshole. Which he is, so, not only come across. "Want to

give Hollander a chance to finally be best, ya know? He can be captain at last. Is been his dream for so long.”

The crowd of reporters burst out in various degrees of laughter when he winks to drive the point home. In the back of the room, Shane is putting on a show rolling his eyes and pretending he’s not smiling, but Ilya knows better.



Early April, right before playoffs, Rose sends Shane a picture of her belly. They’re in bed—Shane reading a boring hockey book, Ilya fucking around on his phone with Anya settled into his side—when Shane turns the screen of his iPhone towards Ilya.

Rose Landry: *LOL do you think I’m starting to show or am I just fat?*

Rose is standing sideways in front of a tall mirror in her expensive Los Angeles high-rise apartment, shirt pulled up over her pink bra and held in place with her chin. Her free hand pokes at her tummy where it peaks out from her unbuttoned jeans. She’s only two months along at this point, but usually on the same bird diet as Shane, so always skinny as a twig. Any difference in even just her bowel movements would be noticeable immediately, and Ilya might be imagining it, but there *is* a tiny swell.

“She might be bloated,” Shane reasons, pushing his glasses up his nose with his other hand. His eyes are still transfixed on the screen of his phone, the blue shades of light highlighting the contours of his face.

“That’s our little puck,” Ilya teases, resting his head on Shane’s left right pec. The baby would be about a raspberry now, which is crazy. He thinks about the anxiety between Rose missing her first period and being able to take a test in the French wilderness, because that’s somehow where the wedding took her. Shane was stress-baking zucchini bread for days—to the point they still have six loaves in their freezer right now, despite forcing the whole team to take one home each—just so he could meticulously clean their kitchen after. Ilya threw a game against fucking Buffalo, which only added more to Shane’s stress levels. He thinks they both cried in that lockerroom in New York when Rose texted them ‘*daddies, bad french wif but good news: my vagina will be getting wrecked in November :)*’, and only had that fucking zucchini bread to celebrate with when they got home late that night. His stomach still lurches when he sees or thinks of a zucchini now.

“We can’t call them a puck,” Shane argues, thumbing at the screen when it darkens. “People already think we are too insane about hockey.”

(Ilya actually thinks that’s just a *Shane thing*, not a *Shane and Ilya thing*, but sometimes it’s difficult to pinpoint the exact difference.)

It's quiet for a moment, both of them staring at the phone like it's a miracle. Which it is, or at least definitely feels like. For a long time it didn't feel real, and sometimes it still doesn't. Nothing, effectively, has changed in their day-to-day life. Except Ilya is now constantly looking forward to The screen eventually darkens again, which prompts Shane to lock it, tossing it aside on the mattress. He turns and lowers himself onto his elbow, leaning his cheek on Ilya's good shoulder when he lays down completely on his side. Shane's in an old threadbare Irina Foundation tee, but Ilya is shirtless like usual. Only easier if they end up getting freaky later, he figures.

"What about last names? Do you want to do Rozanov?" Shane reaches over to tickle Anya's white belly absentmindedly, which earns him a delighted snore and sleep-hazed twitch of her backpaw, before resting it over Ilya's ribs next to her snout. "I know legally we're the Hollander-Rozanovs, but I feel like that would be too much of a mouthful."

Ilya shrugs to the best of his ability in this position, smirking smugly. "They get that from their daddy."

"Stop," Shane commands, butting his forehead into the underside of Ilya's jaw as he flushes an adorable pink all over. "We should just do Rozanov, it fits better with that Russian middle name thing based off Ilya."

"Hollander will always fit better with Ilya."

"I'm serious."

"You always are."

"So Rozanov?" Shane can't help but circle back, absently fingering the gold chain resting over the dip in Ilya's sternum. He has a curated list of more lists. *Before Baby Comes* is the main macro one pinned to the top of the notes app on the iPad he specifically bought for the purpose of making lists the day Rose went to the clinic for the first time, with around seventeen-hundred meso and micro ones linked on there. There's color codes, and abbreviations only Shane knows, and an infinite amount of bullet points—he could scroll for three consecutive days and never reach the end of the bullet points. Ilya knows this is just another thing he wants to get crossed off.

"Nah," Ilya murmurs, kissing Shane's hairline, running a hand through the dark locks. "They should be Hollander, like grandma and grandpa. Family name."

It's quiet for another moment, before Shane shifts so he's looking up at him, his expressive eyes a little wet. "Is it crazy?"

Ilya's heart softens at the look on his husband's face. "What?"

"That I already love them so much?"

"*Da*, because Rose is definitely just bloated," Ilya concurs with a teasing grin, because yes, it is insane how much he already loves Baby Ilyich/Ilyinichna Hollander. How much he thinks about how beautifully fat and cute they will be, or wonders about their taste in music and

clothes and what might be their favorite animal (anything but a stupid loon, hopefully), or imagines how horrible their distinct monstrous Canadian-Russian accent will be. “Puck is only tiny grape-sized. You should still love me most.”

Shane looks very excited suddenly. “Have you been doing the reading on my lists?”

His eyebrows raise, unimpressed. “Yes, because I know checking things off makes you horny.”

“Shut up,” Shane grumbles prickily but doesn’t protest when Ilya commands Anya with a quick ‘*možno*’, the dog hopping off the bed to find her favorite fluffy cushion downstairs. Nor does he object when Ilya reaches for the bulge in Shane’s pyjama pants, mouthing down the side of his face as much as Shane’s glasses allow him to. He’d like for Shane to keep them on, so he’s careful.

See? Always at least an eighty percent chance of freaky. A small gasp escapes his husband’s lips as Ilya nips at his jaw as he moves down the bed, breath hot on his husband’s ear as he says, “Then why are you hard right now?”



Ilya will never admit this out loud, but winning a Cup kind of loses it’s shine after the first. They kind of blur together into *secondthirdfourth* Cup. It’s great, and he knows many people, but mostly the fuck ass Metros that haven’t won a cup since losing Shane, would *kill* to be in his shoes. That’s why it’s a silent thought. He wouldn’t want to sound ungrateful, or for Shane to admit him to a mental hospital.

He’s relieved they made it happen, and the season is finally over. His hockey career is over. It’s crazy and exhilarating at the same time.

“Hockey has given me a lot,” Ilya beams into the microphone, speaking like an idiot in the middle of a rundown karaoke bar after a particularly awful rendition of O Canada!. It’s barely June, so not particularly sweltering outside, but they stuffed about a hundred and then some people in a hole-in-the-wall karaoke bar against every fire department regulation in Ottawa, so he’s still covered in a sheer layer of sweat. He doesn’t for a second want to mention the Cups, and the medals, and the record breaking hattricks, and the MVP awards. It was about that, at some point, but it hasn’t been, not in a long time. “It’s given me friends for life, and new home. I am especially grateful it has given me Shane.” From somewhere in the mass of people his tomato-red husband smiles sweetly at him, mouthing an ‘I love you’ his way as the drunk crowd hollers and *awws* at him. Boodram, who fucked back from retirement in his beach house in Trinidad and Tobago especially for tonight, makes loud kissing noises while losing half the contents of his beer bottle on his pink *I Tried To Retire But Now I Work For My Wife* shirt. Ilya kind of needs one desperately. “One time, he told me I was awesome player to watch. Hollander, you will never be the kind of player I am, no matter how hard you

try.” He’s smiling like a fucking dick when he pauses dramatically. “You will always be better.”

There’s another loud outbreak of *whoos* recognizing Shane’s brilliance and *boos* recognizing how down bad Ilya is in equal amounts. Svetlana whoops in the crowd, jostling Shane’s shoulder, as she hollers, “I have always said that!” Rose is on his other side, squeezing his hand. His eyes are shiny, his cheeks flushed and bringing out his freckles, his stupid linen blue button down is wrinkled like always. Ilya loves him forever, and that’s the only reason he won’t say ‘fuck ice hockey!’ out loud right now.

Slamming down the rest of his beer, he yells into the sparkly microphone shaped like a pineapple, “And now I cannot wait to get fat like defensive players!”

Cheers erupt across the bar on a level that makes sure they’re definitely going to get the police called on them tonight, and a pretty sparkly cocktail is pushed into his hand by someone. They named it The Retired Russian, and it’s just pure vodka with edible glitter in it and a little plastic duck perched on the edge of the glass. His husband meets him when Ilya’s still climbing down the stage and trying to make his way to him, clapping people’s shoulders and shaking hands on the way, while Hayden Pike starts an off-beat rendition of *misery business*.

“I am joke about getting fat,” Ilya assures him quickly, still a few feet between them. He grins stupidly, “Although you can pry that McGriddle out of cold, dead—”

Shane kisses him, hard. Mr. I Don’t Like PDA. Right in public. With *tongue*. He accidentally meets David’s eye over Shane’s shoulder, who pointedly looks away. “I love you, too, you know?” Shane tells him after a full minute, a little out of breath, his pupils so fat his glittering eyes are nearly black. “You’re the best person alive, ever, I mean it.”

Ilya can’t help but kiss him again. “Despite fact I’m no longer a hockey player?”

Shane laughs way harder than is truly warranted, if Ilya is honest with himself. He’s funny, funnier than Shane definitely, but he’s not *that* funny. “It might even make me love you more.” There’s a small hiccup, which explains a lot—the alcohol’s been getting to his head. His big brown eyes that Ilya is kind of obsessed with soften, Shane’s bottom lip forming a pathetic little pout that he wants to kiss better. “Even if it also makes me a little sad.”

And Ilya gets it. He does. Even if he’s relieved, and looking forward to a Non-Hockey-Related future, there’s still things to mourn. He wasn’t lying when he said hockey has given him—well, the world. It’s not going to feel great to see Shane back on the ice without him, being flanked by some seven minute old rookie from the fucking seventh round draft selection not even nearly on his level, someone who would be the luckiest person in the world to have even so much talent as Shane Hollander has in his pinky toe.

But for Ilya, it was never about hockey. He was just good at it. And he loved the thrill of the game, the energy of the crowd that loved him *and* the crowd that hated him, the high of a win, the fastest way to get out of Russia and away from his family. *Fuck*, he thinks if maybe he’d picked up a football instead of a hockey stick, he would’ve had six Ballon d’Ors by now.

He wouldn't have Shane though, so thank God it *was* a hockey stick.

"Sad is good," Ilya marvels matter-of-factly, gripping both of Shane's shoulders, tugging him back and forth slowly a couple of times. He pats them, before sliding them down Shane's arms to interlink their hands. He's going to take advantage of this lack of PDA-awareness—or non-Ilya people maybe?—in his husband right now, it's his fucking retirement party and he wants to hold Shane's hands in front of all the people he loves and tolerates. "Means we have many good things to be sad about, da?"

"Glaza bojatsja, a ruki delajut," Shane half-slurs, half-so-fucking-sincere, blinking rapidly at him. It means something along the lines of 'feel the fear, and do it anyway', or more literal, 'the eyes are afraid but the hands do it anyway'. He told Shane about it after he had a full-blown panic attack in the bathroom after his first pre-game press conference post-Fanmail Gate; suit-jacket on the dirty bathroom floor (first red flag) and white dress shirt sticking to his back like he'd been out in the pouring rain, trembling hands on the sides of the graffited stalls and fingertips white from the strain, throwing up the singular banana he had for breakfast in the bleach-heavy toilet, and then bile, so much bile, he couldn't stop. He was breathing like a crazy person, so fast and deep, grabbing for his tie, the buttons on his shirt, his chest. Ilya thought Shane was about to die on him. Ilya had to bring out the Captain voice and everything. *Glaza bojatsja, a ruki delajut*. It's something that's helped with Shane's anxiety over the years, turned into the Centaurs team motto despite the fact nobody can pronounce it right because they have about ten brain cells between all of them in total and nine of them are Shane's, even has an honorary framed poster in the cottage's half bath.

"Right, you're being very brave," Ilya compliments affectionately, clutching his hands tighter. "I'm so proud of you."

Shane whines a little, pressing his forehead into the nape of Ilya's neck, nuzzling there. "Anya should be here."

"We will tell her all about it later," he promises, and Shane abruptly untangles their fingers and grips Ilya's shoulders, pulling his mouth back down to his. The kiss is dirty, wet, and Ilya tries to meet him there, licking the taste of him off the roof of his mouth; cheap beer and the salty onion rings Jackie tried to get him to eat earlier. Shane's teeth prick his bottom lip, then soothe it over with chaste little peck.

Shane's glistening mouth pulls into a slow, flirty smirk. At least, Ilya thinks it's supposed to be flirty. If he didn't know Shane, he might have been a tiny bit scared. "Will we do *more* later?"

Ilya bites back a huff of laughter, too good of a person and too in love with his husband to point out Shane might have trouble getting hard later, let alone *more*. There's always tomorrow. He wipes at a bit of spit on the corner of Shane's lips. "Sure. If you're good."

Barrett, who retired two years ago after he shattered his shin into six mismatched puzzle pieces playing fucking Florida, baits Ilya into doing shots with him, and Shane disappears back towards his gaggle of women. "Heyyyyyy pretty girls," he drawls, nearly making Ilya jealous because Shane is never generous with his compliments. He makes Svetlana—heavily pregnant in a way that made Ilya worry about her flying this close to her due date, and

panting simply from the heavy exercise of breathing—and Rose—proud carrier of the Hollander Nectarine with at most a modest swell—pose for a bump picture, their stomachs pressed together. “Toooooo cute,” Ilya hears him coo from by the bar, his voice strangely high. Yuna asks him if he needs some water.

Ilya swallows a laugh before slamming back the shot of tequila Troy holds out for him. “How’s life being old and out of shape?”

His face scrunches up as he swallows his own shot, clapping Ilya on the back. “That’s going to be you now, Rozanov.”

“No, no,” he insists, holding what he thinks are two fingers up at the bartender. “You will always be older and more out of shape than me.”

Troy shakes his head. Then nods his head over at Shane, who is now doing an uncoordinated line dance with Luca’s girlfriend Maggie, their arms tangled together in a way that keeps them from clapping their hands but they still try their absolute best. He’s going to hate himself in the morning. “Hollander thinking about retirement too?”

“Insider information only for inside people,” Ilya says, not entirely sure he’s making sense, but his heart is in it. *Fuck off, Troy*, is implied, despite the fact he likes Troy. He just doesn’t like him *in* his touchy subjects. The bartender places five shots on top of the bar, and they both take one. In all honesty, Ilya thinks Shane is slowly getting there. He needs routine and mindfulness and a support system and other fancy buzzwords the therapy pamphlets have been telling Yuna and Ilya.

“You’re not a Centaur anymore either.” Troy leans back against the bar, reclining a third shot as he blinks profusely. Which means Ilya has to take it, in order to win the unspoken contest. The Centaur comment hurts lightly. He built that place up from the ground. Below it, actually. They were literally in hell before he chose love over success. Because he had lots of success in Boston. But there’s a saying, in his old country, or somewhere, that if success only took hard work, donkeys would rule the farm. The farm also needed Ilya Rozanov. “Are you afraid some new rival is going to take your man?”

Ilya scrunches up his face, irrationally annoyed all of a sudden. “Troy, is party. People drinking, happy. Why you fucking with the vibe?”

Barrett smirks slowly, now nursing a tall glass of water while watching Hayes fuck up the ending notes of a Whitney Houston song. “What? He *is* like criminally sexy. You’re going to have some competition. I mean, there’s bound to be some new kid on the block eventually, right? Shane can’t be the best forever, and we know the rivalry gets him hot.”

“Psh,” Ilya waves him off, taking a fourth shot, just because. It burns all the way down, and he likes how it distracts from the ache eating away at the walls of his chest. His teeth grind down so hard his molars hurt. Who is Barrett, talking about what gets *his* husband hot? “Shane will die before being not best.”

He leans closer to Troy, that annoying ache blazing deep and hot inside of him. No way someone is meeting up with Shane in hotel rooms and special secret sex apartments between

games and award shows, and flirting with him on the field over losing face-offs and how bad his chirps are, and using each others last names to keep up some sort of non-existent glass walls and then using tuna melts to break them down, and there's definitely nobody fucking Shane until he cries literal tears of pleasure in private while the general people thinks they're mortal enemies in public—not if they're not Ilya fucking Rozanov. That's *their* thing. “And he is *my* husband. People can *think* he is sexy, but fuck whatever Rookie from Montreal or Boston thinks he can fuck with the sank, sancti—holiness of our marriage. I will beat him up with own stick in the parking lot.”

Troy holds up both of his hands, eyebrows up to his hairline. “Hey. I no longer own a stick, don't worry, Rozzy.”

“Poor Harris,” Ilya pouts, leaning an elbow on the bar as he grins over at the stage; ache long forgotten. A completely stone-cold sober David—wearing a custom-printed tie with dozens of Ilya's-Faces around his forehead—is doing a rendition of *I Want To Know What Love Is* with Marleau—plastered, shirtless, and a shirt with one Ilya's-Face tucked into the band of his jeans—and it's honestly not even bad.

His eyes are drawn away towards Dillion as the man comes over and roughly pats him on the shoulderblade. “Are we taking shots or what?”

“I never liked you, by the way.”

The biggest flop loser right wing known to men and women in the world of hockey actually snickers, shaking his head. “Thanks, Cap.”

On the drive home, Ilya has sobered up considerably. Shane spent around fifty minutes alternating pushing him against a wall and kissing him with loudly reprimanding him about the cig he sneakily smoked outside with Troy, which honestly just kind of made Ilya horny and in need of another smokebreak. And to bite Shane. Jackie Deserves Better Pike came over with another batch of fucking onion rings about an hour after he took those shots, and he's had seven glasses of water courtesy of Svetlana since. His tolerance is much higher than some *other* people's, and he barely considered himself inebriated anyway (he would've told Dillion to fuck off even if he was a teetotal loser), so now he just desperately needs to take a piss.

They're in the Hollanders' *reliable* (boring) Honda. Yuna is driving, David in the passenger seat, Rose is wedged next to Shane because she has a room at the same hotel as Shane's parents. Yet this does not stop Shane from unashamedly kissing Ilya's neck. “Shane, baby,” Ilya whispers, gently pushing him away. He's already kind of getting hard, which is not a state he wants to be in around his in-laws. David has PTSD. “No.”

“I want to,” Shane insists, loud, eagerly nosing up the column of Ilya's neck while his fingers fumble with the button on his jeans. “Sooooo bad.”

“You can't,” Ilya also insists, hushed, stalling the hand so dangerously close to his crotch. It doesn't immediately stop Shane's one-track mind, so he also has to angle away his groin as best as he can. God, Shane is going to want to fucking kill himself in the morning. “Not here.”

“I *can*,” Shane persists this time, angrily and like an adorable upset kitten not getting it’s nightly liquid snack on time. “Impossible to can’t.” He pouts, the hand not in Ilya’s deathgrip reaching out to brush over his cheek, probably accidentally his eye, and then mouth, jaw. “You’re too beau-ti-fuuuuull.”

“Down boy,” Rose says with a snort, patting his thigh like he’s an actual dog in heat. Ilya catches David stifling a laugh into his shoulder and trying to act cool by looking out of the window, an amused Yuna raising her eyebrows at Ilya in the rearview mirror. There’s still hope Shane will suffer from alcohol-induced amnesia in the morning. It’s that or suicide.

Shane straightens with a heavy sigh, crossing his arms over his chest petulantly as he tilts his head back on the headrest. Yuna turns up the news on the radio to fill the silence, and Ilya tries to think of Crowell shirtless to get his dick to calm down. For about three minutes, Shane’s so quiet, Ilya imagines he fell asleep.

“Does it scare you?” He suddenly mutters, rubbing his eye with one of his knuckles.

Ilya has wondered: maybe tonight was a lot for Shane, mentally. Ilya no longer playing hockey, not at practice with him, not conditioning with him, not strategizing with him, not reviewing game tape with him, not traveling with him—it’s all a break in his carefully crafted routine. *Maybe* he got shit-faced, out-of-his-mind drunk to deal with it. *Maybe* he is on the verge of a crash out or burn out or whatever-the-fuck out. Except Shane doesn’t usually cope by getting drunk, he copes by asking a lot of questions.

Tonight it seems, he’s mixed the two of those up.

“What?”

“Not playing hockey?”

Of course. “No. Not really.”

He makes a considerate noise. “Why not?”

“Because...” Ilya pinches the bridge of his nose and racks his brain for a sensible explanation, but everything is operating a tad bit slower tonight. Despite his otherworldly Russian-bred tolerance, by the way. “Shane, I drank. A lot. Can’t think.” After a brief pause, he palms Shane’s knee and adds, “My life is very good. That helps.”

“It scares me,” he admits quietly, tracing the black wedding band on Ilya’s right hand absently-mindedly. “To think about it. I don’t like to.”

“I know you don’t.”

He shifts to look at Ilya with those devastating, sad brown eyes. “I’ve always been Shane Hollander, Hockey Player. It’s my name on Instagram. It’s the only thing I’m good at.”

Yuna clears her throat softly in the front seat, fingers flexing on the wheel. Shane doesn’t even notice, locked in on Ilya.

Ilya's eyes dart between Shane's, dipping his head to hold his gaze when Shane tries to look away, his heart breaking in his chest. "You're more than that, sweetheart. You're good at a lot of things."

A little dip forms between Shane's brows. "You just said we're not supposed to do those things here."

Jesus fucking Christ. Ilya scrubs a palm over his face. "Not *those* things either. Other things than that too."

Shane considers it in earnest, everything flashing across his face as soon as he thinks it. "I *know* that, but I don't know either, does that make sense?"

He pinches Shane's chin briefly, affectionately. "It does." He hopes it might satisfy Shane enough that they can wrap this conversation up and have it another time and place.

There's a pregnant pause. "Are there other things that scare you?"

Ilya smiles at him, fond. "Why? Are there other things that scare you?"

Shane eyes Rose warily, who has fallen asleep, and is softly snoring against his shoulder. Luckily she's suffered from few bad symptoms so far, except a craving for raw onion and peanut butter. Ilya's Slavic, so he kind of fucks with that anyway. Her long-sleeved lacy top has ridden up a little under her maroon fur coat, the intimidating pale swell of her belly just barely visible. "Being a father."

It's starting to feel more real now. There's a sonograph tacked to their fridge, and they finished the baby room in boring shades of beige at the main house last week, and Shane has had two anxiety attacks related to newborn products since Saturday. It's great.

"You had pretty good example."

"That's true," Shane smiles, happily, leaning forward to squeeze his father's shoulder. Ilya reaches under Shane's arms just in time to catch Rose's head. "I love you, dad."

David gniffles. "I love you too, buddy."

His stupidly drunk husband frowns, then grins dopily as he twirls a strand of Yuna's hair around his finger. "Sorry mom, I love you so much too. You're the *bestttttt*."

Yuna briefly catches his hand to squeeze his fingers, before it's back on the wheel. "Me too, Shane. But please keep your hands above the waist while we're in the car."

"Okeeyyyyy," he sings, resting his cheek against Ilya's chest while Ilya's still gently maneuvering Rose's head back against Shane, one arm twisted behind him. It's like a bad game of Twister. Shane hooks a finger around his gold chain. "Do you want to come see me play my first game for the Centaurs all by myself?"

"You will have ten players."

“But no Rozanov.”

“That is point of retiring.”

“I don’t care if you get fat, by the way.”

“Thank you.”

“Do you mind I don’t eat McGriddles?”

Ilya huffs, humoured. He’s starting to feel the night catch up to him. “Sometimes. Are too tough on yourself.” He half-lifts a shoulder. “One chicken nugget every now and then won’t make you bad hockey player.”

“You’ll be a great dad. You won’t have them think bad thoughts about themselves.”

“Thank you.”

“I can’t believe you smoked though.”

“Half a cigarette.”

“Still. It’s *bad*.”

“Sorry. I’ll be more boring next time.”

“Do you really think I could play another ten years?”

“Five, definitely.”

“Do you think I should?”

“That is not for me to decide.”

“Just tell me,” Shane presses, suddenly dead serious. “Honestly. I can take it.”

“I...” Ilya starts, not sure he actually wants to lie right now, even though Shane’s obvious intoxicated state. He doesn’t want to like, break his brain either. “I hope you don’t want to,” he carefully settles on, finally. *Good enough*. “But if you do, I will be with other WAGs in suite, cheering you on.”

Shane smiles. “Maggie is nice. Very flexible. Luca did good. What do you think?”

Ilya hums, his eyes suddenly like lead. When there’s no more questions, he pries them open anyway. He watches Shane stare out the window, hard, obviously lost in thought. Ilya absently grabs his hand, but Shane pulls it away.

“Mom said hands above the waist.”

Not sure *that’s* what she meant, but okay. He shakes his head. “What are you thinking about?” He groans, tapping his temple into the metal door panel. “‘S so loud.”

“Nothing,” Shane says, evasively.

“*Shane.*”

“Mom...”

Yuna laughs. “Yes, Shane?”

“Can we *pleasemaybepossiblypleaseifyouwantandyou don’t mind please* get chicken nuggets? And maybe some French fries?” He must be truly bombed, if he’s asking for fast food.

Rose yawns, blinking her eyes rapidly as she stretches. “I could eat.”

David looks over at his wife, squeezing her hand on top of the gear shift. “You heard the pregnant lady.”



“I can’t pick,” Ilya complains heartily, pouting at a geriatric beagle. He lifts up three fingers in greeting. “Is impossible. They’re all too cute.”

When there’s no answer from his husband, he turns to find him at the far end of the corridor. His feet drag him over there before he can even make the conscious decision, standing shoulder to shoulder with Shane. He’s longingly watching a tiny, black cat called Boba, curled up in a ball in the back of her isolation cage. Next to her name there’s a stickered emblem of two hands holding a heart, meaning she’s one of the shelter’s furballs that needs special care.

Ilya sneaks his arm around Shane’s back, squeezing his firm tricep right above his elbow. The small cat has big, distrusting amber eyes that are watching their every move behind the glass, part of her right ear missing and a faint pink scar over her button nose. He thinks there’s a bandage around one of her paws, but it’s hard to tell.

“It says she’s easily scared and aggressive to people,” Shane tells him absentmindedly, his eyes honed in on the cat. Mr. Are You Sure You Want To Get Another Pet Right Now? seems to have done a full 180. Which is good, because this is only Ilya’s *first* official order of retirement business. He might build an army out of the unwanted. “They found her on the street, underweight and scratched up.”

Shane’s fingers press against the glass, as if to say hi to the creature, an act of kindness. Ilya considers it: small and furious and misunderstood and had to fight to survive. At least half Ilya’s type. Probably not the best idea they’ve had when a newborn is joining their family soon, but they do love a good bad idea between the two of them.

His hand trails down Shane’s forearm to link their fingers together, using it to pull him back into Ilya’s chest. “You like?”

“I do,” his husband answers, so fast it can’t be anything but knee-jerk honesty, but is already shaking his head lightly as he reaches back out to smooth out the corner of Boba’s informational sticker. Doing it for the plot is more Ilya’s thing, and Shane rarely allows himself to indulge in things out of his comfort zone—it took him over a decade to accept Ilya into it—so this seems like the perfect time to microdose some selfish happy urges. “But you’re a dog person. Cats are very particular, I’ve seen online. And I’m going to be on the road all the time once summer ends—”

Maybe for the first time, Ilya sees some sort of flicker of preemptive regret, or annoyance on Shane’s face. Ilya tries to remain calm and casual about it. *Baby steps*, he reminds himself.

“I can look after her when you’re not home, is no problem,” Ilya shrugs casually, resting his chin on Shane’s shoulder. He loves Shane’s shoulders, they’re so wide and sturdy, a product of his dedication to cable rope pulls and perfecting his slapshots. “I love small, angry kittens.”

“She’s three. Not a kitten, just—underdeveloped I assume. Probably has illnesses. Maybe a special diet. Needs a lot of patience and time,” Shane goes on, and Ilya’s not sure if he’s convincing himself or Ilya that it’d be too much trouble, or a bad fit. Shane bites the inside of his cheek, and after a beat shifts his head so he can look at Ilya, slightly narrowing his eyes. “And *I’m* not small, by the way.”

“Sure.” Ilya straightens, moving the flat of his hand from the top of his own head to Shane’s. “I got few inches on you.”

“That’s ‘cause all they fed you in Russia growing up was potatoes and vodka.”

“Make no sense. Why would vodka help me grow? Probably keep child small like Boba.”

“Shut up.”

“All they feed you was poutine and Canada Dry and you grew into nice medium height boy.”

“Fuck off,” Shane glowers, low, which just makes Ilya grin like an enamored idiot, which just makes Shane more mad, which just makes Ilya wants to kiss him more. It’s a whole vicious cycle. “I am tall for this country.”

“If you say so,” Ilya taunts with a non-chalant lift of his shoulder, condescending enough to make Shane’s nostrils flare a little, which Ilya fucking loves. He might get hard at this very public animal shelter at this point. “So Boba tiny balls in drink right?”

“Yes,” he bites back, still in argument mode.

“Ah. Another thing in common.”

“I swear to fucking God,” Shane chastises him coldly, lowering his voice. He really does look like a pissed off cat wished to be a real life boy. Ilya won’t tell him this. Maybe when they’re at home, and nobody can take any compromising pictures of the half-mast situation in his pants. “My balls are not tiny.”

“No, your balls are huge.” Ilya raises his eyebrows, flicking Shane in the chest. “I meant she’s Asian too. Boba Asian drink, *da*?”

Shane stares at him for a beat, then, “You are impossible.”

Ilya smiles, so happy. Huffy, bossy Shane is like his own personal Lexapro, but he won’t stop taking the real ones because he learned that the hard way. *‘I feel fine’* is not a good reason to quit cold turkey, his therapist was kind of right about that. “But you loooooove me.”

“Unfortunately,” Shane murmurs petulantly, checking the time on his black watch. Rolex, obviously.

One of the pink-haired volunteers comes over with a big beaming smile. She is very upbeat and luckily not a watcher of hockey. Or a good liar, kind person, etc. Her hands clutch together in front of her mossy-green MILF (Man I Love Frogs) shirt. “Anyone has caught your eye that you want to get to know a little better? Maybe take out to pet or have a cuddle with?”

“We know enough,” Ilya supplies, pointing a thumb over his shoulder at the scrappy cat that looks like it ran a fight club outside. “We’ll take Boba.”

Shane protests half-heartedly. “Ilya—“

He shushes his husband. “Also, I want the cute weird poodle in crate seven.”



“Congrats on having sex successfully for fourth time,” Ilya tells Finn, patting him on the chest with both hands. He can’t stop smiling. Sveta is a mommy, again. “Better at sex than hockey, considering my right nut dangles better than you.”

Finn rolls his eyes in silent response, while Shane winces, reaching out to shake his hand. “I apologize about him. Congrats on the beautiful kids.”

“Thanks Shane,” Finn replies, smiling genuinely now. (Probably because Shane Hollander is complimenting him, every hockey player’s dream but Ilya’s reality. Even if Shane is stingy with his compliments, usually. Makes them hit like a line of fucking cocaine straight to his bloodstream when it does happen though.) He’s a tall guy—taller than Ilya, unfortunately—with a beard and hair in the colour of carrots. Plays for the San Francisco Sea Lions, which sucks, because it’s far away from Ottawa: eight fucking hours on a plane. Only takes longer to get to Moscow because of the lack of direct flights. Ilya gets to be a little resentful about that, he feels. Especially since Finn’s not good enough of a player to not just transfer to New York. Admirals are as close to a Cup next season as the SF Sea Lions, because they’re both at the far backend of anyone’s rankings. His ruddy eyebrows raise dryly. “Always a pleasure, Ilya.” He looks at his wife in the hospital bed over Ilya’s shoulder pointedly. The bed is

covered in a pastel-colored knitted blanket and stuffed animals. “I’m going to grab you that sushi order, okay?”

“Bye bye,” Ilya tells him with a lift of his fingers while his eyes hone in excitedly on the babies cradled in each of Svetlana’s arms. They’re wearing matching yellow Sea Lions hats, which, *ew*. He makes grabby hands while moving closer to the bed. “I want one.”

Svetlana laughs, nodding her head at the one in her left arm. He immediately sinks down on the mattress at the dip next to her hip. “You take Matvey. Shane can have Savva. That way I keep them apart.”

“Hi,” Shane smiles over at her, leaning over to the baby in her other arm to hug her as Ilya’s already grabbing his designated baby. He’s tinier than all of Sveta’s other babies, because they’re a few weeks early. “How are you, Lana?”

“Fourth time, I’m an expert,” she waves him off with her now free hand, then helping Shane with lifting Savva into his arms. Her curly hair is pulled back in two buns on the back of her head, an IV still in her elbow. She’s glowing, the corners of her mouth permanently upturned. “The head remember—yes, like that, perfect,” she intersperses, then continues her original conversation, “Only 45 minutes this time. I’m breaking records, there’s no other way.”

Shane carefully sits down in the chair next to Svetlana’s bed, holding Savva out perpendicular from his body with one hand under the newborn’s hat-covered head, the other hand supporting it from underneath. He fumbles a little with the stupid ugly hat that went askew in it’s journey to Shane’s arms, trying to get it to cover Savva’s ears again. “We should’ve gotten you a Centaurs hat, huh? Wouldn’t give me this much trouble.”

Sveta watches Ilya, pinching the soft inside of his forearm. He swallows a yelp, not wanting to startle the baby. “*So, it’s still happening?*” She asks him in their native language while Shane is still pre-occupied, quick and low.

His shoulders stiffen, annoyed. “Yes.”

“*How do you feel about it?*”

“*Does not matter,*” Ilya utters, rolling his eyes at his best friend fishing for feelings. Ilya feels a lot of things, all the time. He talks about them, all the time. He’s here to meet two cute babies, not do it some more. Frankly, it’s kind of a touchy subject anyway. “*It’s what he thinks he wants.*”

Sveta rolls her eyes, because two can play that game, crossing her arms over her silk, pink pyjamas. “*Tell him it’s not.*”

“*It doesn’t work like that,*” Ilya insists, mad at himself for sounding so unsure. To be honest, he’s been feeling down a lot lately. He’s been questioning his handling of this whole thing. If maybe what he thought were signs Shane was ready for a life beyond hockey—so many casual off-hand mentions of plans for their future like Greece and expanding the summer camps to all year round training and *maybe the trophy room would be a good playroom for the baby because of the light, after we have it professionally disinfected obviously*; less two-

hour nightly ruminations on why they lost a game or Shane's backhand didn't invent the cure to cancer; whole strings of days at the cottage where the rink wasn't even visited or the word hockey wasn't even mentioned—were just figments of his imagination; wishful thinking; selfish fucking behaviour. If maybe he was fucking this whole thing up, or the approach of it, hockey, Shane, moving on to new parts of their life together. If he is just kidding himself, thinking he knows Shane best. *"He needs to realize himself. If I tell him it's like—robot, pushed into water. He'll short-circuit and smoke will start coming from his ears, and then he'll explode. I'm too hot and young to be a widower."*

"You ever think you baby him too much? He is an adult man."

"He is an adult man who has never known life without hockey. I'm pretty sure he skated before he walked. It's going to be a full system reset to lose it. He just needs a little more time."

"Neither have you," Svetlana points out, probably also remembering the little league he joined at eight, and how he won that *zolotaya puck* with two broken ribs before his voice dropped, and how he skipped every class at school to get drunk or smoke, but never a hockey practice.

Those elite after-school clubs also kept him away from home longer every day, and winning competitions or breaking records didn't stop his father's everpresent disappointment but it made it less sharp at times, which is something Svetlana tends to forget.

"I know, but it's different for Sh—him." Ilya quickly glances over at his husband to make sure he didn't hear his almost-name. Matvey's face starts to scrunch up, so Ilya absentmindedly offers him his pinkie to suckle on. It quiets him down immediately. *"We both obsess, obviously, but he hyperfixates. It pushes him to be better and torments him in equal ways. He almost lost it, with his last team, and that nearly killed him. I don't think you realize how close it got. I think he'll do anything to avoid feeling that way again. Hockey was part of me, too, but it was a part I could cut off and still feel like me. It was never about hockey for me. With him it's like... more interwoven? In his DNA? Not as easy to amputate without severing something vital."*

Svetlana offers him a small, sympathetic smile. *"Sounds complicated."*

"It is," he agrees. He imagines it'll be like grief—a bereavement of not just a sport, but a life he'll never have again.

Sveta sighs wearily, reaching for a plastic cup of water with a white straw in it to take a sip. *"Ah, he's lucky he's pretty. He's such a hockey-obsessed idiot."*

"With good reason. He is the best."

"Well, well, well, Ilya Rozanov," Svetlana smirks smugly.

Ilya jostles her leg with his elbow as well as he can with a baby perched in his arms. *"Now that I'm retired, obviously."*

“Hey, slow down, I want to understand,” Shane breaks in, finally done with the stupid Sea Lions hat and trying to follow along with their conversation apparently. His Russian is okay, if Ilya speaks to him slowly and the subject isn’t too niche. They watched a lot of KHL, when Shane was actively studying the language, to help his translation speed. A side-effect of that was that Shane glossary exists for sixty percent out of hockey terms. Russian still needs his full focus though—different from Ilya who now even sometimes catches himself thinking in stupid English—which Ilya has thoroughly learned over the years. A blowjob while catching a replay of one of the games and Shane is incapable of telling him who won. Some well-placed fingers on sensitive places and Shane does not understand a word of the depraved possessive promises Ilya is murmuring into his heated skin. A little tiny baby in his arms asking for attention and warm ears, and he has no idea he’s the subject of their gossiping session.

“Just talking about breastfeeding,” Svetlana smiles over at Shane innocently, making him a little uncomfortable when she puts her hands over her boobs and squeezes softly. She pulls an exaggerated face. “So painful.”

Ilya scoffs, continuing their rapidfire Russian. *“Breastfeeding, really? What the fuck.”*

“What? I know boobs scare him.”

“They do look big though.”

“They are. And super heavy too. It’s stupid to procreate with big dumb American. His babies too big even when not full-term,” Svetlana grumbles in her melodic voice, and then for Shane’s unfortunate benefit, switches to English to drive her point home. “My vagina is wrecked forever. This is last time.”

Shane is starting to look borderline queasy, despite trying to force a supportive smile on his face. Ilya can’t believe he used to eat out girls. Was he pulling these kind of faces?

“You say that every time,” Ilya mutters, and Svetlana stomps him in the ribs with a full-on fist.

“Ey! What the hell is wrong with you? I’m holding one of your babies. What if I drop him?”

“You won’t drop him, because then I will kill you.”

“You can’t ‘cause your gargantuan boobs would be in the way.”

“My huge tits are none of your concern,” Sveta announces unabashedly.

His husband is, at this point in time, so red in the face, it’s endearing. Maybe even a little concerning. “Your babies are beautiful, Lana.” So subtle.

“Spasibo, pretty boy,” she laughs sweetly, apparently done teasing him. “Do you know if you guys are having a son or daughter yet?”

Shane shakes his head. “We thought it’d be a nice surprise.” He shifts Savva in his arms so he’s facing Shane’s shoulder. “I have a new ultrasound for you, if you want.” He has about

ten copies in his wallet, for anyone who asks about the baby.

“Obviously,” Svetlana gushes excitedly, then does a 180 and harrumphs, looking sadly at her blanket as she pulls on a loose thread.

“*What’s wrong?*” Ilya demands, suddenly alert, adjusting Matvey in his arms so he can check her forehead for a fever with the back of his hand. “Are you in pain?”

She swats his hand away, flicking her eyes up to the ceiling. “No, dickhead. I guess Rose, Emmy-winning good samaritan angel carrying your baby, is favorite now out of all your SBFs.” She pouts in a way that tells Ilya she’s as unserious as always. SBFs is a term only two people in the whole entire world use—one is in this room, and the other one is Rose.

“No, that’s Jackie,” Shane assures her with a doopy smile, probably so proud of himself.

While Shane is figuring out the rules of checkers, Svetlana is outplaying a computer in chess though. “Hollander, I can tell Savva is hungry. My arms are sore. Can you put him to my breast?



Ilya is always slightly overwhelmed by how devastatingly breathtaking Shane is like this: the way he looks, sounds, even smells. His beautiful shoulders pressed to the mattress, his back arched, those dimples above his ass taunting him. Those groans and grunts just for him that make Ilya’s cock weep for an act of quick mercy. That minty citrus mixed with clean sweat and salt, *his*.

“So good. So responsive,” Ilya murmurs soothing words of reassurance, withdrawing his thumb from Shane’s entrance. As soon as his husband takes in a ragged breath, he replaces it with a finger, then two, rubbing and stroking and sliding them in. Shane—so lovably predictable—spreads his thighs wider for him, inhaling sharply, needy. “All for me. And you like that, don’t you?”

Shane barely grunts out a ‘yes’ in response before Ilya’s moving his hand faster; short, firm strokes, easy because he’s so slick with lube and spit and pre-come. Always easy. Shane’s hips buck, trying to take him deeper. It makes Ilya smirk. “So greedy too,” he adds softly, fondly.

Ilya drapes himself over his husband, kissing the curve of his shoulderblade, the side of his neck. He makes a soothing noise when Shane whines a little, impatient. “It is okay, baby,” he says, more gentle than he feels, just because he knows it helps drive Shane crazy faster.

“Know what you need. Do I not always know what you need?”

Shane nods eagerly against the pillow under his cheek, his eyes squeezed close. This way, Ilya can see him, see exactly how far along the scale of desperation he is. It also makes him

unable to resist from scraping his teeth along Shane's jawline, pressing a wet kiss right below his ear, before pulling back entirely.

Ilya stands and watches Shane get up on all fours like this is their own choreographed dance, palming his own dick to release some of the unbearable tension in his balls. People always endlessly talk about how hard the sub has it, but never consider how hard all this shit on his sanity *and* cock is. Whenever he thinks he's reached the limit of his self-control, he manages to push it a little further. He stalls, just because he likes the sounds Shane makes when he does. He grabs the lube again, that they definitely don't *need*, and bites his bottom lip, watching—Shane's deep, heaving breaths trying to keep himself calm and stiff spine braced to be fucked. He waits; five seconds, then another handful—Shane arches his strong back with an angry, petulant mewl, cursing under his breath as he lowers himself to his elbows, ducking his head between his shoulders.

Ilya smiles, so very pleased, giving his own dick a quick squeeze. "You want to ask me something?"

"Fuck you," Shane spits, lifting his head to glare at him over his shoulder. His face is sweaty, flushed red, eyes shiny from *want*. He's actually so beautiful it hurts.

"Wrong pronouns," Ilya teases as he takes a hold of the curve of Shane's perfect hipbone, satisfied when his husband's biceps actually tremble from the touch. "Not very awake of you, Mr. LGBTQ."

Shane groans, his nostrils flaring. "Oh my God, shut the fuck u—"

"Ah. Wrong again," he cuts him off, digging his thumb into the firmness of Shane's ass from where he's still holding his hip. Ilya's cock is in his other hand still, begging him to slide home.

Shane doesn't need to be pushed far. He never does. It's like he's always on the edge, at the brim of it, *close*. "Fuck me, please. Ilya, just fuck—"

So he does. Ilya pushes his cock past Shane's hole, and he finds himself watching again, entire body taut from keeping still. Shane's tight big body stretched around his cock, so warm and perfect. It always takes him a second, even if he doesn't always allow himself one.

As soon as he moves for the first time, Shane gasps loudly, tipping his head back. The sharp outline of his Adam's apple drives Ilya insane, sweat coating his shoulders and trickling down the middle of his chest from all the restraint he's been showing the both of them. On the next thrust, Shane's head falls back forward, like it takes too much from him to keep it up. He's so receptive, so eager, so beautiful, moving back into Ilya, dictating his own pleasure outside of Ilya's control.

Ilya's hand grips the back of Shane's neck to keep him still, to keep him from fucking himself on Ilya's dick and ending this all a little more prematurely than he has planned for them. Not being able to set the pace only frustrates his husband enough to bury his face in his forearm, biting down. Ilya has seen worse from him. There's been times before, in this very bed, in

this very cottage, where they've spent hours, and hours, and endless hours, building and begging and coming back down again to rebuild all over.

His fingers glide down Shane's shoulder and arm to intertwine their fingers, his dick still throbbing inside of his husband. There's a smudge of mint green on the middle knuckle from the baby room they painted earlier, for *their* baby, *their* perfect son or perfect daughter, and suddenly he's dangerously close to coming. He tilts forward, both of them groaning when it drives him deeper, pressing a kiss to the frown in Shane's brow. "No worry," Ilya is surprised by how shaky he sounds, gently tugs Shane's earlobe with his teeth to regain some sort of semblance of control. He rubs his face against Shane's dark locks, out of his mind with desire, with the need to be on and in and all over his husband. "Am going to take care of you."

"Can't wait any longer," Shane shakes his head like Ilya posed him a question, a sweet kind of desperation in his brown eyes, the kind that tells Ilya he's too far gone from reality, from the here and now. Just Ilya's now, just a body made for him, a vessel invented purely to bring him pleasure. "Need you now."

"Hmm," Ilya hums softly, unlinking their hands so he can brush Shane's damp hair off his forehead. He leans down and forward to kiss him, despite the fact his husband is quite literally quivering from anticipation, sliding their tongues together briefly. He presses his cheek against Shane's as he pulls his hips back, slams back inside. Enjoys feeling the warmth of Shane's gasps, the strain in his muscled back under him, knowing Shane can feel the hummingbird beat of his heart against his shoulder. The sight of the tiny #24 tattooed on Ilya's hip whenever they part for an unbearable second before they meet again—groin to ass.

Ilya grips Shane's waist on the next roll of his hips, each slam harder and less in control than the last. A lot of the time, just being filled up with Ilya's cock is enough to make Shane come, but he needs a little more tonight, Ilya can tell. He's pushed up enough now to apply even more force, enough to make Shane's knees slide slightly across the mattress.

He doesn't think he's ever wanted anything as badly as he always wants Shane, but he's always a little resentful that once they start, it'll also have to end. He could stay like this forever. He can feel Shane tense with pleasure, and slides a hand around his abdomen to grip his hard, heavy cock. It's hot and soaking wet like always, and Ilya strains to keep from releasing him so he can lick it off his fingers.

Shane is just a string of moans and pleasurable incoherent noises as Ilya jerks him off while simultaneously rocking inside of him. It's not as deep or hard now, impossible in this position, but still so good. Good enough that his own orgasm hits him all at once—intense and all-consuming and little-stars-behind-his-eye-lids *good*, his pulsing cock pushing to the hilt and filling his husband up the way he likes.

With a long low and shaky groan, Shane starts to follow him over the edge. It makes Ilya hungry with power and pleasure and all good things in the world to watch someone as restrained and reserved as Shane allow himself to let go entirely. Because of Ilya, his husband, his, his, his. Because Shane trusts him to take care of him. Shockwaves of warm release spurt all over his hand and forearm and Shane's abdomen. And probably the sheets, with how much there is of it, which Shane is absolutely going to hate later.

Later, because right now, Shane's body is growing limp and soft underneath him. Ilya litters delicate kisses all down his spine while slowly pulling out, his own cock twitching happily at the sight of his come dripping out. *Greedy bastard.*

Shane practically purrs at the sensation of Ilya's soft mouth on his heated skin, only cut off when Ilya, on his way down to his knees, nips at his ass playfully. He lowers his head so he can lap at his husband's hole with his tongue, taking his sweet time with slow licks and languorous swipes and maybe even a poke of the tip inside to clean him up. After a minute, Shane—probably overstimulated—starts to twitch underneath him, so Ilya pulls back, kissing his thigh and slapping the part where it meets his perfect ass.

Ilya collapses beside Shane with one hand behind his head and the other on his husband's lower back, right above the curve of his ass, still panting heavily. Shane slowly blinks the haziness away from his eyes and when he completely comes to, adjust his head on his pillow so he's closer to Ilya. Shane briefly squeezes Ilya's jaw with his thumb and pointer finger before he softly croaks, "I love you, asshole."

"I love your asshole," Ilya grins, lowering his palm to squeeze Shane's ass.

Shane rolls his eyes, finding the will to roll over onto his back, their sides pressed together and Ilya's hand now right over his belly button. Shane covers his fingers with his own, pulling a face at the stickiness of the both of them. "I need to shower."

"In a minute," Ilya promises, to which Shane turns onto his side. He straightens out Ilya's gold chain down the middle of his chest, dragging his finger down his abdomen to his happy trail, goosebumps forming on Ilya's arms. From there on, Shane walks his fingers to Ilya's right hip, scratching at the #24 with a blunt nail. He's had it for a few years now—their second anniversary he thinks, his brain not entirely cooperating at full speed yet at the moment.

Shane likes the tattoo, but doesn't like the idea of getting one, so there's not a matching one hidden anywhere for Ilya to suck marking bruises into. Music is not really his thing, so there's no #81 playlists, and the most jewelry he can stand is their wedding ring, so there's no #81 dangling down his neck either. There *is* a really hot picture of Shane on their nightstand—one he had to promise in blood to never publish anywhere else for anyone with eyes to see—where he is wearing Ilya's jersey, #81 on (somewhat) proud display. It's not even a sexy pose, just Shane awkwardly standing with his hands intertwined in front of his hips and mid half-smile that makes him look a little constipated, the polaroid camera on self-timer, but Shane was quite proud of it when he handed it over with a serious blush and a, '*Happy belated anniversary, you're lucky you're not still on the Bears.*' It's Ilya's most prized possession.

Somehow he still craves a cigarette every time they finish, but Ilya ignores the urge. He pushes a few sweaty curls away from his forehead, looking down his nose at his husband. "Now season is starting soon I better get used to left hand again, *da?*"

Shane is quiet for a moment, not looking at him but at the gold cross on his sternum. Then: "It's going to be weird without you."

“You did it without me before. You’ll like it,” Ilya brushes him off, grateful the airconditioning chooses to kick back on automatically right this very second. He’s fucking hot. “No real challenge. Spotlight all yours. *Captain Hollander*.” He acts out the name in front of them with his hand, like a bad transition on Powerpoint.

“I know,” Shane says, thoughts far away. There’s a light scratch over Shane’s collarbone, courtesy of Boba. The queen quickly adjusted to her new palace, complete with automatic water fountains and twice-daily plated meals—without any need for bloodshed, despite the shelter’s popular beliefs. Unfortunately for them Queen Boba has made her displeasure with the daily clindamycin shots she needs for a nasty infection in a wound on her backleg—a remnant from her days roaming the streets—known to the stupid peasants who she allowed to take her in. Ilya runs his thumb over it, imagining Boba cuddled up to Anya and Peanut in front of the fan in the living room where they left them. Shane tries again, “I know I can. I just...”

“Yeah?” Ilya prompts quietly, hopeful. His heart starts to beat louder, smashing against his ribcage. *Is this it?*

Shane gives a small shake of his head, finally looking up at him with a small, forced smile. “Nevermind.”

Ilya actively chooses not to be disappointed, while he debates pushing the subject further. Doubt lingers, convinces him he’s not handling this—Shane, retirement, everything—the right way. He fucking wants a cigarette so badly.

The phone on Shane’s nightstand buzzes, and he pushes up on his forearm to reach over Ilya to grab it. A genuine smile forms this time, and then the moment to say something is over, and then Shane informs Ilya, “Bump update.”



Rose-anov [05:04am]: *DO NOT WORRY GUYS but I wanted to tell you guys before you find out from pap pics*

Rose-anov [05:04am]: *I am currently at the hospital in Michigan*

Rose-anov [05:04 am]: *Not dying btw!*

Rose-anov [05:04am]: *Nobody’s dying*

Rose-anov [05:05am]: *Been cramping for the past day and there was some blood*

Rose-anov [05:05am]: *Not a lot Shane, unclench please*

Rose-anov [05:06am]: *My obgyn jsut wanted to be safe so they’re checking me out n refusing to feed me or let me sleep until they know more which is v annoying bc I’m hungry n TIRED*

Me [05:02am]: Booked flight. On my way. T-2,5 hours

Ilya stops swiping left on the last message to see if Shane has read it yet, or received any of his seven voicemails that in hindsight he thinks were mostly in worried Russian, when the checkmarks suddenly turn blue. He sits up straight in the sticky plastic waiting room chair, bracing himself. He just needs to hear Shane, tell him it's going to be okay, so he can start believing it himself too.

His phone only rings once before it's pressed to his ear, Shane breathing shakily once before he finally hears, "Ilya."

"She's okay," he blurts without skipping a beat, rubbing a relieved hand over his mouth and lowering his shoulders enough to gaslight his body into thinking he's relaxed. Ilya is a firm believer that if you walk the walk, you talk the talk. Eventually. "Baby is okay. They're running test, so I had to leave the room because Rose and I both agreed we should keep it down to only one of us having seen her naked. But kid doctor told us for now, there is no immediate danger."

"For now," Shane repeats bitterly, like that's the only part he heard. Ilya imagines him, in the middle of practice, huddled off in a private corner of the sin bin in a strange arena somewhere in bumfuck nowhere, Finland. In his hockey gear, dark hair matted to his neck and forehead. Probably stopped for a drink of water, and checked his phone quickly only to get his whole day ruined.

"Will keep it that way," Ilya leaves no room for argument. He'll gun this whole place down before he lets anything to Rose or their baby. In that order.

"What if something happens to Rose because of what she is doing for *us*?" Shane curses, and Ilya knows he's close to slipping over the edge, his already little amount of control absolutely frayed. "Fuck."

Ilya leans forward, elbows on his bouncing knees as he presses a thumb against the inner part of his left eyebrow. All he's had so far today is a piece of minty gum and bad hospital coffee, and the combination of adrenaline and caffeine is doing wonders for his nervous system.

"Nothing will happen to her. It's *Rose*."

There's a loud *clank* on the other side of the line, a mirthless huff, and then Shane thundering, "I know it's Rose, but she's not a fucking superhuman, Ilya! She's not immune to pain, or trauma, or, or *death*!"

"*Dorogoy*," he starts, demanding, after shaking off a flinch. He stares at an old Covid poster reminding people to keep their distance on the wall in front of him, curling his free hand in a tight fist. "Take breath. Four seconds."

Shane does as he says, before taking a deep four-second long breath, holding, exhaling through his nose, and holding again. The cycle repeats; twice, three times.

“Good,” Ilya murmurs. “Do we need to do five senses?”

“No, I’m not the one in the hospital, I need to—” There’s still a slight trill to Shane’s voice, one he wouldn’t have recognized if he didn’t know him so well, but it seems like Shane is taking his usual *‘I’ll just be over it’* approach. “Be normal about this.”

His heart twinges in his chest. “Shane, is okay. It’s scary—”

“I should be there,” he sniffs, detached and neutral in that particular Shane way; like maybe that would make the words hurt less. *Not in Finland for a pre-season exhibition game sponsored by fucking Parmalat to garner awareness for prostate cancer.* Yeah. “I saw her three days ago, and she was fine and—I should be there.”

It is crazy to think about. Yuna threw them a baby shower just last Saturday. Rose was smiling and laughing at old baby pictures and swaying to the Taylor Swift songs David put in a playlist (that, by the way, finally proved ‘Lover’ wasn’t a dirty word). There was a cake with two tiny rice crispy and fondant cans on top—one coke, one ginger ale. Ilya made Shane and Rose pose for awkward maternity shoot pictures in front of the lilac Hollander Baby banner like they were an actual couple until he thought one more direction to gaze deeper into each other’s eyes might make Shane pass out from embarrassment. There were a lot of games, and presents; a stuffed Loon, two diaper cakes, a wrap baby carrier, a Hockey For Dummies book from Svetlana Ilya promptly tossed Hayden’s way, a Spiderman onesie from Wyatt. At the end of the afternoon, Rose halted mid-bite with a gasp, a little mustard on her chin as she unceremoniously dropped her hotdog on her plate (no more bird diet, thank God). She reached for their hands simultaneously, and Shane didn’t even care about Rose smearing ketchup and sauerkraut juice all over his fingers, because then they felt it. The baby was kicking. Ilya cried a little.

And now he was sitting in a sweaty plastic chair at the hospital. By himself. Bad at waiting, like always. But Ilya was going to have to be good at it for the four of them. He finds the gold chain around his neck, straightens it out. “I’m here. I’ll be there for her for the both of us, okay?”

“Ilya,” Shane breathes shakily, all of a sudden sounds close to tears again. It makes Ilya want to fly over to Finland and hold him in his arms so bad it physically hurts. “This...” He stops, then restarts, “It’s like the plane all over again.”

“Is not like plane,” Ilya scoffs passionately dismissive, heart lurching. *Fuck that fucking plane.* (But also thanks for everything in retrospect, just not right now.) “Rose is not dying. Not because she is *Rose*, but because I say so.”

Shane laughs, watery. “‘Because I say so’ is not really a better argument than ‘Rose is untouchable because she was nominated for an Oscar in 2024’.”

Faintly, Ilya smiles, even though Shane can’t see. “Are you going to be okay?”

There's a sharp inhale on the other end of the phone call, and Ilya knows that no matter what he says, Shane is still going to be beating himself up over this. "Jesus, fuck, yes. I just wish..."

"Yeah," Ilya breathes, the exhaustion from the 5 am wakeup, and the hasty drive over to Shane's parents to drop off the pets, and the overbooked flight he had to upgrade to first class for no fucking reason on, and the waiting and the worrying and the refreshing of WhatsApp and the wondering about Shane and the smell of fucking anti-septic catching up to him all at once. "You got Hollander representative now, yeah? He will take care of everything."

"I love the Hollander representative very much," Shane murmurs, and it sounds like he might be smiling, which is at least a small win in Ilya's book. "And I hope he's not angry at me for being an irrational lunatic."

"Is okay. That's why I'm your parents favorite Hollander," Ilya boasts unabashedly, then sobers a little, thinking of all the waiting, and distance, and worrying still left. "*Ya tebya lyublyu*. I need you to breathe, *da*?"

"*Da*," Shane repeats with a big sigh. There's some shouting in the background, and some muffled movements over the microphone before his husband continues, "Haazy is waving me over so I probably gotta go. I'll keep my phone on me, just in case. Call me if anything changes."

"Wiebe not gonna like that, Cap."

"Wiebe can fuck off."

Ilya suspects, despite frequent updates via text, that Shane has probably been spiraling all morning—call it a sixth sense. Ilya sends his husband a selfie of him and Rose in the hospital bed. There's an IV in the hand she's using to hold up thumb and a box of the pizza he picked up for her (despite it being 9 am and having to ask a nurse to heat it up in their staff room airfryer, two slices at a time), a smudge of tomato sauce on her chin, and slight purple bags under her eyes. He holds up a cup of tasty red goo with a smile.

Me [09:13am]: *Okayd to eat finally bc Rose is monster when hungry. Baby fine. People assume I am husband so I got jello !!! No pizza cuz she is foodguarding like Peanut*

His phone instantly buzzes with a reply, Shane's probably glued to his hand despite Wiebe running drills in preparation for tomorrow's big game. Or tonight's. Time differences tend to break Ilya's brain when he's tired.

Jane [09:13am]: <3

Me [09:14am]: *Rose said this week magz think JJ knocked her up to make you jealous and win you back*

Me [09:14am]: *We r both unsure if they mean JJ or Rose*

Me [09:14am]: *Either way fuck the metros*

Jane [09:16am]: *Upgrade from them claiming the twin she ate in-utero came back for revenge*

Jane [09:16am]: *What did docs say?*

Me [09:17am]: *Placenta against cervix, too low than supposed to be. Fancy word for it. Only partial, so good. For now more observation for rest of the day and then resting at home if no more blood. If stay like this then normal birth, if covers whole cervix then maybe they cut her open*

Me [09:19am]: *They showed baby on monitor and they were doing perfect doctor told us*

Me [09:19am]: *Which we already knew bc they are a Hollander ;)*

Me [09:19am]: *Rose said she's excited to pig out on the couch n be waited on hand n foot by us*

Me [09:20am]: *So don't worry*

Me [09:23am]: *Did word cervix make you pass out?*

Jane [09:27am]: *Sorry*

Jane [09:27am]: *Feel fucking terrible but Weibe is making us do a split-squad game so I have to go*

Jane [09:28am]: *I'll Facetime immediately after, okay?*

Me [09:28am]: *Ofc. I got them*

“Soooo,” Rose starts suggestively, picking a slice of mushroom off her pizza to put it directly in her mouth. She moans as if she was forbidden from eating for weeks. It’s like Boba when she goes three minutes without a snack.

“So,” Ilya echoes, raising his eyebrows at her, licking off the white spoon.

“How’s the whole retirement thing working out for you?”

“Good,” Ilya decides, then lifts his shoulder in a slight shrug to add on to his answer. He dips his tongue inside the empty cup to scoop up the remnants of red jelly stuck in a groove in the packaging. “Lonely.”

She snickers, a shit-eating grin forming on her pink lips. “You’re not subtle, you know.” There’s a slight wince when the baby kicks, and she grabs Ilya’s hand from where he is lounging beside the bed so he can feel. *So strong. They’re doing so good, growing and kicking and staying inside Rose. They’re best,* Ilya telepathically praises his child, *Best baby ever, safe inside. Not scaring Papa like they did this morning, just little dramatic.* “You’re an expert at playing the long game.”

“I could be subtle like elephant and Shane would still not understand. I am trying to show him: life after hockey is not bad. It is good. I haven’t died. I’m still me,” Ilya laments, a little frustrated as he gets up to chuck his cup in the trash. He chuckles fondly when he sits back down at Rose’s bedside, in another uncomfortable chair like hospitals thrive on that kind of shit. “Shane has to be like frog put in gradual warm water, not boiling.” He shakes his head, kneading his shoulder, remembering Shane’s defeated *I should be there*. “I think he will be ready soon.”

Rose pats her tummy softly. “I think so too.”



“Fuck yes,” Ilya whisper-shouts when Shane passes the puck to his rightwing, who then manages to score a last minute goal and wins the Centaurs their first game back this season. Rose is already asleep upstairs, so he is trying to be quiet watching the re-run of today’s game against Boston. All afternoon he’s tried to avoid Yuna’s texts and any other spoilers while he drove Rose to and back from the hospital for her strictly weekly check-up. Baby is good, and Rose is slowly going insane inside, so next home game Ilya finally gets to make his debut in the WAG-suite wearing a Hollander jersey and #24 facepaint. He’s already coming up with so many amazingly clever ideas to simultaneously worship and humiliate Shane—a few well-timed cardboard signs, maybe a little glitter, some t-shirts with his husband’s face or shirtless campaign material on it, and hopefully, in a few months, a baby on his arm in a tiny Hollander jersey. Ilya is actually kind of sorry to the other WAGs, he’s going to outshine ever single one of them.

He’s halfway through the dishes when Anya and Peanut start barking at the door. He quickly shushes them with a stern *tiho* as he makes his way to the entry hallway, and Boba starts excitedly weaving his way through his legs, back and forth and back again.

The door opens with a turn of keys and a soft creak, Shane slipping inside. He puts his gear bag in their coat closet, meticulously peeling off his jacket and hanging it inside, and toeing off his shoes by the rack they keep them on. Boba is budding her head into his shin like she's trying to leave a permanent dent, and Shane picks her up wordlessly, scratching under her chin. Bicep against the wall to hold his weight, Ilya watches him, observing the strange tension to Shane's shoulders while he finishes his usual serial killer routine in silence.

"Hey Cap, nice game," Ilya whispers as soon as Shane is close enough to hear him, since they're near the stairs and Rose gets very grumpy when she's woken up from her slumbers by anything but brunch. Shane doesn't say anything, just presses a kiss to the corner of his mouth and then moves towards the open kitchen.

Ilya watches him in confusion. Shane seems to be in some sort of slateless daze as he sinks down on one of the stools at the kitchen island, his back to the counter and a purring Boba in his arms still.

"Are you okay?" Ilya checks, wariness in his voice as his eyes track every one of Shane's micro-movements. There's not a lot to go off on; a slight flare of his nostrils when he breathes in, a tightening in his lips.

Ilya is already ducking his head to meet Shane's eyes when he suddenly looks up straight, blurting out, "I'm not going back."

"What?"

Shane's tongue dips out to wet his bottom lip, a slightly delirious glint to his brown gaze, and then it's all coming out in a whirlwind of what Ilya is sure are English words: "I spoke to Wiebe. It's going to cost us, a lot, and the general manager will fucking hate my guts for a while, and the commissioner is probably going to blackball us from any future hockey events, but he's going to help me get out of my contract, claiming injury or a complete mental breakdown or something, I don't care."

"You don't care?" Ilya echoes, frozen in place from disbelief. When he finally blinks and collects himself, he adds, "You don't want to finish the season?"

Shane's eyes are round like he is a little scared of himself right now, but also something a bit more along the lines of excitement or relief, his shoulders dropping slightly, like he's slowly defrosting, coming back to himself. "No, I want to be here with you. And Puck." The corners of his mouth turn up slowly, and then he's grinning like a stupid idiot clown that Ilya loves very much, "And have a milkshake not made out of protein powder and supplements." He dims lightly, apologetic in such a sincere way it makes Ilya's stomach lurch. "I won't get fat because I worry about the history diabetes running in my mom's side of the family, but I—"

"Shane," Ilya blurts out near-pleading, shaking his head slightly, eyes darting between his rapidly. He feels like he is watching Shane having an out of body experience, and when he comes to, the crash is going to fucking hurt. And Ilya feels like he took a hard hit on the ice and is now suffering from some sort of concussion-whiplash-hard drugs mash-up. "This is cold turkey. Is not like you."

Shane shoves his hair back from his face with the hand not holding Boba, eyes on his feet before they come back up. “I know but.. It’s also not really? I’ve been thinking, ever since you told me you were retiring.” He licks his lips again, picking at his thumb with his forefinger as his gaze slightly glazes over again, lost in memories. “I got it, you know? Tonight. What you meant. I was scoring goals, and the crowd was cheering, but all I felt was empty.” Shane scoffs, almost humoured. “You weren’t—you weren’t *with* me, and I’ve gotten so used to looking over my to my left—”

Ilya raises his eyebrows cockily, even if his heart is still racing like he took a dive off a building. “You are only center because I can play all positions. I’m talented like that.”

“Sure,” Shane agrees, with a roll of his eyes. “Having you there, that was like muscle memory at this point last season. I never had to communicate with you, you just knew what I was thinking. You were as fast as me. You were good like me. And we’re still good. *I’m* still good. We won, but all I could think about in the locker room after was the thought of what I’d be missing out trying to chase—more.” He pauses, Adam’s apple bobbing up and down as he looks directly at Ilya, his brown eyes a little wet now. “There will always be more. More games, more goals, more Cups, more medals, more responsibility. But this—” Shane motions between the two of them, pointing a finger up at the ceiling, *upstairs*. “You and me and our little kid and our zoo of pets, it’s enough.”

Ilya is silent—it’s just *a lot*, all of a sudden—as Shane rises off the stool and puts Boba down next to his feet. She meows indignantly, but runs off towards her favorite tower in the living room. Shane shuffles closer to him, gaze searching his, only centimetres apart.

“I’ve been thinking about what you said. About hockey. And how I love it the most,” Shane breathes, looking a little pained. More words, there’s so many words—Ilya is close to passing out. “I don’t think that’s true. I did, at some point. It’s all I’ve ever known. Sometimes it felt like there was Shane, and there was Shane Hollander the hockey player. Like every time I was out on that ice, I was playing a role. And I *don’t* know who I am without it.” His fingers brush over Ilya’s hanging limply down his side, before his pinkie links with Ilya’s thumb. “But I’m excited to find out, with you.”

Ilya is already shaking his head, forehead dropping forward to touch Shane’s. “Shane Hollander outside of hockey is kind, and generous. He is smart, determined, and serious. Boring.” There’s a watery chuckle that might be his, arms coming up to palm Shane’s face with both hands, pulling him even closer. “*Perfect*. He is husband. Pet father, soon human father too. He is the best friend anyone could ever ask for. He’s a good son, but not favorite.” They laugh both, and they might also both be crying. He knows they are, because he’s wiping at Shane’s cheek with the pad of one of his hands and then his own face, before bringing it back to it’s original position. “It’s like I’m writing eulogy. Only nice things.”

“Well, we *are* retiring,” Shane sniffs, scraping his throat. “*I* am retiring for you. You’re only allowed to say nice things about me from now on.”

“You like it when am mean.” Ilya ducks forward to kiss him, finally. *Finally, finally, finally*. “And you only had one bad season left in you anyway.”

His husband is smiling good-naturedly, but it fades slowly. “I’m still a little scared,” Shane admits, gripping both of his wrists tight enough for the tips of his fingers to turn white. He does look almost sick now.

Ilya kisses the bridge of his nose, the corner of his eyebrow. “Is okay. *Glaza bojatsja a ruki delajut.*”

Shane kisses him again, a peck, and then, a murmur into his cheek: “*Glaza bojatsja, a ruki delajut.*”

Ilya pulls Shane’s head into his chest, one hand on the back of his skull, the other arm wrapping around his waist. Shane’s arms tighten around his back, cold nose pressing into Ilya’s throat. They hold each other like that for a long minute, *holy shit* a continuous mantra in Ilya’s head.

After a while, Ilya kisses the crown of Shane’s head, then threatens, “Do not say you are quitting for me when telling Yuna, okay?”

Shane pulls back, out of his grasp, wiping the last of the wet remnants off his cheeks and chin with the back of his hand. He smirks at Ilya like they used to do when in a face-off. *Used to.* “Favorite son title is about to be mine again. Does that make you scared?”

“No, because I beat you easy. Like this,” Ilya brushes him off with a snap of his fingers. “Like always.”

“Hey,” Shane sobers immediately. So serious, and concerned. Fingers grasp at Ilya’s dark blue tee, right over his abdomen. “I’m not just quitting for you, you know that, right?”

Ilya remembers. How scared Shane was at some point that Ilya might end up resenting him for transferring to the Centaurs for him. It’s nice of his perfect husband to assure him that’s not an option here, either.

“I know,” Ilya promises, because he has a lot of faith in Shane and trusting his decisions. “And if you want, there’s this woman—hear me out,” he jokes with a shit-eating little smile, “She is therapist. She can help during transitioning process. Yuna got recommendation.”

Shane blinks up at him, brow furrowing. “Wait. You’ve been planning this?”

He lifts one of his shoulders casually, like this isn’t almost a year in the making in Ilya’s world. “I had feeling, you might want to, soon. Always imitating me,” he smacks a kiss to Shane’s cheek. “Better to be prepared, yes?”

“I might want to,” Shane trails off, ignoring Ilya’s teasing completely. His mind is probably already racing with the next problem. “Because I am happy, but I do feel a panic attack about to hit. And I think there might be more lingering, or building, I don’t know. I feel weird.”

“Is okay. Is big change,” Ilya mutters, affectionately thumbing at Shane’s chin. “We will take cold showers and deep breaths and run 20 kilometers on the treadmill and do five senses thing and we will be okay.”

Shane takes a deep breath, corners of his mouth turning up slightly. Not an easy feat, but Ilya is proud of him for trying. “We will be okay.”



<BREAKING: CENTAURS REIGN COMING TO IT’S END? HOCKEY HALL OF FAMER HOLLANDER ABSENT AFTER FIRST GAME OF THE ‘28 SEASON, ON LTIR LIST INDEFINITELY, SOURCES IMPLY PERMANENT RETIREMENT>

Rose reads the headline out loud, then slowly raises her eyebrows as she looks up from her phone. “Had to steal my spotlight, huh?”

Shane blushes firmly red. “Only on ESPN. Everywhere else people are worried about Rose Landry’s emergency BBL.”

Ilya hasn’t stopped looking at their daughter so far. She’s perfect, with her fat little cheeks and her tiny little toes. No freckles, *not yet* hopefully. She’s in Shane’s arms, who is perched on the arm of the chair, beside him.

“Hi little Puck,” he murmurs, tracing her nose with his finger.

“No fucking way,” Jackie exclaims just as she rushes into the room with two balloons in her clasp and a stuffed bear under her arm, already shrugging out of her jacket while still holding all of the above. Hayden, out of breath, is right on her tail. “I’m staging an intervention.”

“Swear jar,” Hayden inserts petulantly, slightly folding in half when his wife forcefully pushes the bear into his abdomen, apparently having made sure it hurts.

Jackie continues, even though she is already smiling like a maniac at the baby in Shane’s arms as she comes closer. “You did *not* name your daughter Puck.”

“We didn’t,” Shane says at the same time Ilya says, “We did, is good name.”

“Puck Ilyinichna—” Ilya starts.

“Bless you,” Hayden mutters, to a well-deserved elbow from Jackie.

“—Hollander. Kind of perfect, right?” Ilya continues with a smug smirk.

Shane shakes his head, kissing Ilya’s temple. “Her name is—”

Hayden puts the stuffed bear at Rose’s feet with a small wave her way, then leaning against the back of her bed with a dip between his brows. “Wait, it’s not Lily or Jane or something

weird shit like that, right? Those were your fuck buddy aliases, that's kind of fucked up."

Jackie is adding a third finger to the two she's already put up. "Two words: swear jar."

Hayden sends her incredulous look, then looks their way hoping for some sort of support, but Ilya is always Team Jackie.

"It's not Puck or Lily or Jane," Shane assures them, leaning down to kiss their daughter's forehead gently. "It's Iris, for lots of reasons. It means peace, like Irina does. And a flower, like Rose who made her possible. And yeah, kind of adjacent to our fuck buddy aliases, but that's our story and we're not ashamed of it."

"You shouldn't be, my husband is just being an asshole," Jackie says softly, dropping one '*welcome baby girl*' weighted balloon next to their chair, holding on to the other one. It says '*happy birthday*' so he assumes it's for Rose.

"We are little ashamed," Ilya corrects, sneaking his arm behind and gripping the elbow where Iris' head is resting in the crook, squeezing. "Nine years kind of long talking stage."

"Yeah, well, it was kind of the opposite of a talking stage," Shane retorts in that serious tone of his, but he's still smiling. He hasn't *stopped* smiling since they saw Iris for the first time, and Ilya doesn't even think he's noticed. It's just his face now. Beautiful, stupid, boring, happy, pretty face.

"Baby in the room," Rose reminds them fondly. She looks great, despite spending over sixteen painful, scary hours birthing a child not even half a day ago. Her hair is clipped back, and she's comfy in a pair of Miffy pajamas. The first thing she told them after the whole birthing thing was over and a nurse was handing over a bloody, screaming Iris to Shane, was, '*roommate situation terminated permanently, sorry, girlie. You're your dads problem now*'. And the second was '*I need sushi or death*'.

"Hayden in the room too," Hayden adds, semi-bitterly.

"Is same thing," Ilya can't help but retort. He makes it too easy.

"Iris Ilya-whatever Hollander," Jackie—a pro in ignoring their antics by now, especially after four kids—repeats in awe with one more look at their daughter, already on her way over to Rose to give her a hug. "That's beautiful."

"She really is," Shane says, looking down at her in his arms. Ilya kisses his shoulder, over the fabric of his non-hockey or athleisure wear or sponsor themed sweater. Instead it says *Dad Life*, a gift from David, to 'welcome them to his elite club'.

And maybe Ilya doesn't just think it this time, he also says it out loud: "Just like her father."



One second, Ilya is sleeping, and the next he feels a hot minty breath on his face and an insistent poking finger between his ribs. He blinks open his eyes with a groan, stretching his arms over his head. Shane is propped up on his elbow next to him, glasses low on his nose and Boba snuggled in between them. “You even sleep?” Ilya mumbles gravelly with a glance at their alarm clock (6:21 fucking am), tired eyes sliding half-shut again, basic sentences all he’s got right now. ”

“First day of school,” Shane prompts, completely ignoring him as he uses a finger to push his glasses further up his nose. Like he hasn’t been up since 3:30am. Or more likely, didn’t catch any shut-eye at all. The evading of the question is enough proof.

After a quick scrub of his palm over his face, Ilya uses both hands to push himself up the bed, back pressed against their headboard and dark blue sheets pooling in his lap. “Are you going to be sick?”

“No,” his husband pledges, then with a groan presses his forehead against Ilya’s side, slinging his arm over Ilya’s hips. “Maybe.” Another indistinguishable sound, tips of his fingers digging into skin. “Yes.”

Ilya’s hand finds the back of Shane’s head, scratching at his scalp gently. He suppresses a yawn. “Is only JK. Fingerpainting and nature walks. Easy.”

Not that anything is *easy* for Iris. Their daughter is sensitive and painfully shy, and didn’t even communicate in anything else but raspberries and ‘dada’ or ‘papa’ until she was nearly 21 months. She started using full sentences soon after, which just proved she could’ve been talking the whole time but just didn’t want to. She still doesn’t like to speak to strangers to this day, but she’s very chatty at home—mostly Miss Rachel, musings about Loons because her favorite emotional support stuffy karmically happens to be one, and Cars, which she got from her papa obviously. Nothing gets those delighted squeals from her more than riding five below the legal limit in Ilya’s bright yellow sportscar while *Life Is A Highway* is blasting over the speakers.

“I know,” Shane trails off, pressing a line of three kisses down Ilya’s side before dragging his face up. His hair is a mess and his glasses are a little askew now, it’s cute. It’s obvious his mind is still going five *above* the speedlimit, as it tends to.

Ilya grins, used to his husband’s inner workings by now. “You know but you don’t know, *I* know.” He uses the hand still on the back of Shane’s head to smooth back his dark locks. “I will know for the both of us.”

Shane makes a non-committal noise like he’s not entirely convinced yet, butting his head into Ilya’s hand to entice him into continuing his ministrations. When Ilya does, Shane settles back with his cheek against Ilya’s pec. Ilya feels his eyes close, the remnants of sleep pulling at his consciousness.

After a minute, his husband knocks his glasses askew again when he rubs at the inner corner of his eye with the knuckle of his pointer finger, quietly announcing, “I might do a few laps before she wakes up.”

They don't have a rink here in their house in Ottawa. They do have a gym, a yoga studio, and a pool in the basement. Ilya thinks Shane is the only retired professional athlete that's in better shape now than he was competing. Hockey used to be the place where he worked out most of his anxiety, and now it's cardio. To his own deepest regrets, Ilya isn't fat yet either, because his depression needs structure and exercise to be kept at bay. Just a little less than Shane, thank God.

"Good idea," Ilya murmurs groggily with a squeeze of Shane's neck. Mindless, rhythmic movement like swimming usually helps Shane's body catch up with his head. Shane kisses him quickly before disappearing into their bedroom with a, "Don't forget to take your meds."

By the way—Ilya hasn't forgotten to take his meds in months, if not years, but he lets it slide, because he kind of likes how naggy Shane is. Like if there's ever a day Shane doesn't bother to remind him, Ilya needs to start getting worried about possible divorce papers that have been drafted. He'd kill himself before he let that happen.

Ilya doesn't move, but he's sure he could fall asleep exactly like this. He'll take his pill in a second, and then shower, get breakfast going. The water in the bathroom turns on. His eyes just flutter shut when there's a creak by the door. "Papa?"

His eyes spring open, finding Iris half outside the bedroom, half inside, looking sheepish. His heart softens a little when he sees her rub at her eyes with one of her small fists, Loonie tucked under her arm. "Come here, *dorogoy*."

Iris shuffles over, her dark hair still in the two braids he put it in before bed last night. A little frizzy now. As soon as she's next to the bed he reaches under her armpits to drag her into his lap, tucking her under his arm. "*You sleep okay?*" He asks in Russian, picking a piece of fluffy lint from the crown of her head. "*Nice dreams?*"

She nods, snuggling into his chest and dragging her stuffy close. "Where is daddy?"

"Shower," he explains, not being able to resist a small flick of his eyes up at the ceiling. Shane is probably the only person in the world who showers before taking a swim. Then he switches to English, "Are you ready for school, big girl?"

Iris ducks her head, keeping her eyes on the face of her Loon, before she's nodding slowly. "Mommom said school has clay and stories and friends."

"That's right," Ilya agrees, grateful Yuna has seemingly already calmed his daughter's first day of school jitters. "You are going to make lots of friends. Like Anya and Peanuts and Boba. Does that sound fun?"

"It do," she admits with a secret little smile. "I like claying too."

"I know. Remember when we made daddy that puck for his birthday?"

She nods enthusiastically, grabbing a hold of his gold chain with one small hand, and giggles when he pretends to bite at her fingers. "Hmm. I wrote on it."

“You did,” Ilya praises with a pat on her side. “Your whole name.”

She suddenly looks sad and pouty. “But if you want, I could stay home?”

“*What’s wrong, baby?*”

“*Are you and daddy going to be only?*”

Ilya’s brows furrow together, racking his brain for a sensible meaning of the word. Russian is difficult to learn, lots of words to say the same thing depending on the context, but he’s always been very firm on the fact no child of his is going to speak French before speaking Russian. Being trilingual can wait until Iris is like ten, or forever. Ilya’s not very particular on it. “*What do you mean ‘only’?*”

Iris’ face scrunches up, thinking hard. So serious. “*Only like... being by yourself without me. Only.*” She blinks up at him with her brown eyes. There’s a few freckles on her nose, but more pop up in summer. It’s the best thing ever. “*Will you be bored?*”

“*Ah, alone,*” he corrects her with the right word, then laughs, squeezing her close, cheek on top of her head. Their little drama queen. So aware she’s the centre of their universe, she is worried they might not know what to do with themselves with her gone all day. “*We will be very bored, waiting alllll day by the window for you to come home, and daddy will probably cry a little bit because of how he misses you,*” he pulls back enough so he can mimic crying with two fists at the corners of his eyes and she finally smiles, “*but we will survive. Feel the fear and do it anyway.*”

Iris nods again, seemingly satisfied by his answer as she tugs on a loose thread on her pink, striped Sesame Street pyjama pants. She gives him an analytical look. “Papa won’t cry?”

In a way, years of trying to figure out Shane has prepared him for resolving their daughter’s intricate thought processes. He lowers his voice, like it’s a secret, pressing, “Papa will also cry, but don’t tell daddy.”

“Don’t tell daddy, what?” Shane interjects from by the door to their ensuite, arms crossed over his chest as he pushes off the oak jamb. His long hair is damp and combed back, and he’s in those red swimming shorts that show off his crazy thighs. No glasses anymore, unfortunately. He dives on to the bed next to them, and Anya, who had settled in by their feet, scurries off with an indignant sound. Shane kisses Iris’ temple, squeezing her shoulder. “Hey, bug.”

She’s obsessed with fireflies they sometimes get at the cottage or when she stays over with her grandparents. They’ve spent countless summer nights chasing them around the lake, or admiring them while roasting smores over the fires. For the longest time, the word ‘lightning’ tripped Iris up and they’ve gotten variations like ‘lit up bugs’ and ‘fighting bugs’ and then ‘boxing bugs’, and finally ‘beat bugs’, which coincidentally is her favorite show on Netflix.

“Morning,” she mumbles, shoving Loonie at her papa and twisting in Ilya’s arms so she can climb on to her other father’s chest, laying flat on top of him. It’s their pancake time. Shane hugs her close. Seeing them like this together is bad for Ilya’s health on his best days, and

what gets him through his worst. Their dark hair and matching freckles. Their quiet, serious faces. His perfect little family.

“Don’t think I don’t notice you’re distracting me,” Shane murmurs into her hairline, poking her in the side.

She giggles melodically, the cutest sound in the world. Ilya often imagined what they would sound like, before she was born, but nothing he thought of came even close to reality. “Papa said you are cry baby.”

Shane gasps dramatically, swaying them from side to side on top of the comforter. “Papa wants to sleep on the couch tonight?”

Iris shifts her head so she can look at Ilya, stretching up on Shane’s chest with both of her tiny hands flat on his pecs. “It’s okay, papa, you can sleep in my bed.”

“Traitor,” Shane whispers jokingly, kissing her cheek before releasing her completely. He juts his jaw at the door. “Why don’t you go get dressed and I’ll make us bowls?” He suggests, tugging on one of her braids. For some reason Iris actually enjoys plain yogurt with nuts and seeds. No fruit, not even a little honey or a drizzle of peanut butter. It’s kind of psychotic. ‘I like plain’ she told them one time, and you best believe Ilya pretty much had a field day with ‘boring’ being part of the Hollander DNA for the rest of the week.

Iris climbs off Shane and the bed, going around the bed to collect her Loon from Ilya. She pecks it’s beak when she gets it back.

“See ya,” she waves, leaving the door wide open as she hobbles over to her bedroom. Iris picked her First Day of School outfit out yesterday, laid it down in her Lightning McQueen themed room. Like Ilya, she loves a good graphic design or busy print, to Shane’s absolute horror.

“So..” Ilya says, turning his head to look down at his husband. His fingers tap over his abdomen.

“So..” Shane echoes, sitting up against the headboard next to Ilya with one knee drawn up.

He raises his eyebrows. “Have you thought about the—”

“Have *you*?” His husband cuts in.

“I’d be better coach.”

“No way, my team would beat your team in every sense of the word.”

“Oh, we *know* you hate women, Shane.”

Shane turns red, and then immediately lets out a rushed babble of, “No, I don’t! The PWHL Guardians are not on the men’s level. It’s a known fact, not my opinion. They’ve never reached the playoffs in the history of their existence.”

“Yet,” Ilya corrects, knocking his shoulder into Shane’s. “They need good coach. Like me.”

“It’s lots of traveling,” Shane starts, looking off into the far distance as he worries the inside of his cheek. Ilya is sure after all these years his husband has rubbed off on him, because he thinks he knows where Shane stands, but he doesn’t *know*. Different ways of knowing. “Days and nights spent at the rink, time at home watching game tape and strategizing.”

Ilya figures it’s best to let him work it out with minimal input from his end. Ilya knows where *he* stands, and he doesn’t want that to influence Shane in any way. “Yes.”

“We’d have to move.”

“It’s only four hours from your parents. Could be worse.” Ilya huffs, indignant. “Could be New York Admirals.”

Shane rolls his eyes, but is also grinning. “Of course you’d be offended if they’d asked you.”

“They are New York Admirals, birthing and resting place of geriatric dinosaur Scott Hunter. No shit I’d be offended.”

“You saw him at camp two weeks ago.”

“Unfortunately,” Ilya mutters under his breath, and after a beat, because he can’t be completely neutral on the cause, adds, “Guardians would be lucky to have you.”

“It’d be a nice challenge,” Shane muses, looking thoughtful. “I do miss the thrill of a hard-won win sometimes, that competitive adrenaline.”

Ilya gets it, he misses it sometimes too, but there’s also so much more he’s gotten in return. He rests his hand around and at the top of Shane’s shin, leaning over slightly to kiss his bare knee. “Is that what you want?”

“Nah,” Shane says, reaching for his hand to press his mouth to the back of it. “I’m happy right where I’m at.”



End Notes

you best BELIEVE there's twins that look like ilya coming before the end of that year. see how u like that thrill of winning when u got two crying newborns, shane...

a kudo, comment or whatever-da-hell would be much appreciated :)<3 🤖🐱

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