

virtue theory

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virtue theory

by [gone_girl](#)

Summary

When Shane thought back on his life, he could not identify a serious misstep. Nothing should be wrong with him. He'd done everything exactly how he was supposed to.

Notes

tread with caution! shane asks ilya to do CNC which ilya is very uncomfortable with and ultimately refuses to do but the foreplay is very much in that vein and they do not communicate well about it. also shane's eating disorder. also i dont know anything about hockey sorry dont care

PRUDENCE

Shane's first concussion happened when he was thirteen years old.

He'd taken hits before. But Shane had grown up big and grown up young, and it wasn't until he joined the bantam league that he was playing with boys his size and bigger. Boys that hit even though they weren't allowed to, because they wanted to win, because thirteen wasn't far off from fifteen, and if you weren't AAA by fifteen you were dead.

So in the semifinal of his first season on the Ottawa AA team, in the last six seconds of a tied game, Shane saw the winning shot. 36 was in possession, and 36 got overexcited when the nerves got to him. Shane was already moving as he saw the angle of his shoulders: 36 was passing to 12, who had no control of himself and always abandoned the puck to scramble back rather than take a hit. Shane was going to make it, he was so close, 12 was scared, he was about to back off, and someone screamed "REECE YOU IDIOT! HIT HIM!"

Shane dove for the puck. 12 was moving, but he wasn't moving away.

Whoa. He was on the ice. Suddenly the whole ceiling was made of light. Shane thought that that wasn't supposed to happen.

Had they won? He couldn't hear anything.

"Honey. Shane, honey, can you open your eyes?" His mom's hands were gripping his arm very tightly.

He opened them. He hadn't known they were closed. The ceiling was still made of light but seemed much smaller all of a sudden.

"Oh." Mom's voice sounded really weird. "You're fine, you're fine. Honey, are you okay? Does anything hurt?"

"Does your neck hurt?" said a strange voice.

Shane blinked. His vision cleared. He was in an ambulance.

"No," he mumbled. "My—my head hurts." Actually, no. His neck did hurt. He reached up and his hand moved so much slower than it should've. There was something around his neck. "Can't breathe."

"Sorry, man, collar's got to stay on." A big hand, not his mom's, patted his shoulder. "Hell of a fall, buddy. We're going to the hospital."

"We win?" Shane asked. "We won?"

Mom's laugh sounded weird, too, wet and sort of fractured. "Yeah, honey, you did it."

Shane realized that she was crying. He'd never seen his mother cry before. It scared him. He closed his eyes tightly against the lights.

He had never been this disoriented. His surroundings kept shifting, lights fuzzing out into bizarre shapes, his mom's voice distorted by tears. His body moved clumsily and slower than he wanted it to. His head was pounding. He kept forgetting what day it was, or what he was doing here.

But it turned out the worst part of a head injury was the first few hours. Once the initial flurry of scans was over, he was allowed to rest in a dark room, eat jello and drink apple juice and listen to his mom read to him. His faculties returned to him; he still felt tender and nauseous, but he was awake and aware, and his body did as he asked it to.

"For Christ's sake, Yuna," Dad said. His voice couldn't lose all its jolly even with his anxiety and exasperation. "Give it a rest. Read him some Harry Potter or something."

Mom gave him a look, then looked at Shane. "Do you want to read Harry Potter?" she asked.

"No," Shane said impatiently. "Keep going."

Mom went back to the Sports Illustrated profile she had laid out in front of her: Katabek Lavrin, an Uzbek-Russian coach who'd come to the US last year to coach New York.

"I ask him what I consider to be a throwaway question, a gimme: what's been the biggest adjustment working with North American players?" Mom said, her voice dropping back into its familiar comfortable cadence. "Most people who have made the trans-Atlantic jump will speak to the strategic differences we all know about: the Russian brain and the Canadian brawn, old-style Soviet collaborativeness on the ice versus the American focus on individual skills. Or, if they don't care for the question, they'll make a crack about liquor and women, the quality of dental care. But Lavrin takes it seriously. He says nothing for so long that I start to worry I've offended him.

"I believe, he says finally, that North Americans are afraid to die. I laugh, mostly out of surprise. He looks at me like he can't believe I'm laughing at him. I clear my throat and take a sip of the Uzbek vodka which he opened especially for this weekend. If it's delicious, I'm not sure, but I'm grateful all the same.

"I won't pretend I understand the Russian relationship with death, I say. But it's North Americans who have made the sport as violent as it is.

"They are afraid to die without getting MVP, Lavrin corrects himself. Every game is like last game. You are so disciplined, your whole life: skills training is number one, structured coaching from childhood, because junior hockey training is machine to produce stars. They are fighting and hitting hard because they want to be stars. They are afraid their career is for nothing without glory they were taught to want as children."

Mom paused. The quiet stretched out, and Shane opened his eyes to look over at her. She was crying again. Dad had taken the magazine from her hands, and her face was pressed against

his chest. She wasn't making a sound. But her hands were clenched so tightly in Dad's sweater that Shane thought inanely that she was going to disfigure the knit.

"Buddy," Dad said quietly. "Me and your mom are going to go get some coffee. You hungry?"

"No," Shane said. His throat was dry. "Um, actually, might sleep."

Mom took her face from Dad's chest. Her eyes and nose were red. "Good idea, honey," she said. Her voice was steady. "But no TV, okay?"

"Okay," Shane said, reassured by her firmness.

Shane slept long and very well. The pediatric ward where he was staying was empty and quiet aside from the beeping of a few machines and the soft giggling of nurses down the hall. They gave Mom a little cot to sleep on, which was the first thing Shane saw when he awoke early the next morning: her with her hands folded under her cheek like a baby, her favorite cashmere blanket from home draped over her. The cot looked horrendously uncomfortable. Usually Mom was such a stickler about her comfort. She must've made Dad go home and get her the blanket.

She opened her eyes like she could feel him watching. She sat up. She was always quick to get awake. Dad needed at least ten minutes to let the sleep clear. Shane took after her.

"Morning, sweetie," Mom said softly. "Feeling okay?"

"Better," Shane said truthfully. "A lot better. When's breakfast?"

Mom smiled. "I'll go get you some," she said as she stood up. "You have one last scan scheduled for this morning. I think it will take a while, but as soon as it's over and the doctor looks at it he said we can go home."

Mom got a nurse to bring three breakfasts to the room, which was good because he was starving. She picked at her own breakfast as he devoured his.

"Shane," she said carefully. "Your dad and me were talking last night. And I—well, honey, I want you to be totally honest, okay? I won't be mad, I promise I won't." Mom actually looked nervous, which made his stomach feel bad again. "Do you want to go back to hockey next season?"

"What?" Shane sputtered muffin crumbs onto the tray table. "What—Mom, I—yeah, of course I—" Fear flooded him. "Are you going to make me stop 'cause I got hurt?"

"No," Mom said quickly. Then she shook her head. "No, well, I mean—I don't know. I just—honey, hockey is dangerous. And I don't want you to feel like you have to do anything. You are such a bright and wonderful boy, Shane. You could do anything you wanted to do."

He was getting confused. She had never, ever spoken like this before. It was making his head ache. "But Mom," he said. "You love hockey."

Mom bit her lip. “It was really scary when you fell like that, honey,” she said quietly. “It’s fun when we watch the games on TV and they start slamming into each other. But when that boy hit you, you hit the ground so hard. And in the ambulance, you didn’t even—of course I love hockey. But I love *you* more, Shane. You’re my baby.”

Shane stared down at his fidgeting fingers. He thought about how scary it was to feel so out of control of his mind and his body, how frightening the ambulance ride had really been. Then he looked up at Mom. “But we won,” he said.

“Well,” Mom said uncertainly. “You didn’t—”

“36 has a bad pass,” Shane said, rushing to get the words out. “And 12 gets scared, he always backs off when you rush him. And 36 was trying to get it out of the middle by passing to 12 because 12 was unguarded because he sucks. And he wasn’t going to know what to do with a bad pass anyway. So if I could get there, it was an easy open shot to goal.”

“You were *fast*,” Mom said, her eyes sparkling. “You’ve never moved that fast before.”

“Mom,” Shane said. His voice was shaking. He wiped his eyes, embarrassed, but the tremor didn’t go away. “Those two seconds before I got there, when I realized what was going on and exactly what to do, and I knew I could actually do it, and then I actually *did* it. It felt so good, Mom. Everything was so clear. I don’t want to do anything except that.”

Mom pushed the tray table out of the way so she could hug him tightly. She kissed the top of his head. “It was wonderful to watch until you fell,” she said, her voice muffled by his hair.

Shane wondered if she was going to tell him not to do it again. She didn’t.

She kissed his head again before she got up, all business again. “Do you want to finish this Lavrin profile?” she asked. “We’re almost done. I think he has some good advice.”

“Yes,” Shane said eagerly. Mom smiled at him, arranged her cashmere blanket over her shoulders, and grabbed the Sports Illustrated off the side table.

“It was clearly something he’d spent a long time thinking about, this surgical psychoanalysis of his own team. I wasn’t sure if it was just the Uzbek vodka burning a hole in my stomach, but the insight struck me hard. So it does come down to a team perspective versus an individual one, I say weakly. Naturally, he says impassively. I sit up straighter and ask Lavrin what the prescription is. He grins at me.

“It’s not bad to want to be good. And I like how dedicated American work schedule is. Russians could use some of that. But I don’t want anxiety. He punctuates this statement by slamming a very delicate-looking tumbler of vodka against the marble countertop. I tell them control yourself, get anxiety out somewhere else, because I don’t want to see them worrying about legacy when there’s game to play. Stars think. They use their heads for more than injuring other players.

“He pauses here for effect with a proud little smile, clearly having given this speech in the New York locker rooms many times over. Then he shrugs and sits down again. I give them

homework, basically.

“Bet they love that.

“He goes on. Study tape, study game plans, study players, come up with your own plays even if you are not team captain or if no one will ever see. He taps his temple. Muscle memory is good, but can be dumb. Takes effort to develop smart instincts. To become real tactician, who can make crazy winning plays in a second. This is how you become star.

“And you’re in the business of making stars, I say. Now that you’re on this side of the Atlantic.

“He laughs and raises his glass. I’m always in the business of making winners.”

Mom closed the magazine. “What do you think?” she asked.

“He’s right,” Shane said, nodding. “Right?”

Mom smiled. “He is absolutely right. So.” She folded her hands in her lap. “How could you have made that play a little smarter?”

Shane already knew, and was embarrassed that she’d called him on it. “I should’ve just stick checked him,” Shane muttered. “But there were only a couple seconds left and I just—I didn’t think he’d have the nerve to hit me. He usually folds, Mom.”

“I believe you,” Mom said. “It’s very good to know your opponents, and usually you do a good job at that. But if the choice is a clean check to take possession or just running in because you’re *sure* he’ll fold, honey, just do it clean.”

“Yeah. You’re right. I’m sorry.” But Mom wasn’t done.

“Was that really your choice, though?” Mom asked. “Was there another option?” He tried searching her face for a hint, but couldn’t find one.

“Yes?”

“What was it?”

Shane tried to remember. He couldn’t picture anything but the shining clear line from 36 to 12 to the goal. Everything else was blurred black and white. “I don’t know,” he admitted finally.

“Honey,” Mom said. “Will was in front of you. I guess a little bit out of your visual field, but he was closer than you were.”

“Oh,” Shane said, feeling immensely foolish. “I didn’t—I didn’t see him.”

“That’s okay,” Mom said, soothing. “What would you have done if you did see him?”

“Told him to guard 12,” Shane said sheepishly. Mom patted his hand.

“It’s okay, honey,” she said. She squeezed his hand. “We’re always going to strive for better, okay? We’re going to have to really work for it.” She paused and smiled. “I wanted to save this for when you finished the final, but since you’re not playing. I got in touch with the Kingston coach. Triple A, honey. He’s going to do a clinic with you.”

Shane threw his arms around her, and she laughed with surprised delight. “I love you, Mom,” he said into her shoulder. “And I love hockey.”

And he did, was the thing. He really, really did.

FORTITUDE

Katabek Lavrin was struck and killed by a drunk driver in the early hours of New Year’s Day, 2007. It was the middle of the season. The New York Admirals, who’d been languishing for years, under Lavrin had made it to the playoffs in 2005. They lost the semifinals by a hair in 2006. In 2007 they had been a favorite to win the whole freaking thing.

Now their savant coach was dead. Mom, in disbelief when ESPN interrupted New Year’s Day broadcasting to announce his death, said, “But God, the Admirals—”

“They’re done for,” Shane said numbly.

Dad changed the channel. He didn’t scold for once.

Shane pushed away his breakfast even though he was still hungry. For once Mom didn’t force him to eat, just let him go silently to his room.

He sat on his bed, crosslegged, and rested his cheek against the window. It was far below freezing outside, and the icy glass felt really nice against his face.

Lavrin had been a good player in his youth. After Mom read him the Sports Illustrated profile, Shane devoured all the old footage he could find, entranced by Lavrin darting across the ice like a barracuda. He was smart, he was fast, and he clearly loved being one of many, obviously the best one on the ice but never missing an opportunity to make best use of his teammates. Even knowing what was coming, Shane’s breath left his body watching Lavrin’s skate get caught on uneven ice right before he got checked hard into the boards, the bone snapping out of his leg. Blood pulsed onto the ice. Lavrin didn’t scream.

He’d been the star of Russian hockey for three years before that. After, he never skated again. But he was a team player, which was how sports journalists always put it, because the second he recovered he went right back to hockey: training flagging teams to glory. Unstoppable. By 2002 he had his first head coach position, and in 2005 he got the Admirals job. By all accounts, he was shaping up to be one of the greatest coaches the sport had ever seen.

He was thirty-four when he died. There were people that age still playing.

How was that fair? Shane thought. How could such a talented person’s luck run out twice like that? Lavrin had done nothing wrong, his whole life. He’d played intelligent, generous,

electrifying hockey. He'd led with clarity, discipline, and work ethic. Shane would watch his calm face during New York games, his expression never twitching into anger or anxiety.

Shane noticed that he could not breathe. Once he had noticed, it was impossible to understand how he'd gone so long unable to breathe. He lay a hand on his chest, thinking stupidly that he needed to check if he was still alive. He was; he could feel his heart banging inside his chest like it was trying to get out. He couldn't *breathe*. Was this it? His hands were tingling. He'd done everything right, everything, and now some freaking congenital heart thing was going to kill him and his mom was going to die too of grief, his vision was tunneling, he imagined what Dad would say—

He was on his back on his bed, staring up at the ceiling. His breathing had returned to normal.

“What the hell,” Shane said aloud. His heart was still racing, but his hands weren't tingling anymore. He sat up and pressed his face against the window again. He realized that he had hyperventilated himself into passing out and blushed. The ice crusting the other side of the glass melted in a perfect circle.

He jerked up from bed and got his skates from his closet. He stomped downstairs. This was so stupid. *He* was so stupid. He had more important things to worry about. He was on the midget team now out of Kingston, they had a game next week. His coach had threatened serious bodily harm if he didn't fix the accuracy on his slapshot.

Shane went to the backyard rink and ran drills. Finally his head quieted. He forgot about Lavrin, the hunger gnawing at his stomach, the three hours he'd have to spend carsick on Thursday to get to Kingston. All he could hear in the world was the grate of his blades against the ice and the hard click of the puck against his stick. It began to snow.

“Honey!” Mom.

He ignored her, just swung around to hit the puck into the net on the other side so it wouldn't fly into her by accident if he missed. He didn't miss. He was getting top corner every time now.

“Young man! Come over here this instant.”

Shane got the puck out of the net and took his time going back.

“Shane!”

Shane huffed, dropped his stick, and skated to the side of the rink. “What.”

Mom folded her arms and stared at him. Her gaze could crush glass. “Come inside now,” she said.

“Mom,” Shane said indignantly. “We're playing the Tigers next week, Coach said I need to —“

“Coach said you have to skate in an inch of snow?” Mom cut him off. “I don't think so.”

“I’ll clean it off,” Shane protested.

“You certainly will,” Mom said sharply. “But right now you’re going to come inside, take a shower, and eat your lunch. You’ve been out here three hours, Shane.”

Shane was suddenly, unpleasantly reminded of how hungry he was. Man, he was *so* hungry. Abruptly he felt weak. Actually weak, like he was going to fall over. Like a girl. Like a girl who hyperventilated to unconsciousness in bed this morning.

“Okay,” Shane muttered. “What’s for lunch?”

“Pulled chicken sandwiches,” Mom said. “I made you four, but let me know if you’re still hungry afterwards and I’ll make you a shake.”

Shane did as he was told. His unfinished breakfast was still on the table, covered by a little plastic dome fogged with steam. He opened it: he’d left a few bites of omelette, a sausage, and half a jelly roll. He stuffed it all into his mouth with his fingers and then ran upstairs, still chewing.

He was still chewing when he got in the shower, trying to swallow little by little. There was too much food in his mouth to chew properly. Sausage chunks slid down his throat. He was so dumb. If he choked and died in the shower he’d deserve it.

But eventually all the food got down, and he finished showering. He was still hungry. A six-egg omelette with cheese and mushrooms, three sausages, and a jelly roll was a pretty standard breakfast for him, but he was always starving again by lunchtime. It was actually distracting, how often he was hungry.

Playing on the Kingston team was hard. It was really, really freaking hard. The thumbscrews training and the fact that Shane was hitting *another* growth spurt meant he was now eating constantly just to keep up. He was probably eating four thousand calories a day and he was *still* hungry all the time.

Shane knew all that was normal. The other boys on the team ate just like he did, more even. Mom loved how much he ate because, she said, it meant it was working.

But sometimes he just wanted to focus on what he was doing. He liked taking notes watching his favorite commentators’ breakdowns, especially when his mom wasn’t around to bounce ideas off of. He liked rereading books. He liked cutting out really good profiles on his favorite players and compiling them into a scrapbook his mom got him. He liked, even, sometimes, doing his French homework. His last assignment had been handed back with a 95 and a big red-pen arrow pointing at a smear of peanut butter: *C’était parfait mais c’est quoi ça???* Embarrassing.

Shane didn’t mind being a slave to practice because he loved how it felt to get better every week. But he didn’t love eating, and it felt like a betrayal that his body was constantly demanding more.

Shane ate all four pulled chicken sandwiches. Mom, because she watched him plow through the fourth, already had a smoothie made for him when he was done.

“Just in case,” she said. Resentfully, Shane grabbed the smoothie and headed for the stairs without saying thank you. He felt bad about it immediately, but it was too embarrassing to rectify his mistake once he’d already gone upstairs. He took a sip. It was a good smoothie. Mom somehow always managed to hide the dusty protein taste.

Shane went for his skates, but it was still snowing outside, and it felt pointless to clean off the ice when for all he knew there’d be another couple inches by tonight.

Instead, he went and got his scrapbook from his desk. He flipped all the way back to the first few pages, where he’d saved the clipping of Katabek Lavrin’s Sports Illustrated interview in 2005. Lavrin had been a nobody in North America, and everyone was scratching their heads about this weird left-field pick from the Admirals owners until New York started playing like they were alive again.

Shane lay down with the scrapbook on his belly and called Daryn, the phone’s curly cord stretching like a hammock between his bed and his desk. Daryn was his only real friend on the team. Daryn’s dad was the coach, which everyone knew was the only reason he was even on the team, because Daryn was kind of small, kind of slow, and had bad eyes. His encyclopedic knowledge of hockey and genuine tactical skill was the added insult to the nepotism injury, and that was why Shane was Daryn’s only real friend on the team.

“Hello?”

“Coach Gallant? Sorry to bother you. It’s Shane.”

“Shane,” Coach said cheerfully in his thick accent. “No bother, no bother at all. Happy New Year!”

“Happy New Year,” Shane said. “Did you guys celebrate?”

“Oui, oui, so much fun. Next year you must come to Kingston and celebrate with us,” Coach said happily. “You want to talk to Daryn?”

“Yeah, thanks, Coach. See you soon.” It still sort of unnerved Shane how much Coach Gallant liked him now that he’d officially joined the team. It had been all coyness and uncertainty for a year and a half: clinics his parents were paying through the nose for, begging him to come see Shane play, one hard-won “impromptu” skating session with Daryn. These days Coach was so friendly with him that it felt like a bizarre trick.

“Brother man, what’s up?”

“Dude, did you see Lavrin died?” Shane said.

Daryn whistled. “Fuck, are you serious? What happened? His plane crash or something? Fucking knew it was just a matter of time before the Russians got pissed he defected. I wonder if they got the owners to help them? Nah, no way, he was making them way too

much bank—” Daryn was like that: his mind was constantly working overtime, and unless it had something directly to do with gameplay his mind was working overtime to produce shit.

“He got hit by a drunk driver,” Shane interrupted, laughing despite himself. “Stop with the conspiracy theories.”

“You’re so fucked, dude, why are you laughing?”

“I’m not,” Shane said, fixing his face. “But it’s crazy, right?”

“Could’ve still been the Russians,” Daryn said after a moment. “Man, the Admirals are dead and fucking buried without him.”

“It’s sad,” Shane said. “It’s so sad, man. He never did anything wrong.”

“Except trade Boisen,” Daryn said.

“No, like—” Shane stopped and tried to figure out how to phrase it. “I just keep thinking about, like, you could be a really great player and still get your leg mangled. You could be a gamechanger coach and get hit by a freaking car.”

“That’s life,” Daryn said. “What else is there, man? Do your best, die one day. Whatever.”

That was not helpful. Daryn at least seemed to know that. He sighed. “Come on, Shane. You’re not going to break your leg. Or get hit by a car. Like, why even think about that?”

“You don’t know that, dude.” Shane scrubbed a hand down his face. “It just sucks sometimes, man. I don’t have any friends at school.” He let out a short, sharp laugh. “I’m always carsick when we have to drive to Kingston, which is like three days a week! And I’m hungry all the freaking time. It’s driving me crazy.”

“Dude,” Daryn said, bewildered. “Since when do you complain about that shit? I thought you loved it.”

“I do.” Shane stared up at the ceiling. “But if I get hit by a drunk driver tomorrow, what would the point have been?”

Daryn was quiet for a minute, which gave Shane time to realize that obviously he didn’t have any idea what Shane was talking about because Daryn was not good at hockey. This was dumb. He should hang up.

Daryn said, “I guess there wouldn’t have been any point.”

“Thanks, man,” Shane said. “Appreciate that.”

“Look,” Daryn said, not without bitterness. “Everyone knows you’re going somewhere. You’re signing up for this shit. Lavrin. Fucking Bill Masterton. Steve Moore, a couple years ago. Yeah, Steve Moore was an asshole. Whatever. You get my point.”

Shane did not get his point. He actually felt even worse. “What are you talking about,” he said, and winced. His voice sounded fragile even to himself.

“I’m just saying,” Daryn said, a little gentler. “You’re going to have to get carsick. You’re going to have to be a little lonely. You’re going to have to eat, all damn day. And you have to not be afraid something will happen to you. And if you can’t not be afraid, then you’ll just have to be afraid. But you gotta pull it together, man. Control yourself.”

The dread that had been building up inside of him since he’d heard the news of Lavrin’s death dissipated so fast it was hard to believe how much space it had been taking up. In its place there was an answer, bright and clear and staggeringly simple: control yourself.

“Yeah,” Shane said. “I guess you’re right. I can do that.”

“Course you can,” Daryn said. “Chris Pronger’s heart stopped on the ice and he played 40 minutes in the next game. That’s the kind of fucking animal you are, Shane. You are ice fucking cold.”

“I am ice fucking cold,” Shane repeated. Ridiculously, it made him feel better.

“You are *ice* fucking cold,” Daryn said, laughing. “All right. I gotta go, brother. I’ll see you Thursday.”

“See you.”

Shane got up and placed the phone carefully back in its receiver. Then he lay down again, on his stomach this time, reading the Lavrin profile as he sucked down his smoothie. It was a comforting, familiar read.

I ask him how long recovery took, although I already know. He gives me a look and declines to answer. (For the reader’s benefit: two surgeries and a lot of physical therapy over six months before he could work. The nerve damage is irreparable; he’ll never walk again without a cane.)

Instead I ask him, how long did it take you to decide to go back to hockey, once you knew you’d never play again?

No decision, Lavrin tells me. Nothing else for me.

I ask him a question I’ve been nervous to ask: didn’t it bother him, to see all the bright young prospects succeed where he should have? Doesn’t it hurt?

To my surprise, Lavrin does not jeer at me or call me soft, as perhaps I’ve been conditioned to expect. It should hurt, yes? he says thoughtfully. Maybe it does. But I cannot control anything but myself. I do my job and I am happy.

A true stoic, I say.

He frowns. A what?

TEMPERANCE

“Dude,” Hayden said as Shane walked into the locker room from the showers. “Your phone is, like, blowing up right now. This is the second call.”

“What?” Shane hurried to his cubby, where his phone was chiming. He had already thought of every horrible thing that could possibly have happened to his mother, his father, his—

“It’s Justin,” Shane said, flatly.

“Who?”

“The contractor who’s renovating the new house in Cornwall.” Shane picked up. “It’s game day, so I really hope you have a good reason for this.”

“I’m sorry, Shane,” Justin said, sounding, at least, genuinely remorseful. “There’s just a little—I just need to know now, is the timeliness of this project more important to you or the longevity?”

“What?” Shane said, baffled. “What the fuck is going on over there?”

“It’s sleeting up here,” Justin said. “But we already started pouring the foundation for the garage.”

“So stop wasting cement,” Shane said, very narrowly avoiding finishing that sentence with *you fucking idiot*. “The longev—I don’t care if you have to pour the foundation tomorrow instead of today if it means a job well done. This is why you called me?”

“It’s time sensitive,” Justin said.

“You’re *still pouring it?*”

“Guys!” Justin yelled, making Shane wince and pull the phone from his ear. “Stop, stop! We’ll do it tomorrow.”

“Just remember to check the weather,” Shane said, wishing powerfully that he had not believed Justin’s father when he retired and promised Shane that Justin would do just as good a job. “Please. All right? Thank you, Justin.”

“You got it, boss,” Justin said. “I’ll let you know if anything else comes up.” He hung up before Shane could tell him that he was absolutely not permitted to do so.

Never mind. At least the moron had called and given Shane a chance to save some poor future homeowner’s garage from sinking into the earth.

“Everything okay?” Hayden asked, obviously repressing laughter. Shane took a deep breath, which, despite the perpetual stink inhabiting the away locker room in Boston and the current stink from his cheerful teammates jostling around in it, actually made him feel a little bit better.

“My contractor is an idiot,” Shane said. “I’m going to call my mom and see if she can go over there tomorrow.”

“I don’t get why you don’t hire someone to do that shit,” Hayden said, pulling on his sweatshirt. “Jackie doesn’t even ask me how to invest our money. I didn’t even know we owned an apartment building until last year when I asked her why Chad was calling her all the time. Isn’t Chad a stupid name for a gay property manager? Doesn’t that sound like a secret boyfriend?”

“If you would like your balls back,” JJ said from Shane’s other side, “I am sure I can convince Jackie to hand them over. She always liked me.”

“My balls are doing just fine with Jackie,” Hayden said serenely.

“It doesn’t drive you crazy not knowing where your money is?” Shane asked.

“Or your balls?” JJ added, his brow knitted with concern.

“Chad is gay,” Hayden said emphatically.

“*You* are gay,” said JJ.

“Not your best work,” Shane said placidly. He hung up his towel and started pulling on his sweats, letting them bicker behind him. It was nearly one o’clock, which was because the Raiders were constantly starting their morning skates late, which meant the away team didn’t get to have their morning skate until almost noon. But at least it was a regular thing. Shane didn’t mind other people’s lateness or sloppiness or rudeness or idiocy, because as long as he could anticipate it and plan around it, he was good. His Boston routine was different, but it was still a routine.

He’d slept in until 7:30, had his usual morning smoothie of bananas, dates, and almond milk. Quick 5km run. Shower. Breakfast: chopped apples in oatmeal, cooked in almond milk and fortified with vegan protein. Morning session: reviewing game plan, answering emails, returning calls. Ate again. Then the team meeting: running through plays and plans before morning skate. If you could still call it that when it started at 11:45.

The team had been weirdly restless, on edge and impatient. Shane didn’t really know how to address that except as he usually did, by explaining a little slower and a little clearer, and expressing truthfully that he knew they were all capable of turning the Raiders into smears on the ice.

He wasn’t sure if that lifted spirits, but morning skate went well, so maybe it had. He had to head back to the hotel, eat, and shower before his call at 1:45. Now he had to do it with Justin’s cretinous voice eating into his brain.

Shane made good time. When his phone rang at 1:45, he had just sat down to eat and finished texting his mom asking her to check in on the house.

“Hey, Fred? How are you?”

“Good, good, how are you? Ready for the game later?”

“I will be once we get this done,” Shane said, taking a bite.

Fred paused. “Shane,” he said. “We’ve been doing this for a few years now, right?”

Shane, not expecting a question, had his mouth full. He’d timed a big bite specifically because he had expected Fred to talk. It kind of pissed him off. “Mm-hm,” he said.

“I would hope,” Fred said, “that you trust me enough by now that I can just tell you this contract is ready to be signed. We negotiated this thing together, you basically know what’s in it. And I feel bad billing for time wasted. Don’t you want to just relax? Focus on your game?”

Shane swallowed. “Fred,” he said coolly. “Thank you, but my focus on my game really isn’t your business. I don’t want to basically know what’s in this contract, I want to know exactly what’s in it. Once I do, I’ll sign it and send it over and I’ll focus on my game. Okay? Sound good to you?”

“All right. No problem,” Fred said, perfectly blank. “Not a problem. Okay, so as you know, Section I is just scope, compensation, and term. You know that Rolex doesn’t usually sign contact sport athletes. They’re squeamish, I guess. So, as you know, the term is only six months. But this clause here—line eighteen, page three. See it?”

Shane flipped to page three. A speck of garlic oil landed on the page. He stared at it regretfully. “Yeah, I see it.”

In the end the call only took fifteen minutes, because, in fact, Shane did already basically know the contents of the contract. But Fred was a good guy, a good lawyer at least, and he walked him through it anyway. Shane signed the contract and exhaled. He felt okay.

He put his phone on DND and ate the rest of his lunch as quickly as he could, hoping to get at least an hour and a half to sleep before they had to head back to the rink. But Mom called, and hers was the only number that made it through.

“Honey, what is this with the house?” she said. “Why are you worried about this right now?”

“Justin’s an idiot,” Shane said. “I’m sorry, I know it’s a long drive. I can go myself when I get back up there if you don’t have time.”

Mom sighed. “Did you sign Rolex?” she asked.

“Just faxed the contract,” Shane said.

“Good. Good.” Mom sighed again. “Don’t you think it’s time to get a personal assistant?”

Shane groaned. “Not this again, Mom—“

“I know,” Mom hurried to say. “I’m happy to help you, but—“

“I’ll go,” Shane said, wanting to finish this conversation as soon as possible. “Okay? Stay home, I shouldn’t have asked.”

“I am *happy* to help you,” Mom said firmly. “You know, the brand ambassadorships and the contract negotiations and all that, it’s a lot of fun. And I am so happy and grateful you value my opinion so much when it comes to hockey, too. But don’t you think that checking in on contractors is something you can delegate? I don’t even know anything about construction, I wouldn’t know what to look for.”

“I’m sorry I asked,” Shane said honestly. “I’m really sorry, Mom, it wasn’t fair. I don’t want to take you for granted.”

“I appreciate that, honey.” Not one to be distracted, she added, “So should I put out a call for PAs?”

“No,” Shane said flatly.

“Why not?”

“Come on, Mom.” Shane rubbed his eye. It took him *forever* to find people he could trust: he’d gone through two lawyers before Fred, and it had been eight months of searching before he chose Justin’s father’s construction company. A full year to pick his current nutritionist. He still hadn’t found a physio he liked. Dad was an MD at RBC, so he took care of Shane’s portfolio. Even then, Shane still spoke to Dad’s assistant analyst regularly, just to make sure he knew exactly what his money was doing. Shane shuddered to think of how long it would have taken him to find a financial advisor he liked. The idea of searching for a stranger to manage his entire life (much less actually *trusting* a stranger to manage his entire life) induced genuine terror.

Especially since he was now going to have to find a new contractor.

“I just think it might take some stress off you,” Mom said.

“Mom,” Shane said. “I need to nap. We’re leaving the hotel at 4:15.”

“Oh, my gosh, of course, sorry.” Mom laughed. “Knock ‘em dead, honey. Sleep well.”

“Thanks. Call you tomorrow.”

“Love you.”

“Love you too.”

Shane put his phone down. He had a tension headache squatting on the nape of his neck, which was fine, but now it was crawling above his ears and towards his eyes.

He just could not get away from the demands. His team, his contractor, his mother. Fucking Rolex. So what if he played a contact sport? Golfers were more likely to embarrass Rolex than Shane was. Tiger Woods had been an ambassador for years, hadn’t he? Even Shane’s

body was constantly demanding more. He had a protein bar and a green juice and went to bed.

The nap calmed him marginally. The headache retreated back to his neck. He ate again, a bigger version of the same meal he'd just had: grilled tofu, mushrooms, and brown rice. He stretched, a brief yoga routine to get himself limber. Then it was time to go.

The weird edginess was back in the locker room, and it threatened to push Shane off the razor blade he'd been balancing on all day. He'd led these people to victory countless times over. He developed game plans that made best use of everyone's talents, he worked with individual team members when they needed help with a training program or a diet plan. Why, on top of that, was it incumbent upon him to get their morale up? Why couldn't they control themselves?

"All right," Shane said, raising his voice. "Everyone remembers what we talked about this morning?"

Affirmative grumbles.

"No fighting unless everyone can see it was their fault," Shane said. "Then you can pound them."

A few smiles.

"Hands in."

Everyone shuffled forward. For a moment they were all tucked into the circle, hands reaching out for one another, big warm bodies breathing slowly together.

"Let's fucking kill them," Shane said, and the room erupted in cheers.

So Shane was actually optimistic as the clock started. But clearly, even after two years as captain, he didn't have any fucking clue how to gauge his team's mood or how to fix it. Shane made assist after assist trying to get his teammates to play the fucking game instead of brawling with Boston players, who they *knew* were the dirtiest players in the league. The only one who thanked him was Hayden, a gentle little headbutt before he got back in position. Everyone else was all over the place.

Something in the water today, Shane figured, just one of those days. And that made him madder than anything.

In the end they won—inexplicably, narrowly, almost reluctantly, but they won. Shane could barely take pleasure in it; they were *better* than this. *He'd* played well, and he'd dragged this recalcitrant team to victory, but it wasn't supposed to be like that. They were supposed to win *together*. He was angry with them for their immaturity, and he was angrier with himself for failing them.

Mom called, and for once he let it go to voicemail: he wouldn't be able to stand her joy. He couldn't even stand his teammates celebrating, cheering and whooping and congratulating

themselves on a game poorly played. Shane needed to get out of here right now.

Hayden caught him as he was tossing his bag over his shoulder.

“You look like you just swallowed a lemon,” Hayden said. “Or a pint of ice cream. Whatever would upset you more. Wait a minute, let’s share the car.”

“I really have to go,” Shane gritted out. Hayden grinned.

“I can take your bag back to the hotel,” Hayden offered. “If you’re meeting up with Lily.” Hayden reached out to take the bag. It was nice of him.

“No, it’s—” Shane’s tension headache had come slamming back, making it hard to invent a lie that covered up the fact that he wasn’t meeting up with anybody because he needed to go back to the hotel and give himself an enema first. “I’m kinda tired, I don’t think I’m going to see her tonight.”

“Hold up, then,” Hayden said. “I’m almost ready.”

“You are not,” Shane said. If he had to stay in this conversation for one more minute he was going to explode. “I’m leaving. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He practically ran out. JJ behind him called, “Hope you’re getting your dick wet after that performance! Hell, wait up, I’ll do it!” The locker room roared with laughter, and then the door swung shut.

In the car, it was blissfully quiet. Shane’s shoulders dropped for what felt like the first time all day. He closed his eyes, trying to relax the muscles in his face to relieve his headache. Then he checked his phone. It was swarming with congratulations. He scrolled down until he found the only exchange he cared about right now.

I want consolation prize

Hello

Hello

Bring penis

Now

Hello

Bring gummy bears also plz

He’d missed him. Shane felt a little of the tension in his neck release. He rolled his head from one side to the other and breathed deeply. The car pulled up to the hotel.

I’ll be there around midnight

Ok :)

Boston was a small, pretty city. Rozanov's apartment was spacious and obviously expensive, but it was hard to be genuinely ostentatious in Boston. There were a lot of old houses. Good bones, Shane thought as he walked through Rozanov's neighborhood at 11:56 with a bag of Haribo gummy bears in his pocket. He could buy one of these brownstones, maybe.

Shane had hardly knocked on the door before it was swinging open. Rozanov, barefoot and shirtless and smelling fresh from the shower, was beaming. He reached out, grabbed Shane by the collar, and hauled him inside.

"You take so long always," he chided as he crowded Shane up against the wall. "Starting to think you do not miss me." Rozanov buried his face in Shane's neck, licking and biting like Shane was a piece of taffy. Shane tilted his head back, enjoying him. Then his stomach growled, loudly enough for them both to hear it, and Rozanov laughed. "You eat?"

He hadn't since the game, nothing more than a couple protein bars at the hotel to keep himself standing.

"Here," Shane said. He brought the bag of gummy bears up between them and used it to push Rozanov away from him. Rozanov laughed and went in to kiss Shane, but Shane slipped away, leaving Rozanov in the foyer with his candy.

"Why you are mad?" Rozanov asked bemusedly as he watched Shane walk away. "You won. You remember?"

"Yeah, I remember," Shane said, hanging up his jacket and toeing off his shoes. He could feel Rozanov watching him. He looked around the apartment. Good bones, he thought again, but sparsely furnished. It smelled smokey. A cast-iron pan was sitting on the stove, and a dirty plate sat on the counter. Shane imagined Rozanov making himself a steak and sitting here alone to eat it.

"Come." Rozanov tossed the gummy bears onto the counter and wound his arms around Shane from behind. "Come make me feel better. So sad because I lost. Need this." He kissed the back of Shane's neck. He had this easy way of speaking, goofy and comfortable and still ridiculously sexy. Shane hated him. "Been dreaming to fuck you. Come make me feel better. Suck my dick, please, Hollander? You are so sexy and famous and good at hockey, please suck my dick."

Ordinarily this would've made Shane melt into a puddle. He had no idea why it wasn't moving him now. It was a little frightening. If hockey couldn't make him happy, and Rozanov couldn't make him calm, then what was left?

His heart began to race. His breath began to come short. His brain panicked, short-circuited, spat out: "Make me."

Rozanov laughed into his hair. "Oh, I make you. Go sit in front of couch."

“No.” Shane extricated himself from Rozanov and turned to face him. “I’m serious. I’m going to fight back. I want you to hold me down and make me.”

Rozanov’s face closed off. The spark of affection in his expression died out. “I don’t like to do that,” he said, slowly. “Why you want me to do that?”

Blood was rushing in Shane’s ears. “I need it,” Shane said. “I just—I need it, Roz, I’ve had—I’ve had the worst fucking day.”

Rozanov softened by a fraction. “I make you feel better,” Rozanov said, coming towards him. “Just ask me what you want.”

Shane realized Rozanov must think something awful had happened, which made him feel worse. Nothing awful had happened. Nothing even particularly out of the ordinary had happened. Why did he feel like this? Why couldn’t he control himself?

“I don’t *want* to,” Shane said through his teeth. “If you can’t do it I’ll just go.”

Rozanov’s jaw clenched and then relaxed. “I can. But I.” He stopped. His eyes searched Shane’s face and did not, apparently, find what they were looking for. “I like when you like it,” he said finally.

Shane couldn’t explain himself. Literally couldn’t, felt that if he tried he’d die. He shouldered past Rozanov, making a new bruise from the game ache, and went to put on his shoes. He’d just bent down to reach for the left one when he felt Rozanov wrench him back by the arm.

Shane toppled backwards, directly into Rozanov, who rolled them over so that Shane was stomach-down on the floor. All his weight was on Shane. He elbowed back, hard, making Rozanov huff out something in Russian and giving Shane a chance to wriggle away.

He ran into the bedroom. His heart was still pounding, but it didn’t feel like fear anymore. He felt exhilarated. He looked out the window, saw Boston glittering outside, and smiled.

Rozanov, all two-hundred-something pounds of him, charged Shane and slammed him down to the bed. He pinned Shane’s hips down with his legs and leaned back so he could get his hands on the hem of Shane’s shirt. He was trying to pull it off. Shane didn’t let him. “Fuck,” Rozanov spat, and ripped the shirt.

Shane freed one leg and threw it over Rozanov’s hip, hooking his foot into the crease of Rozanov’s knee. It gave him the leverage to pull hard enough to knock Rozanov backward, giving Shane the upper hand. He grabbed Rozanov’s wrists and pinned them by his sides. His torn shirt hung in Rozanov’s face.

Shane was hard. He stared down at Rozanov, who looked nothing like the guy who had greeted him at the door like a loyal dog. Rozanov was snarling at him. He jerked his arm, unbalancing Shane, and Rozanov dragged him down.

They kept wrestling. Rozanov was a little bigger, but only a little. Every time one of them won, the other found a way out. Shane had never played dirty before, but he did now:

elbowing, headbutting, spitting and biting. Rozanov was the only thing in front of him, the only real thing: the clean smell of his still-damp hair, the taste of his skin when Shane bit him, the colors of the darkening bruises all over his body from the game, the weight of his body pressing down, down, down.

They didn't speak. They couldn't if they'd wanted to; they were both panting trying to best the other.

But finally, Rozanov got the upper hand and kept it. He had Shane facedown on the bed, one arm trapped under himself awkwardly and the other arm pinned by one of Rozanov's. Shane felt Rozanov's other hand pull his sweats down, just enough to reveal his ass. The cold air hitting his skin made him struggle anew. He twisted, getting enough room to pull out his other arm and swing wildly back. Rozanov caught his hand and pinned it with its twin at the small of Shane's back. He shuffled back a couple of inches, and Shane heard him spit into his hand. A wet thumb pushed against his hole.

"Is ready," Rozanov said, breathlessly.

"Huh." Shane's face was pressed into the pillow. His mind felt, finally, pleasantly blank. If he wasn't so fucking hard right now he could've fallen asleep.

"You—you made yourself ready."

"Mm."

Rozanov leaned down so that his body was covering Shane's back. Shane couldn't move at all. "Say you want," Rozanov said into his ear.

"What?"

"Tell me fuck you," Rozanov said. His English was worse. Shane relished that. "I not letting you up until you say."

"I didn't tell you to let me up."

"What you tell me?"

"Stop fucking playing around," Shane spat.

"You don't like game no more," Rozanov said angrily. He shifted his weight onto his knees so he had room to shove his free hand under Shane's body and grab his hard dick. "What is this? You don't want me? Okay. I go."

Rozanov moved above him like he was actually going to get up and leave. "No," Shane choked out.

"What?"

"No," Shane said, louder. "Don't go."

They were still for a moment. Rozanov was still straddling him, his ass bare, his hands pinned behind his back. Complete vulnerability, Shane thought dizzily.

“Why not?” Rozanov breathed. “You say I have to make you.”

“Please,” Shane said to the pillow, burning with humiliation although he’d said this much and worse many, many times before. “Fuck me.”

Rozanov spat into his hand again, and Shane felt him move slightly. Shane looked behind him and saw Rozanov stroking himself, staring enraptured back at him. His beautiful face in the dark, his body shining dimly with sweat, his thick hard cock in his broad hand. His lips, a little parted. Shane wanted to kiss him. His restraint crumbled.

“I want it,” Shane said in a rush. “I want you to fuck me and make me feel good. I got ready in the hotel ‘cause I couldn’t wait, I wanted you to grab me the second I walked in the door. I miss—I miss how you fuck me.”

Then Rozanov let go of his hands and got off him altogether. Shane froze. Had he ruined it completely? But he hadn’t. Rozanov was pulling off his pants.

Shane rolled over and kicked off his pants. He watched Rozanov put on a condom. It took him three tries to open the lube. His hands were shaking. Shane had never seen Rozanov act this way before.

Shane rolled back onto his stomach and spread his legs. The bed dipped as Rozanov straddled his ass again, trailing kisses down Shane’s spine. Shane put his hands behind his back, like Rozanov had put him earlier. He’d been wound up since Rozanov had grabbed him by the arm, and he needed it right now.

“What?” Rozanov murmured behind him. “You want?”

“I want it,” Shane groaned. Rozanov’s hand spread him open. He heard Rozanov spit, felt it hit his hole. “Please, oh my God, fuck me.”

Rozanov’s cock pressed against him, hard. Shane had the crazy thought he always had when they fucked, which was that this time it would surely not even go in. As always, he was proven wrong. He forced the tip in, and unable to help himself, Shane gasped.

“Fuck.” Shane buried his face in the pillow. “Fuck, Rozanov, hold me down.”

Rozanov’s fingers wrapped around his wrists, and now Shane was pinned down properly. He felt him lean forward, put more weight on him as he pushed in deeper.

Every single time, it was overwhelming. Every time, Shane felt like he wasn’t going to survive this, like Rozanov was doing something he *couldn’t* do, like Shane’s body was going to break apart. That feeling, this time, was magnified by a hundred: his total inability to move, the adrenaline of the fight. He whimpered uselessly, thinking wildly that Rozanov’s cock was so deep he was going to choke on it. His hands flexed; Rozanov’s hold never loosened.

He turned his face to the side so that he could breathe. Rozanov usually started out slow and shallow to give Shane a couple minutes to adjust. Because Rozanov was a good fuck, and he knew if you didn't start out slow and shallow with a dick that big it was going to hurt.

It hurt now. He was going too deep, too hard, making Shane cry out and squirm. The pain felt really fucking good. Something he could never have asked for. But Rozanov finally seemed to understand what he needed, and he didn't let up.

"No running," he said, his breath coming hard. "You ask for this."

"Fu-*uck*, it's—it's so big, God, I can feel it—"

"You like it?"

"Yeah, fuck, I love it," Shane whined. "Love it when you fuck me so deep." The pain was fading now, but it didn't even matter. Tears were coming to his eyes. His hands were tingling from the tight grip Rozanov had on his wrists. The bruises from the game and then from their fight were aching under the rough treatment. He was breathless, panting into the pillow. Rozanov was so, so heavy on top of him. It felt so fucking good. He loved what Rozanov could turn him into: a body whose every sensation was meant for pleasure.

"Fuck. Show me."

Rozanov pulled out and got off of Shane's thighs without releasing his hands. Shane made an indignant noise at the idea of having to move on his own. It turned out that he didn't: with his free hand, Rozanov grabbed Shane's hip and dragged his ass up. Shane arched his back, which he knew Rozanov couldn't resist. Easy: Rozanov groaned behind him and shoved in again.

Getting fucked from the back like this made it hard to balance, but Rozanov kept him upright. Rozanov always kept him up, Shane thought, nonsensically.

Rozanov released his wrists, and as if he knew the circulation had been cut off, started rubbing his fingers. He paused, even, to bend forward and kiss Shane's knuckles.

"What are you..?"

Rozanov didn't answer, just started fucking him again, slower now. He let Shane's hands go. Shane folded his arms under his head and closed his eyes. It was meditative, the familiar feeling of Rozanov's big palm sliding up his back, his thick cock stretching him out.

"Look at me."

Shane looked over his shoulder and saw Rozanov, staring at him with such naked hunger it made Shane's heart pick up again. Rozanov reached up to hold him by the throat, forcing Shane's head back. They were chest-to-back now, like a single huge animal. He kissed Shane's cheek as he fucked in deep, every thrust forcing a strangled little grunt from Shane's throat. The tears blurring his vision started to spill.

Rozanov licked at the tears. The unexpected feeling of his tongue against Shane's skin, made so sensitive by the tight grip on his neck, made him seize up and come. "So good," Rozanov murmured. He licked up another tear. "Taste so good. Love to see you this way. My baby."

He would have collapsed. Rozanov held him up.

Shane felt completely brainless. "Rozanov," he mumbled.

"Okay?"

His hand scrabbled back against Rozanov's flank. He felt Rozanov trembling with the effort of staying still, holding the both of them up.

"Yes," Shane said hoarsely. "Feels good. You feel so good."

Rozanov pulled out and manhandled Shane onto his back, away from the wet spot. He came back immediately, like he couldn't bear to be parted. Shane wrapped his arms around Rozanov, running his fingers through his hair.

"Fuck me," Shane said softly into his ear. "Harder, Roz, come on. If I'm really yours."

Rozanov groaned and started really giving it to him. That sound started up again, one of Shane's favorite sounds, the harsh slap of skin on skin, the dirty wet noise of his cock sinking inside over and over.

"You make me," Shane groaned. He was clinging for dear life as Rozanov fucked him rough. His grip in Rozanov's hair was probably painful. "God, you make me feel so fucking good, I can't—"

"You can," Rozanov slurred out, his mouth open and wet on Shane's jaw.

"I can?"

"You can," Rozanov insisted. He kissed Shane like he was dying for it, which was how Shane felt. Rozanov's angle shifted slightly, making Shane's eyes roll back in his head for a second, and probably making him say the fantastically stupid thing he said next.

"I don't let anyone else fuck me like this," Shane blurted.

"Mm?" It appeared to take Rozanov a second to understand this. When he did, though, he got this big dizzy smile on his face. He kissed Shane again. "You are only for me?"

Shane thought he was going to have to take that back. "It's only for you."

"Yes." Rozanov was kissing all over Shane's face, his heavy body pressed along Shane's whole chest and belly. "This tight ass only for me. You fuck yourself in hotel only thinking for me."

Rozanov's rhythm stuttered in that way it did when he was about to come. Shane, crazily, said, "Yeah. Come on me, like I'm your slut."

Rozanov reared back and tore the condom off. Shane stared up at him, red-faced and glassy-eyed, jerking himself desperately. He thought, with horrible pride, how quickly he could reduce Rozanov to this. He reached up to kiss him. Rozanov moaned into Shane's mouth and came all over his stomach.

Rozanov collapsed onto Shane, which Shane did not mind at all. He closed his eyes and put his arms around Rozanov. It would be nice to sleep here. Just the once, it would be nice to sleep here.

For a few minutes, he let himself imagine that he might. He couldn't really move from under Rozanov's dead weight, but he could see the clock: 12:54. He had a six AM wakeup.

The clock flipped to 12:55, and then to 12:56. Such absolute calm. Shane squeezed his eyes shut and imagined that nothing existed. He imagined that the whole world was a tiny, dark room, and inside it there was only space for two bodies, held closely together. And there was nothing else in the world except for the soft hair tickling his face, the broad shoulders under his hands, the weight on top of him.

Until one, Shane told himself. At one it would all be over.

At one o'clock exactly, Shane tugged gently on Rozanov's hair. "Roz," he whispered. "Rozanov, get up. I have to go."

Rozanov nosed into his neck and didn't move. Shane worked his hands between their bodies and was getting ready to lift Rozanov off of himself when his stomach grumbled very loudly. Rozanov burst out giggling on top of him.

"Hungry," Rozanov said into his neck. "Hungry boy."

"Shut *up*," Shane said, his face hot. He pushed Rozanov off. He landed with a bounce next to Shane, still laughing.

"I have steak," Rozanov said.

"I don't eat red meat," Shane said sullenly. "And I have to go."

"As you like," Rozanov said. He propped up his head on one elbow. He reached out and tickled at Shane's stomach, making dried come flake off. "Coochie-coochie-coo."

"Ew," Shane said, slapping Rozanov's hand away. His traitorous stomach growled again, making Rozanov laugh.

"I should have let you eat my dick," Rozanov said. "Hungry boy needs cock!"

"Ew!"

Rozanov launched himself at Shane. They were wrestling again, but this time it was loud, playful, and also *disgusting*, because Rozanov kept licking his finger and sticking it in Shane's ear to get the upper hand. Despite the dirty tricks, Shane won this time.

“I really have to go,” Shane said, from an extremely inconvenient seat right over Rozanov’s dick. So that he wouldn’t give in, Shane kissed Rozanov quickly and then got off of him to start looking for his pants. He found his shirt, which was in two pieces. Dejectedly, he used it to clean off the remaining semen from his stomach.

“You are weird today,” Rozanov said. Shane looked up to find Rozanov watching him closely. The clock said 1:06.

“You did this,” Shane said, throwing the destroyed shirt at Rozanov. “Caveman.”

“Usually you are folding clothes,” Rozanov persisted. “Today you throw pants on floor. Make me rip shirt. Make me chase you. Make me fight you.”

“You didn’t like it?” Shane asked, pulling on his pants.

Rozanov shrugged, lying back on the bed and pulling the torn shirt idly between his hands. “Was fun,” he said.

“So what’s your problem?”

It came out a little harder than it really should’ve, considering that Shane was trying to be cool about the whole thing. He remembered the weird look on Rozanov’s face, the flat way he’d said *I don’t like to do that*.

“No problem,” Rozanov said tonelessly.

Shane’s stupid fucking stomach rumbled. He wished he could reach inside of himself and tear the thing out.

“You don’t want steak?” Rozanov asked. “I make it good.”

“I don’t eat red meat,” Shane said again, helplessly. “And I have to go.”

“Go then,” Rozanov said. He dropped the shirt and went into the adjoining bathroom. He started pissing without closing the door. Under the bright bathroom light, Shane saw a bruise darkening on Rozanov’s cheek. He couldn’t tell if it was from the game or not.

Shane took one uncertain step forward. “Was that okay?” he asked.

Rozanov shook the piss off his dick and then moved to the sink to wash his hands. “Was fun,” he said. “Really, Hollander, was good. Just unexpected.”

“Unexpected,” Shane said reflexively. Rozanov wasn’t looking at him. He took another step forward. “Are you sure? I’m sorry.” He hated how obvious he was. He could never control himself around Rozanov.

Finally Rozanov looked at him. He came over to Shane and kissed his face once, lightly. “Do not say sorry,” he said. “No problem. No apology. Go. Eat. I text you in Montreal.”

“Okay,” Shane said. “Okay. I’ll see you then.” The punishing little voice in his brain was awake again, if drowsy, and it was telling him that he was not allowed to kiss Rozanov goodbye.

“I see you then,” Rozanov said. He kept standing there, like he was waiting for something.

Shane left the bedroom. He reached for his left shoe and put it on. He heard the water come on. Rozanov was brushing his teeth. Shane put on his right shoe. He put on his jacket and called his Uber to a florist a block away. The feeling of his jacket against his sweaty skin was an irritant, crawling into his brain and making it loud.

He left Rozanov’s apartment, hood up, and started walking to the florist. He held out his hands in front of him. New bruises were reddening on his wrists. They were the only ones that would look strange, he thought: already he couldn’t remember which aches he hadn’t sustained during the game.

He wouldn’t get to the hotel until almost 1:30, and he did still have to eat something if he wanted to be solid during practice tomorrow. So he was going to take tomorrow on maybe four hours of sleep.

He noticed a tension headache settling in at the nape of his neck. No, he corrected himself. More likely, he’d just stopped noticing it for a little while. It never went away.

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