love you like a loophole

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/77450146.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Heated Rivalry (TV)
Relationships:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov, Kip Grady/Scott Hunter
Characters:	Shane Hollander, Ilya Rozanov, Original Female Character(s), Hayden Pike, Scott Hunter (Game Changers), Kip Grady
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Secret Relationship, Domestic Fluff, Light Angst, Humor, Fluff and Humor, Implied Sexual Content, its basically a hollanov romcom, Timeline What Timeline
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2026-01-10 Words: 23,714 Chapters: 1/1

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by olivetowrite

Summary

“Pretend we don't know each other?” Shane repeats, a little confused in all honesty. Wasn't therapy about talking?

“Yes. You are meeting for the first time in this room. Introduce yourselves.”

Shane shifts in his seat, slowly turning to Ilya. It's not all that different from the first time they'd actually met; the awkward vibes radiating off Shane are almost identical. They're just missing a snowy forecast and a cigarette.

He decides to go a step further, standing up. It feels the right thing to do under the circumstances. Who meets for the first time sitting down? He takes a step forward, holding his hand out to Ilya. Or not Ilya. This random man he’s about to meet, who happens to look a lot like Ilya. Ilya takes the cue, standing from his own chair with a shake of his head. He takes Shane’s hand, shaking firmly.

“I’m Shane, uh, Shane Hollander.”

Ilya nods. “Ilya Rozanov.”

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Or: Shane and Ilya get sent to reconciliation therapy, and of course, handle it super well.

Notes

Sometimes on a snowy December day, the gay hockey fixation hits you at such full force you abandon the multi-chapter fanfic you’re writing for another fandom and write a Hollanov rom-com instead.

And I hear you say, but Olive, they wouldn’t be famous enough for this, and to that I’d say: not in my world. In my world, they’re worldwide superstars.

Disclaimer: This is absolutely a hockey fanfic with zero hockey. I’m not even sure the hockey references I have made make sense. I hope it’s part of the charm. Suspend your disbelief etc etc. Loopholes people! Loopholes. Also I’m taking no questions about the timeline of this fic. It’s whatever you want it to be.

See the end of the work for more notes

“What the fuck?” Shane hisses down the line, looking around him as the words leave his mouth. It's futile considering he’s the only one in the hotel room, but still.

“Yes?” Ilya says back breezily.

“Couples therapy?”

Shane swears he hears a huff of a laugh, but he’s already too mad to press him about it. He hasn’t got the time to be double mad. He has a game tomorrow, better yet, he has an early practice. He should be asleep right now, but instead, he’s here, alone in a hotel room, sheets thrown off because he’s pretty sure he’s experiencing stress sweats.

“Reconciliation therapy,” Ilya corrects helpfully, cheerfully.

Which is funny, really, because Shane is the opposite of cheerful. He's halfway to a puddle of sweat. “Which is—”

“Couples therapy, yes. Kind of. Could be helpful.”

“*Ilya.”*

“What? You agreed?”

“No.” Shane shakes his head, kicking the sheets further away. He blows out a tortured breath. “I didn’t say yes. I said to let me think about it.”

“Ahh, so this is thinking about it?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.”

There’s a few beats of silence, and then Shane splutters out, “couples therapy? Who thought of that?”

“*Reconciliation therapy*, and Crowell, maybe."

Shane grumbles some more just for good measure. He's aware he won't be winning any prizes for handling this whole thing well, but it was unbelievable. His agent had called him that morning and laid out the entire thing from start to finish. It hadn’t started *badly*. It had been pitched as a segment dedicated to Shane and Ilya’s rivalry on some hockey fundraiser show. Shane could stomach that; they’d done things like it in the past, and it was always *fine*. Usually, a couple of interviews that took up an afternoon or two, and then some spliced footage from over the years. Bearable.

Then his agent had dropped the couples therapy bomb like it was a minor detail, and it had taken every muscle in Shane’s body to keep himself upright. He’d explained that they thought it would be a fun idea to include a handful of joint reconciliation therapy sessions,

filmed over the *season*, to try and fix their *feud*. Apparently, the fans would love it, and it was all for a good cause. No one had any idea that their feud could be fixed *way* easier. Supply them with a hotel room number, and they were set. Rivalry who?

It was a stupid idea. Top ten worst ideas Shane had ever heard of, and in his life, he'd come up with approximately nine of those from that list himself. He and stupid ideas were best friends! But this was a foolish idea, even without the secret that hangs over them like a dark cloud. This was just plain stupid. They wanted Shane and Ilya to go to *couples therapy*. As *rivals*. On *television*.

As in, people would watch it. Send tweets about it. There would be locker room chats about it, and—

"Couples therapy," Shane repeats for the third time in the last handful of seconds. His eyes still flick around the room after the words leave his mouth, just in case someone has materialized in the last two minutes. "Like us in a room, with a camera, hell, probably four or five cameras, because they need all angles—" Ilya hums. "—with a psychologist examining our rivalry. She's—"

"Could be man. You prefer man?"

"—probably going to know that we fuck, I mean, they know that kind of thing, right? They can like sense it."

"Sense we fuck?" Ilya repeats, and Shane can hear the amusement laced through it.

Shane keeps going with his ramble, his thoughts toppling headfirst into each other like falling dominoes. "Right, like see it on our faces—"

"Not my face. Maybe your face."

Shane lets the phone drop onto the mattress, taking a few deep breaths in and out. They do absolutely nothing to calm his nervous system, especially when he hears a familiar staticky voice coming from his left. He picks the phone back up, pressing it to his ear, his tone clipped when he asks, "What did you say?"

“Is for charity,” Ilya repeats as if that explains it. As if charity is the driving force behind this very reckless, very thoughtless decision—

Shane's blood pressure spikes again, he's sure. "We give to charity—"

"Is for fans. You want to disappoint fans? You already do that when you lose—"

"You said yes?" Shane groans, eyes flicking to the ceiling, praying to whoever is up there. His agent had told him that he’d had word that Rozanov was *enthusiastic* about the idea. Shane couldn’t think of a single reason why Ilya would be enthusiastic about this.

"Yes. But you can say no. No point if is just me in the room."

Shane knows he could, knows he already should have, instead of some convoluted answer to his agent about sleeping on it. He hadn't even known what he'd been saying, what with the stress sweats, and racing pulse, and shaking hands, and—

“This is a bad idea,” he says then, so that they’re both aware.

“Everything we do is a bad idea,” Ilya points out. And it’s helpful, really helpful while Shane's spiralling. The jolt up his spine is proof of that.

It’s not wrong. But this instance, especially, felt like it had *bad idea* written all over it in big, red, unerasable Sharpie strokes. Extra bad idea. Bad idea times ten.

“Don’t you think it’s risky, like, more than usual?” Shane asks, voice hushed.

He hears a shuffle of sheets, and for the first time tonight, he wishes they were together. That traitorous little pang that comes hand in hand with hiding like this.

“We will be careful. Like always,” Ilya assures him.

“What if she can tell?”

Shane can picture the look on Ilya’s face, the slight pull of his eyebrows as he thinks over the words. “She won’t. Or he. Whoever. We are careful. And good at hiding.”

Shane lets that wash over him, his heart rate slowing down slightly. He knows that’s true. They’d become experts at hiding, which was another conversation altogether. It had become an innate part of them, this need to protect what they had.

"Maybe she can make you less boring," Ilya says, breaking the terse silence.

Shane scoffs. "She's a psychologist—"

"Can not perform miracle, yes."

“Fuck you.”

“Hollander,” Ilya says, voice softening. “We do not have to do it.”

“I…” Shane pulls the sheets back over his legs now that the sweating has stopped and his heart is beating at a semi-normal level. “We *could* do it.”

“Yes. It will be fun. For fans, for us.”

Shane huffs an unconvinced laugh. “For us?”

“Maybe we will learn new things about each other.”

There was a sweet sentiment in there somewhere, Shane guesses. “They’re going to ask us about hockey,” he says, and he doesn't know if he's reminding Ilya or himself.

Ilya hums. “Yes. And about why I like beating you so much. Not so personal. Will be fine.”

The last of Shane's resolve crumbles just like that. They're good at hiding, and even better at pretending for the world. This is no different. It's just another day in their hectic lives.

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Jane: Are you sure this is a good idea?

Jane: We could cancel.

Lily: Is in three hours.

Jane: Why are you awake?

Jane: Are you nervous too?

Lily: No.

Jane: What do you think they're going to ask?

Lily: Lots of things.

Lily: Why I am better hockey player than you

Lily: Why are you so slow

Lily: Why did you miss that goal yesterday

Lily: Why you blush when I look at you across the ice

Lily: Other things

Jane: 🙄

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Shane glances around the room, his eyes catching on a Rubik's Cube. He shifts in the oversized armchair he's sitting in, eyes flicking back to the man standing at the door. They were set up in a makeshift 'dressing room' for the afternoon. It was an empty therapist's office, with a table of craft snacks pushed into the middle. It worked for Shane. He leans back, sinking into the ridiculously comfortable cushion, watching sand trickle through a sand timer he'd just flipped.

They weren't filming anything today; they were just here to meet the therapist and get a feel for how this would work. It was like the world's worst practice. Shane didn't know why they needed so much preamble. Surely it was as easy as putting him, Ilya, a therapist, and a camera in a room. What happened to ripping the band-aid off? This felt like pulling it off torturously slowly.

"Sorry, what was that?" Shane asks, dragging his eyes away from the sand when he realizes the man guarding the door had spoken.

“We’re just waiting on Rozanov, and then we can introduce you to Dr Bridges,” the man repeats, noting something down on his clipboard. Has the therapy started already?

“Okay,” Shane says, trying to keep his voice even as he watches the pen roll across the paper. He imagines he’s writing something about him, maybe something like *Shane Hollander, who seems distracted, chose to sit in the armchair to the left after picking up an apple and then putting it back down seconds later. Oh, and he keeps flipping the sand timer.*

Thankfully, before he can think of any more worst-case scenarios, the man at the door speaks in the opposite direction, “Mr Rozanov.”

Shane hears a familiar voice, and then Ilya stands in the doorway, his eyes flicking from the snacks to Shane, still slowly sinking into the armchair. Ilya looks good, his hair pushed back in that way that makes Shane crave running his fingers through it. He grips the chair's arms instead. Write that down, *guy*.

“Hollander,” Ilya says, walking toward the table and picking up a Coke.

“Rozanov,” Shane replies, shuffling to the edge of the cushion.

The clipboard guy raps at the doorframe, pulling their attention back to him. “I’m just checking with Dr Bridges, try not to kill each other while I’m gone.”

They both nod, and he disappears down the hall, leaving them to fend for themselves. Frankly, they were used to these kinds of quips from people now. Everyone thought it was super funny. Shane didn’t think it was funny at all. Ironic, maybe.

Shane stands, well, *climbs* awkwardly out of the chair, already missing the world's most comfortable cushion as he takes a steadying breath. Were they really about to do this?

“Nervous?” Ilya asks, looking at him closely.

That single look lights a fire in Shane, his fingers itching to close the gap between them. Instead, he takes a step back, eyes flicking to the open door. “Yeah. You?”

Ilya shakes his head, then takes a slow sip from the can in his hand. Shane watches his fingers tighten around the metal as he pulls it from his mouth, a telltale sign that it had been a lie. It settles something in his stomach, like a soothing balm to his nervous system.

Ilya replaces the can in his hand with a sand timer, tilting it back and forth. “Is cool.”

Shane hums in agreement, resisting the urge to start pacing the room. He assumes Dr Bridge’s room will be altered into something more television-friendly than this one. Or at least fewer oversized armchairs, you know, so they can fit the four or five cameras that will be pointing at them from all angles.

“Did you sleep?” Ilya asks with a tone just a tad too judgmental for a man who was texting him back in the middle of the night.

Shane watches the sand trickle through the glass. It's making his heart hammer again, so he turns back to Ilya, looking at him instead. Bad idea, that kinda makes his heart hammer, too. Back to the Rubik's cube he goes.

He shrugs it off. "An hour or two."

"It will be fine," Ilya reassures, his voice soft as he places the sand timer back down.

Shane lets the words wash over him, lets himself believe that this is just another commitment in their hectic schedules. So ordinary that it becomes just another thing. Like putting on his skates or brushing his teeth. Maybe it can be. Maybe the therapist isn't a mind reader and won't suspect a thing between them.

Ilya turns back to the snack table, eyes searching around until he lands on a stack of ginger ale. He grabs one and shoves it into Shane's hands, pulling him from his thoughts.

Shane looks down at it blankly. "What?"

"Drink. Don't want you to go—" He waves a hand through the air, and settles on, "weird."

"*Weird*?" Shane repeats, confusion scrunching his brow as he looks between the can and Ilya.

Ilya nods, taking a sip from his own can. Shane has no choice but to do the same, cracking the can and sipping the ginger ale. It does make him feel a little less weird, whatever that means.

"Dr Bridges is ready for you," a voice from the door calls.

They both turn in unison, matching cans in their hands, like the good rivals they are. Well, here goes nothing.

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"Camera one." The director points ahead, then to his right. "Camera two, three, and finally…" He points behind them. "Camera four."

Shane's head is on a swivel, eyes flicking from camera to camera as the director drones on about shoot time and angles. The good news is that there were fewer cameras than he'd anticipated—a stomachable four, which is less than the dreaded five. The bad news is… everything else. He'd been right about the room, though. It was the same layout as the makeshift dressing room, just with no sand timers and fewer comfortable chairs. Shane shifts in the chair he's sitting in now, the cushion so firm that he's pretty sure his legs are going to go numb within the hour. Talk about a downgrade. He needs more emotional support from the comfortable chair here than he did there.

"Don't look into the lens, try to ignore they're there. You both know the drill," the director continues.

"Yes," Ilya agrees with a nod. "Could do this in my sleep."

The director laughs. “Sure. The only difference is that we want this to feel authentic, as real as possible. The cameras will stay rolling the entire time, but it will just be you and Dr Bridges in here tomorrow. No filming today, just a lot of testing angles. We'll work around you. Pretend we're not here.”

“Just us three?” Shane splutters out, gripping the arms of his chair, still not sinking into it.

The director doesn’t seem to notice Shane’s little outburst, still fiddling with the camera. “Yeah. Treat it like a real reconciliation therapy session.”

Interestingly, Shane has never attended a real therapy session for reconciliation. This is his first time. With Ilya—

“Is okay, will be on camera if I try to strangle you,” Ilya says flatly.

"Not today," Shane grits out, aiming for a joke and landing closer to a cry for help. He can't imagine that he doesn't look horrified right now, red-faced and gripping the chair like he's about to pass out.

The director laughs again, moving to the fourth camera. “That’s the spirit. This is gonna be a hit. Hey,” he calls to the other side of the room, “do you think we need another angle?”

A second man immediately starts wheeling another camera into the room as if they have them on tap. Shane forces something that could be a laugh if you didn't look too hard, then stares straight ahead at the empty chair in front of them. What next? Six cameras? No chairs?

As if he’d willed her into existence, Dr Bridges walks into the room, greeting the men working the cameras. Shane suddenly feels like he’s back at school, and the principal has stepped in. He stands, holding his hand out to her. “Nice to meet you, I’m Shane Hollander.”

Dr Bridges is exactly what Shane would have pictured for this job. She’s got a formidable presence, her neat, greying hair tied into a fancy clip. She’s sporting a pair of smart brown slacks and a matching blazer. Her entire look screams that she doesn't take any shit. It terrifies *and* eases Shane in equal parts. She takes his hand, smiling warmly as she shakes firmly. “Nice to meet you, Shane.”

Ilya leans over, offering her his hand, and she repeats the process. Shane slumps back in his seat, his knee bouncing as he watches her get situated in the large chair that's definitely more comfortable than his, placing her thick notebook on her lap and curling her hands over the top. Shane glances at Ilya, slumped back in his chair, his arms crossed over his chest. He looks a lot more relaxed than Shane feels.

“So,” Dr Bridges starts, pulling Shane's attention back to her. “I’m Dr Bridges, and I’m going to be your reconciliation therapist—”

“Are you a real therapist?” Ilya asks curiously. “Or actor?”

There’s a second of silence, and Shane almost holds his breath, but then, Dr Bridges laughs loudly. “Not an actor, just a licensed therapist. Not currently practising though.”

Ilya nods at that. “They offer you a lot of money?”

She points a finger at him, her lip curving into a smile. “I like you already.”

The two men who had been working on the fifth camera leave then, and it’s just the three of them. Shane briefly wonders if they've disappeared to bring back a sixth.

Dr Bridges flicks her notebook open. “You can call me Dr Bridges or Gwen. Whatever makes you most comfortable.”

They both nod in unison, and it just highlights the absurdity of this entire situation. Two hockey players, not on the ice, not doing press, but in a therapist's office together.

“What exactly is reconciliation therapy?” Shane asks. It sounds pretty self-explanatory, but he wants all the facts anyway.

Dr Bridges smiles at him, and it’s kind. It’s bizarre to consider tomorrow they’ll be back here, but with the cameras rolling, capturing every word, every minute facial expression. He schools his features now, trying very hard to look normal about all of this. Ilya immediately shoots him a look that tips him off that maybe it hadn't been so successful. He unfurrows his brow, blinking at Dr Bridges.

“Well, in usual circumstances, it’s to lend a hand to build those broken bridges. A lot of mediating. A lot of going over past experiences that have led to strained relationships. This is a little different. A little less serious.”

“Is very serious,” Ilya says with an exaggerated shake of his head.

Shane bites his cheek to stop the laugh escaping. “So we’ll go over some of our…” he pauses, searching for the words and lands on, “rivalry stuff.”

Dr Bridges nods. “We’ll discuss your rivalry over the years, what sparked it, and why it's become such a big deal to the public. Anything you personally want to bring up over these sessions, I would encourage you to. There will be some icebreaker exercises to help you reconnect. And I hope that part will be fun.” She smiles. “It’s very low pressure, probably not so different from all those documentaries you do.”

When it’s laid out like this, it doesn’t sound so bad. Maybe Ilya had been right.

“And it’s five sessions?” Shane asks, logging all her answers in the back of his head to turn over later.

“Split up over a season. An hour each time. As for the filming part, you’d have to ask someone else.” She shoots them a look. "I just work here."

Shane smiles at that. “And the first session is tomorrow?”

Dr Bridges nods. “Bright and early.”

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Ilya presses a soft kiss to Shane's shoulder, murmuring something against his skin that sounds suspiciously like *told you.* It sends goosebumps skirting up his spine, snarky remark or not.

"I don't know what I was expecting," Shane admits, letting his head flop against the pillow.

Ilya narrows his eyes, pushing up on an elbow to assess him carefully. "You thought she would sense—" He circles a finger around Shane's face. "Sex-drunk face."

Shane pushes him, and he flops onto the mattress next to him. "Asshole."

They were set up in a hotel for tomorrow's filming, and it was nice. They, of course, had separate rooms, but there wasn't the same worry that a wandering hockey player would catch them coming or going. The stakes weren't *low*, but they were lower, and it felt thrilling in a way Shane couldn't really explain. There was no rush to make sure they were back on opposite sides of the hotel. Shane *would* go back to his room eventually, but right now, he was content to lie here blissfully, the warmth from Ilya seeping into his side. And maybe, just maybe, talk about today a little more.

"Five cameras," Shane says, blinking up at the ceiling.

"So many angles," Ilya murmurs, "perfect to capture all of your weird faces—"

"Perfect to capture the moment Dr Bridges realises we're lying right under her nose."

Ilya raises an unconvinced eyebrow, and Shane gets the urge to reach out and smooth it back down. "We are lying right under *everyone's* nose—"

"It's different—"

"Okay. Maybe ask Dr Bridges if she senses—"

Shane scoffs, and he's pretty sure he's pulling another very *not chill about this* face. "You can't use our *therapist*—"

Ilya cuts him off with a kiss, licking up into his mouth a little filthily. Well, that's effective. Shane lets himself be ravished for a blissful second, then pulls back, poking Ilya in his side. Ilya rolls off him with a tortured sigh, running a hand through his hair as he stares at the ceiling. "We could leave therapy out of the bedroom—"

"She seems nice," Shane thinks out loud. His blood pressure has returned to a semi-normal level after today, but that slight unease that this is the wrong thing is still plaguing him. It's not out of the ordinary. That's kind of his whole shtick.

Ilya hums in agreement. "She is going to fix us."

Shane rolls back over then, leaning up on his elbow so he can look down at Ilya. "Fix our fake problem?"

Ilya blinks up at him, and Shane wants to say fuck this conversation and return to that ravishing. But then, Ilya says, "Maybe she will see through it. Fix our real problem instead."

"And what's that?"

They have so many problems; *they* were such a problem that Shane couldn't even guess which Ilya might be referring to.

Ilya sighs heavily, a smirk tugging at his lips. "Can't stop needy Canadian hockey player from sneaking into my room. Very inconvenient."

Shane huffs, letting himself flop against Ilya. He narrows his eyes at him in accusation. "Needy? You texted asking why I was taking so long twice in five minutes."

"Terrible rumour," Ilya says, resting a hand on Shane's scalp, his fingers massaging gently, and woah, what were they talking about?

"Still nervous?" Ilya asks after a few seconds of quiet bliss.

Ahh, that's it. Shane shakes his head. "It sounds like it's going to be another documentary wrapped up as a therapy session. We have all the usual answers." He looks up, and Ilya's fingers fall from his hair. He resists the urge to drag them back. "We just recite them and go."

"Easy," Ilya agrees. He drops his voice into a monotone drawl. "Hollander is good hockey player, but not as good as me."

Shane nods. "Rozanov is my best competitor. Playing against him feels like real competition."

"Good," Ilya approves.

They'd recited these same answers so many times over the years that they could do it in their sleep. It was muscle memory, like a suit of armor they wore so they didn't say the wrong thing. And people accepted it as fact every time. Sound bites turned into headlines, elevating this rivalry that had landed them in reconciliation therapy. Everyone had it backwards, tangled up so severely that it couldn't ever be set straight. It felt safe that way. They worked so hard to protect it, so they could have these moments together, even if they were fleeting.

"I should go," Shane says, already regretting the words before they leave his mouth. "Okay," Ilya says. He leans down, tracing his hand along Shane's jaw, catching his lips in another kiss. Shane relaxes into it, every bone in his body begging him not to leave. Ilya pulls back after a few moments, sighing again. He watches him for a couple more seconds, like they're both waiting for the other to call bluff. Then, just as Shane's convinced he might melt into the mattress, Ilya pats his side. "Go."

Shane pushes up, locates his t-shirt and pants from where they'd thrown them in a haze, and dresses himself just a pace slower than usual. You know, in case Ilya *does* change his mind. He grabs his phone from the nightstand, gaze flicking back to Ilya, lying on the bed, watching him in a way that makes him feel hot all over.

There's a playful glint in his eyes when he says, "See you tomorrow, *rival*."

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Dr Bridges uncaps her pen, tapping the end of it against her thick notebook. Shane gets lost in the movement, trying to ignore the way he's about to be filmed from *five* different angles. Shane was used to being filmed, used to the flash of cameras, and the call of rolling. He was used to eyes on him at all times, knew the feeling instinctively, as if it lived over his skin like an extra layer. The *therapist's office with Ilya* part was tripping him up, though. That was new. And unexpected.

Ilya lowers his voice, tilting his head toward Shane. "I bet they will bring another camera in by end of the day."

"Another two," Shane counters in the same low tone, eyes flicking to where the director is looking around the room exactly like he had the day prior—pre fifth camera. Shane can see the glint in his eye. How could they air this if they didn't have Ilya blinking in high definition in several different angles? It was ludicrous.

Ilya shakes his head. "Just six."

Shane catches his gaze, that same glint he's come to crave, likely reflecting in his eyes, too. "*Seven*."

There's a beat, and then, "want to bet on it?"

Shane nods. "You're on—"

"A thousand dollars," Ilya says, as if betting that much money seconds before they have reconciliation therapy isn't ridiculous.

So, Shane plays the game. He holds his hand out as if it's completely normal, and Ilya shakes it in a quick movement between their chairs, a smug smile on his face like he's already won.

"I notice you're competitive off the ice, too," Dr Bridges interrupts, her pen paused over a scrawl that Shane hadn't noticed her writing between now and thirty seconds ago. Was that about them?

Shane glances over his shoulder, but they're still working on the cameras, talking amongst themselves.

"Oh, we're not rolling. Just an observation," Dr Bridges says, looking between them. "Has it always been like that?"

"We don't see each other off the ice, uh—" Shane shifts in his chair. That was an overcorrection. "Much," he amends with a stiff nod. "For this kind of thing mostly."

Dr Bridges nods, then starts noting something down in her notebook. It makes Shane's skin prickle.

"We are always competitive," Ilya says then. And, oh, yeah. That sounds better than whatever Shane had blurted out.

Dr Bridges nods again. "Like everyone assumes you are."

"Yes," Ilya agrees, "everything."

Shane resists the urge to squirm. Everything was broad. A lot could fall under everything. Chasing pucks *or* chasing orgasms—

"Rolling," the director calls suddenly, making Shane jump. "We have eyes on the cameras, so if anything goes wrong, we'll jump back in and get back on track as quickly as possible. But otherwise, things will keep rolling until we call cut."

It suddenly feels a little too real. They were about to have reconciliation therapy for a rivalry that didn't really exist. Well, not in the way everyone thought it did.

The people in the room file out, and the click of the door behind them feels like a gunshot in the quiet room. Shane swallows thickly, glancing at Ilya. Ilya is watching him right back like he'd been waiting. His eyes flick down, and Shane follows, landing on Ilya's hands resting on his knees.

His left hand is like a star, five fingers spread out. His right hand is balled up, apart from his pointer finger. *Six cameras.* Shane bites back the laugh rising in his chest, placing his hand on the arm of his chair. He makes sure Ilya is watching, then extends his own pointer finger. *Seven*. Ilya's eyebrow quirks subtly, and Shane knows exactly what it conveys, could decode it in his sleep. *You are wrong, Hollander.*

"Okay, so, shall we get started?" Dr Bridges asks, pulling their attention back to her.

It's show time. Shane places his hands on his knees to stop himself from fidgeting and tries to keep his face neutral. They were used to press, used to the answers they were about to throw at this therapist. It was a piece of cake.

"I want to start with *your* opinions, if that's okay. I'd love to get a feel for what you think about all this fanfare." She looks down at her notebook, reading whatever she'd scribbled before, before looking back up. "What is it about your dynamic that you think intrigues the public?"

Ilya jumps in before Shane can. "We are the best at what we do. Would not be so effective if was..." Ilya shrugs. "Scott Hunter."

Shane nods. "We can go toe-to-toe in anything. I think that's exciting for people to watch."

It's true, Shane felt like he had met his match with Ilya all those years ago. They'd climbed together, then stayed at the top like two parallel lines never far apart.

"Do you ever feel pressure?"

"In hockey?" Shane asks.

Dr Bridges smiles. "No, but we can talk about that too, if you like. To live up to the rivalry people have placed on you?"

"No pressure when it's real," Ilya cuts in confidently, his voice on the right side of cocky. The perfect amount to sell this.

Shane nods. "What he said."

Dr Bridges notes something down. "We'll circle back around to that in another session."

Oh, good. Circling back around! Shane's eyes flick to the clock, the hands moving unbelievably slowly. He briefly wonders if someone has tampered with it because there's no way it's only been three minutes. That's a whole fifty-seven left.

"So, Ilya," Dr Bridges continues, her eyes flicking down to her notes, "you said that the rivalry wouldn't be as engaging if it were you, and say, someone like Scott Hunter. Why do you think that is?"

Shane watches Ilya think about it for a few seconds. He can already predict what he's about to say, something about Scott Hunter being—

"Scott Hunter is old. Bad at hockey."

And there we go, straight in the net.

Dr Bridges stifles a smile, raising an inquisitive eyebrow. "He won the cup."

"Luck," Ilya says simply.

"Would you say that Shane challenges you?"

"Yes." Ilya nods. "Good way to put it."

Dr Bridges turns her attention to Shane. "And Shane, would you say Ilya challenges you?"

"Definitely," Shane agrees. His eyes flick back to the clock, fifty-six minutes left.

“Perfect,” she says, closing her notebook. “New challenge.”

“Uh oh,” Ilya mutters under his breath.

“You’re going to pretend that you don't know each other.”

“Pretend we don't know each other?” Shane repeats, a little confused in all honesty. Wasn't therapy about talking?

“Yes. You are meeting for the first time in this room. Introduce yourselves.”

Shane shifts in his seat, slowly turning to Ilya. It's not all that different from the first time they'd actually met; the awkward vibes radiating off Shane are almost identical. They're just missing a snowy forecast and a cigarette.

He decides to go a step further, standing up. It feels the right thing to do under the circumstances. Who meets for the first time sitting down? He takes a step forward, holding his hand out to Ilya. Or not Ilya. This random man he's about to meet, who happens to look a lot like Ilya. Ilya takes the cue, standing from his own chair with a shake of his head. He takes Shane's hand, shaking firmly.

"I'm Shane, uh, Shane Hollander."

Ilya nods. "Ilya Rozanov."

They both look at Dr Bridges for their next instruction, but she just gestures toward them. "Then what?"

Ilya sits back down, so Shane follows.

"Are we hockey players in this world?" Shane asks.

"No," Dr Bridges replies.

"Okay." He turns back to Ilya, trying to sound cheerful when he says, "So, what do you do?"

It comes out stilted. Probably leaning more towards despair than cheer. Ilya looks at him seriously. "I am underwear model—"

"Oh. Okay." Shane nods jerkily, his mouth going a little dry at the thought. "I work at a coffee shop."

"Sounds boring."

"Not boring. I make a great espresso."

Ilya's lip twitches probably because Shane can't even make a decent instant coffee. "I will have to try it."

"You should." Shane waits a second for Dr Bridges to jump in, but she doesn't. He kinda feels like he's fending for himself here. "What do you do for, uh, fun?" he tries.

Ilya shrugs. "I walk dogs. Lots of dogs."

"Oh, cool. I read a hundred books in a year—"

Ilya raises an eyebrow. "A hundred?"

"Yeah," Shane confirms, "sometimes more."

"Hockey scores don't count—"

"I don't watch hockey," Shane interrupts, shooting him a look. "I work in a coffee shop."

"Of course." Ilya smirks. "The famous espresso."

“Excellent,” Dr Bridges cuts in, reopening her notebook to make another quick note. Shane's just as desperate to read it as the first time. She looks back up, folding her hands over it as if she can read his mind. “How did that feel?”

“Weird,” Shane says at the same time Ilya says, “Fun.”

Shane's not sure how that helped either of them. He feels a little off kilter. An underwear model and a coffee shop barista? It's like the start of a bad joke.

“That was just the icebreaker, no pun intended. I have a few exercises planned for the upcoming sessions to work on rebuilding that connection away from the ice.” She smiles at them. “Nothing too difficult.”

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"They said they liked what they saw," Shane mumbles around the floss in his mouth. He pulls it back out, looking toward the phone on the counter. "I wonder how much they'll actually air. Five sessions is a lot."

"They will use my Scott Hunter joke. Was very funny," Ilya says through the line.

"Probably," Shane agrees, going back to flossing.

The first session was very low-stakes, all things considered, even with the icebreaker curveball. After it, they’d ended up circling back to talk more about their rivalry over the years. *That* was something they could do in their sleep. It was simultaneously the least *and* most complicated thing in Shane’s life, a stark contrast between the two. Shane's aware that there will be other things they get into over the season, but for now, he can breathe a sigh of relief that it's over. He gets to live in ignorant bliss until the next session, and that feels like a win.

He had to head straight to the airport from the therapist's office, though, and he didn't like that they hadn't had a chance to debrief, so. Here they were, debriefing while Shane flossed in a hotel room bathroom. Ilya was, well, Shane didn't really know.

"What are you doing?" Shane asks.

"Reading magazine," Ilya says faintly. It sounds like a lie, the way the words come out with an amused tilt. Shane isn’t in the right headspace to examine how he can tell Ilya is lying over a crackly phone line.

"What magazine?" Shane asks, playing along. He drops his floss into the bin, baring his teeth awkwardly at his reflection.

"You would not know it."

Shane scoffs, picking his phone back up. "Why wouldn't I? I read magazines."

Ilya hums. "Yes. One hundred books in one year. Probably all boring hockey ones—”

Shane leaves the bathroom, flopping onto the bed. "Actually, I don't read—"

A ding cuts him off. He holds the phone over his face, clicking into a message from *Ilya*. And okay, apparently it wasn't a lie. New thing on Shane's to-do list: get fluent in Ilya Rozanov. It would probably be beneficial for therapy, anyway.

"What the fuck?" Shane narrows his eyes at the screen. "Why do you even have that?"

"Is just here."

"A magazine I shot years ago just happens to be at your place?"

He doesn't even remember when he shot this. It had to be at least three or four years ago. He was standing in some branded underwear, pulling what could only be described as a *smolder*. It wasn't great. No wonder he hadn't seen it in years. He'd probably burned every copy in sight.

"Is good read," Ilya says distractedly. Shane looks at the picture again. There are no words on the page—just his body and *hockey superstar* in big bold letters. Fuck his new life as a barista, he'd been the underwear model all along. "Maybe Shane Hollander superfan broke in and planted it," Ilya continues, and Shane can hear him flicking the page, probably to a more smoldering picture of him.

"Are you the Shane Hollander superfan?" he asks.

"Terrible rumors, Hollander," Ilya tuts.

Shane lets himself smile up at the ceiling at the absurdity of this conversation just for a second before he drags them back to steadier ground. "Do you know when the next therapy session is?"

Their schedules were jam-packed for the next couple of months. His agent had said they were fitting these sessions in when they could, all because the league was enthusiastic about the idea.

"No, probably not for a month or two. We will have to cause big scene, so we have something to talk about next time."

Shane huffs a laugh. "You want to make headlines?"

"Could be fun. Want to fight? Can show people what a real fight is, not what you and Scott Hunter did."

Shane secretly loves this side of Ilya. Light, playful, bordering on silly. He wants to hold onto those moments most, have them in person, not over a phone in a lonely hotel room. He wants so much they can never have that sometimes it feels like a physical weight is caving in on his chest.

These days, he finds that he craves the ordinary things most, the things people all over the world do every day. He likes to imagine a world where he and Ilya can walk down the street

together, go to a store, something as simple as getting pizza, and no one gives them a second look—a world where they're so normal that it's boring.

But they *weren't* a normal couple, and each of those things would come hand in hand with anxiety that they'd get found out, that someone would put the pieces together somehow. It was exhausting. Shane loves the life they have, wouldn't change most of it for the world, but sometimes it feels like he's spinning plates, trying to keep everything together.

Something hits him then, scattering the bleak thoughts. "Hey."

"Yes."

Shane smirks into the empty hotel room, already way too smug about this. "You owe me a thousand dollars."

Ilya doesn't miss a beat. "No way."

"They brought in two more cameras. That's *seven*."

"One was not on us—"

"We shook on it—"

"Doesn't count," Ilya finishes.

Shane leans up on an elbow, staring down at his phone like it's personally affronted him. "Why not?"

"One of them was pointing at Dr Bridges. Only six on us." Ilya sighs, as if he's full of regret, the big liar. "You owe me a thousand dollars."

Shane's mouth falls open. "That wasn't part of the bet. You said six cameras, I said seven. There were seven."

"Six on us—"

"*Five* on us if we're playing by your stupid rules."

"Not stupid rules. One new one on us. That makes six. You are not very good at math. I take Venmo or PayPal—"

"Good night, Ilya."

"No, Shane—"

"I'm hanging up."

"Okay, you do not have to give me a thousand dollars. The bet is void."

The corner of Shane's mouth tugs into a satisfied smirk. "I'll take an I owe you."

Ilya grumbles something that Shane can't make out, but it fills him with a pleasant warmth anyway.

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Shane slides into the barstool, staring straight ahead to the back of the bar as his brain whirrs with possibilities. Sometimes it felt like he spent weeks, months, at one point *years* thinking about seeing Ilya again, and when he finally had the opportunity, Ilya in front of him, he lost all semblance of composure. It wasn't so severe these days, but it was still a hard habit to kick, ingrained in him like a reminder of what they used to be. Or, more positively, how far they'd come.

Ilya sips his beer, his eyes drifting to the side. He places the bottle back on the bar top, tipping his chin. "Hollander."

"Rozanov." Shane nods back. He shifts in the stool, glancing over his shoulder. He hadn't planned to come here; hotel bars, alone, weren't really his idea of fun, but he'd seen Ilya on the way up to his room. And. Well. He took a quick detour. Hotel bars weren't so bad when Ilya was in them.

"Excited for tomorrow?"

Shane huffs a humorless laugh. "Excited for *therapy*?"

Ilya hums. "Maybe it will be fun."

Shane didn't know about that. The last month had passed in a flash. He hadn't been thinking about the next therapy session; he'd just been focusing on what he did best, *hockey*, hockey, and then some more hockey. And maybe, just underneath hockey, there had been a couple of thoughts of Ilya, too. On whether there was a universe in which they could ever be normal someday. Sometimes, Shane thought yes; others, it was a resounding no. Right now, with a reconciliation therapy session a handful of hours away, sitting in a packed hotel bar with no idea which of these people knew who they were, the scale tipped back to impossible.

"Have you told anyone?" Shane asks.

"About the therapy?"

"Yeah."

"No, no." Ilya pulls a face. "I go to couples therapy with Shane Hollander. Is too complicated. They can see it on TV."

Shane doesn't know why that settles something in him. Maybe it was because he'd become so comfortable with secrets that they'd started to feel like the safest option. "Same. It sounds too weird when I say it out loud."

He had actually planned to tell Hayden, but it hadn't come out right. He'd stood in the locker room with half his gear on, stumbling through a lengthy explanation about *nothing* as Hayden had nodded along like it made perfect sense. The next thing he knew, he'd been invited to the

Pike's house for dinner like they'd been worried about him, and he hadn't even managed to get the therapy bomb out. He did get his favorite dinner, though, so it hadn't been a completely futile attempt. He'd yet to try again. Maybe he would when he was craving Jackie's lasagna.

The whole thing was weird. It would probably always be weird. At least until it aired on television and everyone pretended it was completely normal that Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov were having reconciliation therapy.

"We didn't make big scene," Ilya says then, picking his beer back up.

"*I* did," Shane points out a little smugly. "Lots of headlines—"

Ilya's mouth tips into a satisfied smirk. "Any more magazines for my collection?"

Shane shakes his head, a little dazed as he lets his gaze land on Ilya properly for the first time tonight. He looks good, and it has been too long. "A collection?"

Ilya nods sagely. "Very good for firewood—"

Shane kicks Ilya's foot under the bar. "Asshole."

Ilya drops his head, leaning a little closer. It would be nothing to anyone looking in, just a conversation between two hockey players at a hotel bar. But it still makes Shane's skin prickle, a burst of longing and apprehension settling in his stomach like a hot coal. "Would it make headlines if I kissed you..." Ilya scans around them quickly before turning back, his voice dropping to a whisper. "In this bar?"

Shane swallows thickly, Ilya's low words a suckerpunch to his stomach, that hot coal bursting into flames. He forces something that could be a hum of agreement, and then, "yeah, uh, probably. Front page." It comes out strained, his vocal cords betraying him at the last second. Fucking traitors.

Ilya's eyes widen. "Wow, front page."

He knows Ilya too well, knows they're just words, that he'd never actually, but the thrill it sends up his spine is just the same. That scale might be sitting firmly at impossible, but that didn't mean they couldn't pretend it wasn't. They were good at that. Pretending things weren't so impossible.

Shane rests his hand on the bar, fingers curling around a paper coaster to try to steady himself. "Your room or mine?"

"Mine," Ilya decides, not missing a beat as he grabs his beer. He finishes what's left in a couple of swigs, then slides it back on the bar with a clink. He stands, tipping his head subtly toward the elevators. "305," he says, slipping past him.

***

"Why didn't you wake me?" Shane croaks out from where he's under Ilya's hotel room sheets, still half asleep. He is going to leave; he just has to get his point across first.

The point being that they should not, under any circumstances, be doing this.

This being sharing a hotel room.

Well, sharing a hotel room overnight.

Sharing a hotel room for an hour or two was totally fine. Shane would encourage it. Maybe even cosign it.

"You can leave now," Ilya points out from the bathroom doorway, a toothbrush dangling precariously from his mouth, toothpaste foam dangerously close to dropping onto his bare chest. His face is neutral, not even a hint of worry that Shane is still bundled under *his* sheets in *his* hotel room. Too busy being the most insane toothbrusher Shane's ever seen, he guesses.

What if housekeeping had realised Shane’s room was empty? What if they saw his lone bag in the middle of the room, searched their systems, found Ilya's name, and put two and two together—

"I'm leaving," Shane announces for the third time that morning, throwing the sheets off.

Ilya nods, disappearing back into the bathroom. He comes back a minute later, a shirt in each hand. "You're still here. Which shirt?" He holds them up toward Shane.

"Are you trying to impress Dr Bridges?"

"Yes," Ilya says seriously, "my life goal to impress our therapist. Which?"

"The one on the right," Shane huffs, pushing himself up from the bed. The bed they shared, in Ilya's hotel room. Shane needed to put himself in a timeout for his recklessness.

Ilya steps back into the bathroom, returning a minute or two later in the shirt Shane hadn't picked. He flops onto the edge of the bed, watching as Shane tugs his t-shirt over his head.

"Do you think we're getting too..." Shane pulls on a shoe, then stands back up, deciding to shoot straight for the target. "We're not careful enough."

"We are very careful," Ilya counters, still watching Shane hopping around with one shoe on like it’s his favorite show.

"I'm in your hotel room," Shane points out, looking around them as if they needed the evidence. As if the orgasm that had crashed into Shane, then proceeded to pull him into a deep sleep before he could return to his hotel room, wasn't proof enough.

Ilya hums. "All the way over there." His eyes flick to his lap, then back to Shane, burning with sudden heat. "Could be here."

Shane pulls his other shoe on, using every muscle in his body to not move toward Ilya. "Do you think they think it's weird that I didn't use my hotel room?"

"Who?"

"The staff."

"They don't know."

"They *could* know."

Ilya shrugs. "Maybe they think you went to hook up with one of the other thousand guests here."

"Maybe," Shane starts, shoving his phone into his pocket, "they think I went to hook up with the *only* other hockey player in this hotel—"

"Probably other hockey players. Is Canada."

Shane huffs, shooting Ilya a scathing glare.

Ilya pushes up from the bed with a smirk, sauntering toward Shane, walking him backwards until they hit the desk. He looks at him seriously as Shane melts into his hold, relaxing against the wood. It's not all that comfortable, but its impossible not to when Ilya's looking at him like this, which is exactly how they got themselves into this situation in the first place. *Reckless*. What happened to that timeout?

Shane's eyes dart to the door. "They're probably looking for me right now."

Ilya breathes out a ghost of a laugh before he catches Shane's mouth in a gentle kiss, hands cupping his jaw. The type of sweet kiss that makes Shane feel like he could melt while also effectively shaking all of the worried thoughts from his head, like clearing an Etch-a-Sketch.

Ilya pulls back after a few moments, tilting Shane's chin with his thumb. "No one knows. We are careful."

Shane lets his body relax for a second, Ilya's hand resting on his cheek like a grounding pressure. And then, because he can't help himself, he adds, "we could be more careful."

"We have great excuse if anyone sees us together..." Ilya's lips pull into a firm line, his expression somber. "We are in couples therapy."

Shane leans in closer, his body moving on instinct. "We should probably stop calling it couples therapy."

"We are a *couple* in *therapy*," Ilya says. He tugs Shane closer. "Couples therapy."

Shane huffs a laugh, his heart panging like it always does at the insinuation they're a couple. Before Ilya can say anything else, he unhands himself from his grasp, shuffling out from his cage between Ilya and the desk.

Maybe that is the crux of it. They can be a little more reckless because they do have an excuse, even if the public doesn't know it yet. It's a tightrope Shane isn't used to walking. He's used to hiding, hiding *everything*.

"I really do have to go," Shane says, backing up toward the door even as every part of him aches to stay, to say fuck it and head down to therapy together.

Ilya nods, leaning back against the desk, almost like he's holding himself back, too. "I will see you in therapy."

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"Why is it that you don't see eye to eye?" Dr Bridges asks, her eyes flicking back to her notes assessingly.

They are twenty-six minutes and thirty-four seconds into today's session. Shane knows this because his eyes haven't left the clock, glued to the way the hands are moving torturously slowly. It's going... well. As well as therapy with the public rival you'd shared a bed with last night can go anyway.

"I think we are opposites in... some ways," Ilya throws out, his fingers drumming against the arm of the chair leisurely.

Shane refocuses, humming in agreement.

Dr Bridges nods as if she approves. "Which ways?"

Shane immediately thinks back to their conversation from that morning. *That* had been a great example of them being opposites in some ways.

Shane worries. Ilya was, well, Ilya. And Shane knew he worried, too, just not like Shane did. In that all-encompassing, world-ending way that he seems to be a professional at. Professional panicker comes straight after professional hockey player on his resume.

Shane clears his throat, trying real hard to telepathically tell Ilya to steer clear of whatever this conversation is about to be. He doesn't have a good feeling about it. It feels like a fork in the road that could very easily lead to something too personal.

Divert back to hockey. Hockey is safe. Hockey talk, they could control.

"On the ice, not so much, but maybe—"

"I don't think we'd get on as, uh, *friends*," Shane cuts in, that wave of familiar anxiety getting the better of him. There's a beat of silence, Ilya and Dr Bridges both looking at him, and he takes the opportunity to shift awkwardly in his chair. He's pretty sure he's turning red. He clears his throat, playing it real cool when he asks, "Was that not the question?"

Ilya turns his head, shooting Shane another questioning look. Shane glares back at him. After a beat, Ilya turns back to Dr Bridges, nodding jerkily. "Yes. Yes. We would make terrible friends."

Shane bites his lip, averting his eyes from Ilya because it really shouldn't be funny, especially with all these cameras rolling, but it is. It's so funny that Shane has to take a deep breath to stop from laughing.

Dr Bridges notes that down. *Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov would make terrible friends.* "Why do you think that is?"

Ilya looks at Shane again, and then back at Dr Bridges. "We are too different—"

"So different," Shane agrees with a forced smile.

"He reads boring hockey books."

"*Not* boring. Rozanov reads these magazines—" Shane hesitates, his brain short-circuiting. "I mean, I have seen him in hotels, before a game, uh, reading magazines—"

"He is right." Ilya nods. "I enjoy simple pleasures. Hockey and good magazine. Some are very interesting. Good pictures."

And now, they've made it sound like Ilya is reading porn magazines in his spare time. Dr Bridges blinks at them a little blankly, then nods, noting whatever that had been down. *Shane Hollander reads hockey books. Ilya Rozanov reads... porn.*

She places her hands over the notebook, looking between them. "What would you say your biggest difference is? You first, Ilya."

"Hollander thinks too much. I do not," Ilya quickly answers.

Dr Bridges raises an eyebrow at that, clearly not convinced. Shane isn't either. "Do you not think?"

Ilya holds a hand out, making a so-so gesture. "Not like Hollander. He thinks a lot. About hockey, about his team..." Ilya shrugs. "*Everything*. All the time."

"Shane, your turn. What do you think your biggest difference is?"

"Il—*Rozanov* doesn't think *enough*," Shane answers just as quickly as Ilya had.

"Doesn't take a lot of thinking to beat you," Ilya says with another shrug.

Shane doesn't miss the smile that Dr Bridges is holding back when she asks, "So, you don't think you could bond over, say, *hockey*?"

They both shake their head in unison, a practiced dance. This part, they were experts at; it was like slipping into your favorite sweater. You knew what to expect. That is, until Ilya goes off script and adds, "maybe one day—"

"Nope," Shane cuts back in, firmly shaking his head again. "Never."

"How about when you're both retired? Do you think you'll look back on this time in your lives fondly?"

Jeeze, these questions. And why hadn't she made any notes that time? Shane inconspicuously leans forward a little, trying to get a closer look at the notebook perched on her lap.

"Maybe when we are eighty," Ilya decides.

Shane nods in agreement, slumping back in the chair. "Maybe then."

"Another TV special?" Dr Bridges teases. "One of them has got to work, right?"

Shane huffs a laugh. "Yeah, maybe."

The questions continue, Shane and Ilya reciting their usual practised answers, and Dr Bridges pressing them with follow-ups. It's all going smoothly, probably too smoothly, which is why Shane isn't shocked when she throws the next bombshell at them.

"Do you think you could give each other five compliments?"

Shane stiffens in the chair anyway, blinking at her. "Five compliments?"

Dr Bridges and these damn icebreaker games. What next? Introducing themselves with a fun fact? Hello, I'm Shane Hollander, and there are exactly eighteen minutes and twenty-five seconds left of this session.

"Do we have to?" Ilya asks.

She nods, her voice taking on an amused lilt when she says, "We could start with three if you think five is too many."

Shane stays quiet because he's pretty sure she's joking. Even though three would be better than five. Similar to how four cameras are better than seven. He'd learnt that one the hard way.

Five compliments are a lot. He could easily give Ilya five compliments away from the cameras. He could probably give him five hundred if you gave him a pen and a pad of paper. But in front of the cameras? Anything more than *you are good at hockey* trips him up. He looks at Ilya intensely, searching for something nice, but not *too* nice.

You have good hair? *No*, definitely not. That sounds creepy.

The way your lip curls up when you're getting ready to insult someone is— *okay*, also no. He might as well stand in front of the camera and say I'm in lo- *I like Ilya Rozanov.*

You are great at… *therapy*. No.

You're really, really good at—

“Turn your chairs toward each other,” Dr Bridges instructs, then, cutting into Shane’s intense brainstorm.

“Huh?” he breathes, jolting back to the conversation.

There’s no time for an explanation because Ilya is already standing, turning his chair to angle toward Shane’s. Shane has no choice but to follow, shifting his chair so it faces Ilya’s. He shuffles around, sitting back down, now face-to-face with Ilya, the gap between them suddenly ten times smaller.

If Shane moves even an inch, his knees are going to knock into Ilya’s. He shuffles back, the chair not moving an inch. Oh, good. He’s stuck here. Stuck here and forced to give compliments that won’t give them away.

Ilya watches him for a second, then raises his hand in a silent wave. Shane tries one last time to shuffle his chair back, but it’s not budging.

“When you’re ready,” Dr Bridges says, leaning back in her own chair.

Shane clears his throat, getting himself situated. “Who first?”

“I’ll go first,” Ilya volunteers.

Shane nods, bracing himself for what’s about to come out of Ilya’s mouth.

Ilya tilts his head toward him in challenge, raising an eyebrow. “You are very fast on the ice.”

Well, that’s something. “Thank you—“

“*Sometimes*.”

“Your attitude is inspiring,” Shane throws out with not a second of thought behind it. Then he slams his mouth shut because he sounds like the inside of a greeting card. Bad, no, terrible start. Only four more to go.

“My *attitude*?” Ilya repeats skeptically.

“Yeah. You know—“ Shane waves a hand toward him in the small gap between their chairs, nearly brushing his chest. “You don't care if you piss— *annoy* people. And you’re really good at it.”

“And that is a good thing?”

Shane tips his chin. “Yup.”

“You are very good at being on time,” Ilya says then, not giving Shane a chance to recover from his blunder, his gaze still fixed on him. Shane won’t be the first to look away.

“You think being punctual is a compliment?”

“Yes.”

“You make great use of the penalty box—“

Ilya scoffs. “That does not count.”

“The referee wouldn’t have a job without you. It’s a great thing you’re doing.”

Ilya narrows his eyes. “You keep the boring book business alive. Is thriving because of you —“

Shane levels Ilya with a gaze. “You keep the *hockey magazine* business alive.”

That does the trick. Ilya looks away first, coughing into his fist. Shane smiles smugly, watching Ilya shift in the chair.

Dr Bridges looks between them, tapping her pen against the open notebook. There are no notes, just a blank piece of paper staring back at her. “Maybe we can revisit that next time.”

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"She suspects something," Shane whispers as they speed walk down the hallway. He doesn't know who's around, but they need to have this conversation now before either of them gets pulled into a phone call with one of their agents about something he doesn’t give a shit about right now.

"She doesn't know," Ilya replies, matching Shane's conspiratorial whisper and overeager pace.

"Could she even tell anyone? Isn't that like *illegal*?"

"Maybe," Ilya says, “probably.” He pulls Shane's arm when he walks faster. "Where are you trying to get to?"

Shane slows down, trying to match Ilya's leisurely pace. "Somewhere with no people to overhear us."

Shane isn't sure that place exists away from either of their places or locked hotel rooms, but if it does, it’s definitely not here, an office every way they turn. Ilya nods, turning down another hallway. Shane doesn't know where they're going, doesn't know how Ilya knows where they're going, but he's happy to let him lead the way while he spirals a little more. He has a whole list of things to pick from.

Ilya pushes open a door, and suddenly, they're in a parking lot. Shane looks around, and it's pretty much deserted, just a couple of cars dotting the spaces.

He lowers his voice anyway, turning to Ilya as he closes the door again. "Was that okay?"

Ilya looks down at the can of Coke he'd just stolen from the snacks table, considering, then back at Shane. "Yes."

"The *therapy*, Ilya."

"Oh. Yes, the part where you said we could never be friends." He nods. "Was very convincing."

Shane leans against the wall, thinking back over the hour. They were finished with Dr Bridges for the day, but they had to stick around for some promo shots the team wanted for the announcement, whenever that was.

"Do you have any idea when they're announcing it?" Shane asks.

"No. I know nothing."

"Neither," Shane sighs.

They stand in silence for a minute or two, Ilya drinking his Coke, and Shane thinking about, well, everything. Everything apart from the hotel room debacle from this morning. He was over that. He had bigger fish to fry. The hotel room was a goldfish in his shark-infested lake of problems.

"What the fuck are those icebreaker games?" Shane says, then, just because he can't stop thinking about the shitshow that was their compliment-off. It was bad, even for them.

"Your attitude is inspiring," Ilya repeats Shane's earlier words thoughtfully as if he's turning them over. It sounds worse the second time around.

Shane huffs in annoyance. "Well, I obviously couldn't say what I actually wanted to say."

Ilya doesn't skip a beat. "What did you want to say?"

"Doesn't matter—"

"I wanted to say that your freckles are very beautiful," Ilya says in a low voice, something close to a whisper.

Whatever quip Shane had been about to throw dies on his tongue. He rolls his head to the side, watching Ilya casually sip from the can like he hadn't just hit Shane straight in the chest in a perfect bullseye with that. It was a whole lot better than *you're very punctual.* Cool. Whatever. *Rivals*.

Rivals standing in a parking lot outside a therapist's office, to be specific.

Ilya narrows his eyes at him. "You are not very good at the game—"

"Are you fishing for a compliment?"

"It is not my game. It is Dr Bridges." He shrugs. "I do not make the rules."

Shane blows a breath. "I like you a lot—"

“Try again—“

“*What*?”

“Try again,” Ilya repeats. Then he takes another sip from the can. “I am waiting.”

“You’re hot—“

“Yes.”

“You’re an asshole.”

Ilya nods, that smug smirk returning. “Also, yes.”

Shane can’t help it; the words leave his mouth in a rush, “Maybe that’s why I like you so much.”

That gets a proper smile out of Ilya, and it does devastating things to Shane’s heart. Ilya hides the grin behind his can, and Shane takes the opportunity to take a breather. They’d survived another session. That was a positive. They’d survived a forced compliment battle, *and* Shane had survived whatever that had been just then—two more positives.

"What do you think she writes down in that notebook?" Shane wonders aloud once he’s collected himself, gaze subconsciously skimming across the parking lot to make sure they're still alone.

Ilya joins him against the wall, finally, leaving a generous gap between them. It’s the perfect amount for two people who would never be friends. "A check mark for every time I make her laugh." Ilya sips his Coke, then looks at Shane seriously. "Whole book is full, she had to buy another."

Shane rolls his eyes, but he can't help the laugh that bubbles up his chest. He groans, looking at Ilya. "This whole thing is stupid."

Ilya hums in agreement, the corner of his lips tugging up. "Very stupid. No idea why we agreed."

Shane lets his head fall back against the wall, grimacing. "Friends when we're *eighty*?"

"Scott Hunter's age."

"Stupid," Shane mumbles, letting himself relax for the first time all day, the quiet of the parking lot, a couple of compliments hanging in the air, and Ilya by his side. They'd survived session two. Just about. Only three more to go. They might have to go back to the drawing board, though, because Shane wasn't entirely sure that *friends when we're eighty* and compliments about punctuality were going to cut it.

***

"Ok, so, I'm Dr Bridges," Shane says, settling in the chair he's pulled in front of his bed. The only thing he's missing is a notebook.

Ilya shifts on the end of the mattress, his judgmental eyes flicking from the chair to Shane's bare chest. "This is very cruel, Hollander. Like holding bone in front of a dog."

"*Focus*. You already fucked me once." Shane clears his throat. "What would you say if I said what *exactly* is it that you hate about Hollander?"

"I would say that he does not know what roleplay is—"

Shane ignores that, trying another angle. "What would you say if she asked you how we could better our friendship off the ice?"

Shane had spent the last couple of weeks thinking about every possible question Dr Bridges could ask them. He'd even googled what reconciliation therapists usually ask, then written them in his notes app and gone through them every night, brainstorming multiple answers for each. He'd forgone his hockey books to repeat the words like a mantra, drilling them into his brain until it was second-nature. He is beyond prepared. Maybe more prepared than he's ever been for anything in his life. He feels a little like he's defeated therapy, and they were only two sessions in. Now he just needs to get Ilya on the same page. Hence the chair.

Ilya doesn't miss a beat. "We can't. We can never be friends." He flops back onto the bed with a dramatic grunt. "Can never fuck. Life is cruel."

"*Ilya*."

Ilya holds a hand up like he's drowning. "*Shane*."

Shane bites back his laugh. He likes all sides of Ilya; the cocky hockey player is just as intoxicating as the side that is insistent on making Shane feel good. But *this* side he has a particular soft spot for. The side not everyone gets to see, playful, unburdened, and *just for Shane.*

As sweet as the sentiment is, and as much as Shane feels for the man who's fake-drowning on his bed, unfortunately, they really do need to focus. They have their third session in two days. Mere hours away, and they haven't prepared at all.

"We need to get this right."

Ilya pulls himself back up, sighing in defeat. "Okay. Okay." He looks at Shane, still in his chair, still waiting for the answer. "Hollander is excellent player. I think friendship would not work. Would make playing on the ice more difficult." Ilya waves a hand in Shane's general direction. "Less intense. Don't fix what is not broken."

"That's good." Shane nods. He's resisting the urge to pull up his notes of questions. It feels too far even for him. "I think Dr Bridges' job is to fix what *is* broken, though."

Ilya hums in thought. "She doesn't know it is not broken. Broken for others. Perfect for us."

Shane's heart pangs in his chest. *Perfect for us.* He at least tries to stop the grin from spreading over his face.

"Are we done?" Ilya asks, head tilting back as he watches Shane stand from the chair embarrassingly quickly.

Shane nods a little breathlessly, shoving the chair out of the way. It clatters to the floor with a very indelicate thud, and Ilya snorts. Shane doesn't waste a second, crossing the suddenly unfairly big space between them, straddling Ilya's lap, and pushing him back against the bed. He looks down at him, his traitorous little heart panging in his chest. *Perfect. For. Us.*

Ilya smiles up at him devastatingly. "Good foreplay, yes?"

***

Jane: What would you say if Dr Bridges asked whether we feel any pressure to live up to our rivalry in the public eye?

Lily: This number is disconnected.

Jane: ????????

***

"Would you rather take a hockey puck to the stomach or thigh?"

Shane sips his ginger ale, narrowing his eyes across the table at Scott. "Thigh, obviously."

They were in the Kingfisher, a hockey game behind them and a therapy session ahead. It seemed as good a time as any to accept Scott's invitation to the bar he now co-owned. It was cozy and had the good ginger ale, so Shane couldn't complain too much. His only criticism was that he and Ilya could be holed up in one of their hotel rooms right now, doing things that are much, much more enjoyable than playing *would you rather.*

"Stomach," Ilya cuts in, walking up to the table with his drink.

Shane shoots him an unconvinced look.

"Would you rather play against Scott or Rozanov?" Kip asks Shane, resting a casual hand on Scott's knee.

Okay, second criticism, the jealousy that bolts through Shane like a lightning strike every time Scott and Kip get to do *that*. Tonight, he'd learned that they were a tactile couple, a hand on a knee, a brush of a shoulder when the other slid into the booth, private smiles explicitly reserved for the other. It made Shane jealous in a way few other things had, a physical weight sitting heavy in his stomach. He wouldn't have even considered himself a PDA guy, but he guesses he didn't have a choice. It didn't matter whether he *wanted* to touch Ilya or not. It didn't factor into the equation. He *couldn't*, and unfortunately for him, witnessing Scott and Kip so free in a gay bar Scott co-owned, with the hockey highlights playing on the television

in the corner, made him crave it desperately, *miserably*. He swallows a mouthful of ginger ale, trying to wash away that feeling setting up camp in his gut.

"Ilya," Ilya says, sliding into the booth next to Shane, leaving a generous gap. "Boring against boring..." He looks between the three of them. "*Very* boring."

Scott huffs, picking his beer up. "Sure, man."

"My turn," Ilya announces then, tapping his fingers on the table as he thinks. "Would you rather fight a bear or Ryan Price?"

That gets a laugh out of Scott, probably the first all night. Their table wasn't exactly the life of the party.

"Bear," Shane decides, picking his ginger ale back up just for something to do with his hands that isn't reaching out and brushing Ilya's knee. He probably *could*, what with the dim lighting and secluded corner booth. He shakes the reckless thought from his head, trying to refocus on the conversation.

Scott nods in amused agreement. "Definitely bear."

"Correct answer," Ilya approves with a nod. "Fun game."

"It's would you rather, there is no right answer," Shane mumbles mostly to himself, his hand gripped around his bottle like a maniac. He looks away as Scott rests a hand on the back of Kip's neck, pulling him closer.

"I like what you've done with the place since last time," Ilya observes, his eyes darting around the bar.

"That's all Kyle, he's got an eye for it," Kip says cheerfully. "There's a new cocktail menu, too."

Ilya turns his attention back to Scott, a grin spreading over his face. "You and Bennett just fund it?"

Scott already looks about ready to throw the towel in on the night. Shane waits for the punchline to drop.

"—Like a sugar daddy?"

"You're an asshole, you know," Scott says.

Ilya shrugs. "You invited me here. I thought I would do something for good cause."

"I have no idea why," Scott says with a shake of his head, swigging his beer.

Ilya laughs. "Yes. Me neither."

"What's new with you two?" Kip asks then, probably in an effort to get them back to steadier ground.

"Hockey..." Shane starts, thankful for the subject change, but then he pauses, thinking his next words over. His life had revolved around hockey for as long as he could remember; it was nothing new. What *was* new was the therapy part. That had snuck up on him.

Kip laughs, tilting his head toward Scott fondly. "Hockey makes the world go round, right?"

It was sweet, the way Scott smiled at Kip, all bright and in love. It made Shane smile, too, because as jealous as he was, and he was very, *very* jealous, he was also happy for Scott. For both of them. What they'd done was groundbreaking, for themselves, for other closeted players, hopefully for Shane and Ilya one day. It was a ripple effect that would continue for years.

"Right," Shane agrees with a tight nod.

The conversation continues for the next hour or so, hockey, beer, a couple of those new cocktails Kip had raved about, a lot of ginger ale, and of course, Ilya making jabs at Scott that start with *old* and end with *ancient*. It's nice, even when Scott looks like he wants to launch across the table and strangle Ilya.

"It's, uh, amazing what you're doing," Shane says when they get onto the topic of Scott's coming out.

Scott waves him off a little bashfully, shrugging. "Someone had to be the first. If it weren't me, it would be someone else."

"Do not downplay what you did, Hunter," Ilya says sincerely, "it is amazing whether you were the first or hundredth."

Scott's lips pull into a tight smile, and Shane swears his cheeks turn slightly pink at the compliment. "Thank you—"

"Still bad at hockey, though." Ilya grins. "First time crowd went crazy for you was when you kissed Kip."

Kip snorts, and Scott shoots him a look that screams *traitor*. Shane thinks that Kip might have had one too many of those fancy blueberry cocktails. They don't look great, the weird, purple-tinged liquid kind of making Shane's stomach turn. He'd stick to his ginger ale.

"Thank you, Rozanov, that was almost a compliment," Scott says, holding his beer out across the table.

"No problem, Hunter." Ilya nods, clinking his beer against Scott's.

"This was fun," Kip says suddenly, the words slightly slurred around the edges.

"How many of those did you have?" Scott asks, but his words are injected with a level of fondness that Shane's never heard from him.

That jealousy rears its head again, making his skin prickle. Before the conversation can continue, *or* his jealousy can grow, he pushes his ginger ale away, pulling his phone out of his pocket. It's getting late, he's brimming with jealousy, and they have an early flight for therapy tomorrow afternoon. "We, *uh*—" Shane stands awkwardly, shaking his head. "*I* should probably go. Busy day tomorrow."

Scott nods, pushing the half-drunk cocktail out of Kip's way. "We should probably head back, too."

Ilya stands, shuffling out of the booth. "Yes. Me too. We have therapy tomorrow."

It's like a freeze frame, everyone pausing what they'd been doing to look at Ilya. Scott and Kip's faces both scrunch into differing levels of confusion, and it's kinda funny the way they're staring at them. Shane wonders how they'd react if they'd dropped their real secret.

"You... *what*?" Scott asks, eyes flicking between them like the answer is going to materialize. Shane is still standing awkwardly in the booth, his phone in his hand, probably looking somewhere between amused and horrified. He takes the opportunity to shuffle out, standing next to Ilya—a united front against Scott Hunter, his boyfriend, and *reconciliation therapy.*

"Therapy," Ilya repeats with a nod.

It's not like it's a secret. It's going to air for the whole world to see in a few short months.

"*Together*?" Kip asks, his brow still furrowed, his words still slurred.

"It's, uh, reconciliation therapy. For our rivalry," Shane offers.

Scott's eyes widen. "It's that bad?" He gestures to the small gap between them, and Shane shuffles to the side, making that small gap just a *tiny* bit more acceptable. "How are you in the same room right now?"

"The therapy is very effective," Ilya says seriously.

Shane can't help but laugh then. The absence of context is just making this sound ten times worse than it actually is. Well, the lack of context, and Ilya.

"The true story is probably very boring compared to whatever you are thinking." Ilya smirks, watching Scott pick the beer he'd just put down back up.

Scott shakes his head in disbelief. "What are you talking about?"

"They're lying," Kip says, attempting to slap his hand on the table like a judge, missing entirely.

"This is fun," Ilya says, turning to Shane. Shane can't argue. It beats the game of would you rather from earlier.

As fun as it is, he decides to put them out of their misery. "It's for TV. It's not real. Well, no," he backtracks, hesitating, "it *is* real. It's a therapist. But the league thought it would be funny."

He shrugs because he honestly doesn't know how to explain this. He hasn’t had to explain this. "I guess."

Scott raises an unconvinced eyebrow. "You're getting paid to do fake reconciliation therapy?"

"Bingo!" Ilya says.

"*Not* bingo," Shane counters. "It's a real therapist. I think."

"Allegedly," Ilya throws out.

Shane shoots him a look. "She *said* she was a real therapist. She's a very nice lady."

"Yes," Ilya agrees, “probably not a liar."

Scott slumps back in the booth, looking every bit as bewildered as he probably should. "What the fuck?"

"Well, I for one will be tuning in," Kip says, picking his discarded cocktail back up.

"Fuck yeah, we will," Scott agrees.

"Yes. You should. I mentioned you—"

"Fuck you, Rozanov," Scott groans.

***

Lily: Are you feeling okay?

Lily: A fever?

Jane: What do you mean?

Lily: You have not quizzed me.

Jane: 🙄

Jane: What would you say if Dr Bridges asked where we see ourselves in five years?

Lily: I have five more cups. You have none.

***

Shane relaxes against the mattress, the soft rise and fall of Ilya’s chest under his ear doing wonderful things for his spinning thoughts. Tonight had been fine in the grand scheme of things, but he couldn't shake that feeling of seeing Scott and Kip so content together. He leans to press a gentle kiss to whatever skin he can reach, and Ilya hums contentedly.

“You should go,” Ilya breathes, no fight to it as exhaustion softens the syllables. He makes no move to release Shane from his hold, though, his fingertips tracing patterns across his arm as

if on autopilot.

“I know,” Shane agrees, not moving a muscle, too busy soaking this in to worry about the flight they both have in six hours. They might not have the freedom Scott and Kip did, but they had *this*. And if this was all they *could* have, Shane would fight like hell to find a way to accept that it was enough.

He does need to leave, to somehow drag himself from Ilya and into a lonely hotel room instead. Sooner rather than later, or they run the risk of creating even more problems for themselves. Problems they definitely don't need on top of everything else. But instead, he shifts so he can watch Ilya’s face when he says, “Tonight was kind of like a double date.”

“Kind of,” Ilya agrees, his tired eyes fluttering closed. “Scott Hunter would not be my first choice for double date, though.”

Shane huffs a laugh, clutching tighter as if Ilya is about to ask him to leave again. “Neither. But him and Kip are cute. Uh, touchy.”

Ilya hums again. “Kip is sweet.”

“We were on a double date, and they didn't even know it.” It comes out suddenly, all the emotion Shane is trying to hold back spilling over into strained words, which is a disaster because he had been aiming for humorous. He clears his throat, searching for something else to say, when Ilya opens his eyes again, catching his gaze.

“Do you ever wish—” Shane pauses, because he's still not entirely sure what he's asking here. He doesn't know what it is he wants, doesn't know how he's supposed to live with this level of jealousy over something so *stupid*. He should be happy for Scott and Kip.

But Ilya just nods, a slight tip of his chin. “All the time.”

***

Shane leans against the wall outside of Dr Bridges' office, thinking back to last night. He'd eventually, mustering all the strength he possessed, managed to untangle himself from Ilya long enough to return to his own hotel room.

"You are thinking," Ilya says lowly.

They'd been instructed to wait outside while the crew adjusted the cameras, so here they were, both watching the closed door like it was the most entertaining thing they'd ever seen.

Shane tears his gaze away, turning to Ilya instead. "I'm thinking about Scott—"

Ilya raises an eyebrow. "About how he is very hot?"

Shane is pretty sure his face twists in disgust because Ilya laughs so loudly that Shane leans forward, scanning up and down the hallway to check they hadn't disturbed anybody. He slumps back against the wall when the coast is clear. "Shut up, that's gross, and they'll hear you."

Ilya gasps, a hand coming up to clutch his chest. "Oh no, they will think the therapy is working."

Shane huffs a laugh, looking him dead in the eye, speaking loudly when he says, "You're going down, Rozanov."

"Yes." Ilya's eyes flick down Shane's body. "I will be going down."

Shane shoves Ilya, then turns away to resume intense door staring. He's one hundred percent certain he's flushing, which doesn't bode well for him in any circumstance, really, but especially not this one: about to talk to a therapist. He's still not gotten over his belief that she can read everything that crosses his face. In fact, getting to know Dr Bridges has just made him more certain. He can hear Ilya still laughing behind him as he assesses the wood of the door, willing his face to calm down.

After a minute or so, he feels Ilya shuffle closer. He glances over his shoulder and sees him looking down at his phone.

He can't help the itch of curiosity. "What are you looking at?"

Ilya doesn't look up. "Have you ever judged each other?"

Shane turns then, watching Ilya scroll down. "Are you looking up questions she could ask?"

Ilya hums. "Nothing better to do. Answer."

Shane bites back his smile. "I've never judged you."

"That is not true."

"*What*?"

"You judge me all the time." He lowers his voice in a terrible imitation of Shane. "Ilya, you should not be smoking."

Shane rolls his eyes. "That doesn't count."

Ilya shoots him a look. "That counts. Mr Judgey. Shane Judgey Hollander. I have never judged you—"

"That's not true. You judge me all the time."

Ilya shakes his head firmly. "No." He waves his phone, still open to whatever page he'd pulled up toward Shane. "I assess you. Big difference."

"You *assess* me?"

"Yes. Like right now. You are blushing—"

"Il—*Rozanov*."

The door opens then, and Shane jumps back, forcefully smiling at the camera men as they file out. Is he really blushing? Like right this second?

"Cameras are rolling, you know the drill," one of them says on his way past, not giving either of them a second look. It's probably for the best, given the whole blushing situation he's got going on.

Shane shoots them a thumbs up, nodding enthusiastically. When they're halfway down the hallway, he turns back to Ilya, giving him a scathing look. Ilya puts his thumb up awkwardly, his eyes flicking to it, then Shane. "Very good."

"This feels like judgment," Shane huffs.

"No, no. *Assessment*," Ilya corrects, pushing Shane forward into the room.

Shane stumbles over the threshold, and Dr Bridges looks up, smiling warmly. "Hello, come in, come in."

Shane walks to his chair like a man who is definitely *not* blushing and sits down. Ilya flops in the chair next to him, smiling at Dr Bridges like butter wouldn't melt.

"It has been too long," Ilya says politely.

It's been a month. Well. Five weeks, four days, twelve hours— But Shane's not counting.

"It has," Dr Bridges agrees, "how are you both?"

Shane jumps in first because he has this under control; he's calm, he's serene, he's mastered therapy, and his voice cracks when he says, "Good."

Everyone ignores it, thankfully. They talk a little about hockey, and about what they've been up to, before Dr Bridges pulls out her trusty notebook, resting it on her lap.

"Shall we get started?" She asks, opening it to a blank page. They both nod. Shane's eyes flick to the clock. “Have either of you played two truths and a lie?”

Shane resists the urge to groan. He'd barely recovered from the compliments game. Or the back and forth in the hallway. “Yeah,” he manages to get out, hoping for a miracle that Dr Bridges is just making friendly conversation.

“Ilya?” she asks, turning to him.

“Yes,” Ilya confirms.

“Perfect. Turn your chairs. Shane, you can start today.”

There goes his friendly conversation hopes. Shane stands, turning his chair so it faces Ilya’s, because apparently this is just what they do now. “How exactly do these games help?” he asks, trying to keep the annoyance out of his tone as Ilya pushes his chair way closer than it had been last time.

“It's all about reconnecting. Breaking the metaphorical ice.”

“Yes, Hollander. *Reconnecting*,” Ilya agrees, sitting back in the chair that is so close to Shane’s that he might as well be sitting in his lap.

Shane shuffles into the tiny gap, flopping back into his chair. He doesn't remember the last time he'd played two truths and a lie. It was probably at some teammate's house years ago when they could still drag him out after games. He didn't know when the last time he'd played would you rather was before last night, either. Maybe that was what Dr Bridges had up her sleeve next. He was drowning in icebreakers.

“Uh, okay, my first one is…” he pauses, thinking, until he comes up with, “I love snow.”

“That’s the lie,” Ilya says immediately.

“You don’t know that. There are two more to go,” Shane says. Ilya is right. That is the lie. He didn’t not like snow; he was just neutral to it. *And* he needed something fast because his brain keeps circling back to the biggest lie he tells daily, the one he definitely can’t use: I hate Ilya Rozanov. “I do yoga,” Shane blurts out.

“True,” Ilya says with a smug nod.

Shane turns to Dr Bridges. “I don’t think he knows how to play.”

“Is not my final answer,” Ilya says before Dr Bridges can chime in. “Keep going.”

Dr Bridges notes something in her notebook, unwilling to help Shane, so he turns back to Ilya. “My guilty pleasure is cheap pizza.”

“True.”

“Okay, so Ilya, the lie is?“ Dr Bridges asks as if he hadn’t been playing as they went.

“Snow.”

She looks to Shane. “Shane?”

“He’s right,” Shane confirms.

“Ilya, your turn.”

Ilya nods, turning back to Shane. “I am better at hockey than you—”

“That’s not a truth.”

“Records do not lie.”

“This game isn't called two *opinions* and a lie.”

“Sounds fun. Shall we play that? My first one Shane doesn't know how to play two truths and a lie.”

“That would be a lie,” Shane huffs, crossing his arms over his chest.

***

"Okay, to finish, I want to focus on some positives,” Dr Bridges says cheerfully. She’s probably still recovering from Shane and Ilya’s version of two truths and a lie. “I want to try and build on the things you do have in common—"

"Hockey," Shane supplies. It's the obvious answer, but also not so obvious because that's where their rivalry lies. It's also where everything else lies. It was like a fucked up venn diagram, with hockey overlapping with every aspect of them, together *and* apart.

"Right." Dr Bridges nods. "Tricky, right? So..." She quickly scribbles something in her notebook, then draws a line down the middle of the page. Shane and Ilya watch raptly. "We're going to move away from hockey today, I know, I know, it probably feels unnatural, but stay with me." She turns the page toward Shane and Ilya, showcasing their names on either side, a line dividing them into two boxes. "What are your hobbies that *aren't* hockey?"

They both pause, and Shane can only imagine that Ilya is racking his brain as hard as he is. They don't do anything but hockey. The only thing Shane can conjure up is *the thing.* The very thing that would be a bombshell of epic proportions if uttered in this room full of cameras. Or *any room*, really.

"I practise, I go to gym, I... play hockey," Ilya tries. Shane almost laughs because everything on that list *was* hockey. He might as well have said he hangs out at the rink in his spare time.

"I go to the gym, too," Shane throws out just for the hell of it. Dr Bridges could put them on gym equipment side by side and see how that works out. It’s not like they hadn’t already done it.

Dr Bridges writes down something on the page, then looks back up, waiting.

"I watch—"

"Hockey?" Dr Bridges guesses, her mouth tugging into a smile.

"Yes." Ilya nods.

There's a stretch of silence that goes on too long. Dr Bridges seems content to wait it out until either of them can come up with something. Shane thinks through his schedule, searching for *anything*.

Meal planning is a thing he does... for hockey.

He reads... hockey books.

He goes out with his team *maybe* once a month.

He hides career-altering secrets with his hockey rival.

"Sometimes I do jigsaw puzzles with my dad," he says eventually. It's occasional, and usually forced when Shane's dad thinks he's getting too stressed, but it's *something*. It's something that isn't hockey or fucking your rival. And somehow fucking your rival is still hockey adjacent. What was it that Kip had said? Hockey makes the world go round.

Dr Bridges writes that down. "What about you, Ilya?"

"I like puzzles," Ilya says.

"Perfect." Dr Bridges places her hands over the very empty list, looking at them. "I want you to do a puzzle together."

Ilya makes a noise of intrigue at the same time Shane says, "What?"

"Go and buy a puzzle, and then do it."

Shane glances at Ilya, then back to Dr Bridges. "Together?"

"Yes. Together."

"I will probably find a way to beat him at doing puzzle, too," Ilya says, turning to Shane with a shit-eating grin. Well, at least someone is having fun.

"Wait," Shane holds a hand toward the gleeful man to his left, leaning forward to look at Dr Bridges. "Why are we doing a puzzle?"

"Team building," she says simply.

"Team building?" Shane repeats, unconvinced.

"Team building!" Ilya says, still grinning. "Is exciting."

Team building. Ice breaking. What next?

Shane slumps back in his chair. "Okay, so we do a puzzle—"

"Together," Ilya cuts in.

"We do a puzzle *together*," Shane amends.

Dr Bridges nods. "And then you come back next session and tell me all about it."

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ILYA ROZANOV AND SHANE HOLLANDER BOOT THEIR SKATES OFF AND EMBARK ON RECONCILIATION THERAPY.

Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov, the MLH's most famed rivals, are in a turn no one could expect, switching their skates for a therapist's couch. In an exclusive, we can confirm that later this year, Channel 7 will premiere televised reconciliation therapy, shot over the season, between the two rivals in a bid to finally squash that beef.

hopeful_oasis: *What??????*

rozanovfangirl293: *when next year???? i need a date*

r0zan0vz: *Beef so bad you have to go to reconciliation therapy lmaooooooo*

Shanexhollander: *Don't attack me, but I've always kind of shipped them. It's that enemies to lovers vibe they got going on. Scandalous!*

***

"This is stupid," Shane grumbles, eyes darting over his shoulder for the third time in the last five minutes. He wishes more than anything it wasn't, but the need to constantly be aware of their surroundings feels rooted in him like muscle memory. They've hidden so long that it's become a part of him that he can't shake.

They're *still* hiding. But they are going to buy a puzzle together. And that is a big step—a monumental step in the grand scheme of things. It's no kissing on the ice, but it's close. Take that, Scott Hunter.

"No one will know it is you," Ilya says, gesturing to the sunglasses on Shane's face. "They will think *wow* Ilya Rozanov is with mystery man."

Shane pulls the sunglasses off with a huff, smiling awkwardly at someone as they pass before turning back to Ilya. It hits him then that they are walking down a sidewalk together in broad daylight. It's absurd. He pulls the sunglasses back on. "This is weird, right?"

Ilya shrugs, far too calm for the situation currently unfolding. "A little. But also kind of fun."

They'd obviously been in public together, but it was almost always before or after a game. They had a safety net if they needed one. He guesses they do have a reason today, too. But it doesn't feel like a good enough one. It feels flimsy at best. What would they say if a fan came up to them in the puzzle aisle? Yeah, our therapist suggested it.

"People are excited about our couples therapy," Ilya says, like he'd been reading Shane's mind.

That at least is true. Shane's pretty sure he's read the article's comments at least a hundred times since it dropped, and 95% of them were overwhelmingly positive. The public was eager to watch, at best, and a little confused, at worst. Both sets of their teammates had been beyond amused by the whole thing, teasing them mercilessly. Hayden had actually suggested a *watch party.* Shane had shot that down before it could make the rounds, then immediately texted Ilya to try to plan their own two-person viewing. Even the dorky photoshoot had been a hit, even if Shane had grumbled when Ilya had joked about getting a physical copy for his collection.

"It feels weird people know," Shane admits quietly, falling into step with Ilya. He could do this. He could be very cool about walking down a sidewalk with Ilya. No big deal.

"Yes. But also..." Ilya lowers his voice, quickly glancing around. "Now we can do this. Not so suspicious."

Shane pauses in the middle of the sidewalk, Ilya's words washing over him like a revelation. It wasn't that Shane hadn't considered all of this; he'd actually considered every part of this entire situation ten times over. But he hadn't thought about it this plainly.

If people knew about the therapy, would they just assume it's working?

"Ilya," Shane whispers, a wave of giddy excitement crashing into him, overriding his worries just like that.

"Yes," Ilya replies, still walking.

Shane jogs to rejoin him, trying to keep his voice low when he says, "It's not so suspicious anymore."

"I know, that is what I—"

"We can go out," Shane continues. They haven't solved their problem by any means, but in a roundabout way, they've somehow plunged headfirst into at least a taste of freedom. And they hadn't even realized.

"Yes. To buy a puzzle."

"We could do more than that," Shane points out, resisting the urge to start grinning. That is not very cool. He wouldn't grin while walking down a sidewalk with Hayden.

Ilya's eyes widen, probably at Shane's boldness, and maybe his erratic movements, and his mouth tugs into a pleased smirk. It nearly knocks Shane off his feet. "Are you going to... what do they call it? Dine me?"

Shane snorts, his chest light. "Wine and dine? Who taught you that?"

Ilya shrugs. "Are you?"

"Well, I don't know if any restaurants will have anything on my meal plan—"

Ilya's lip twitches. "Okay."

"Or maybe..." Shane starts, his heart pounding in his chest suddenly. "We can go for pizza."

That gets a smile out of Ilya, and it's just as world-changing as the first. "Puzzle first. First date later," he says, opening the door to the store.

Shane feels like he floats through the doorway, his brain on a loop of first date! First date! *First! Date!*

***

"Why are there so many?" Shane wonders, staring up at the stacked shelves of puzzles, a little overwhelmed by choice. He picks the one directly in front of him up, holding it out to Ilya. It seems as good as any.

Ilya takes one glance at it and shakes his head firmly. "No. Boring."

Shane turns the box back and looks at the picture on the front. "It's a mountain."

"Yes." Ilya points to the sky on the box, then the lake in front of it. "Too much blue. We will be there for days."

"Huh." Shane assesses the box once more before sliding it back onto the shelf. It wasn't a bad point. His eyes scan the puzzles again, looking for something else. Rule one: no lake.

Ilya steps forward, pulling something down, but he must think better of it because he slides it back with a shake of his head. Oh, this was serious business. Ilya Rozanov, the puzzle connoisseur. Shane was learning so much today, in this aisle of a random store. He pulls another puzzle down, one with no lake, and turns to Ilya, borderline holding his breath for the verdict. He's got a good feeling. "What about this?"

"Too much sand," Ilya decides, barely taking a second look.

Shane huffs in defeat, putting the desert puzzle back. Rule two: no sand.

"Since when were you a puzzle expert?"

Ilya ignores him, shuffling down to the next section. Shane had a funny feeling they'd be here all day searching for the perfect puzzle. They were nothing if not overachievers. Oddly enough, he found he didn't mind all that much.

"What's the criteria?" Shane asks, watching Ilya pick up a puzzle of a duck. "That's cute."

Ilya hums, keeping it in his hand, his eyes still scanning the wall of boxes. "Not too much of one color. Anything with water is usually boring—"

"That duck is in water," Shane points out helpfully.

Ilya looks down at the box, then turns it to Shane. "He is exception because he is very cute."

Shane can't help but smile. It is a cute duck. Just as he's about to suggest getting the cute duck, Ilya slides it back on the shelf, striding down the aisle.

"Uh, where are you going?" Shane calls after him, watching as he crouches, his hand rummaging around the bottom shelf. After a few seconds, he straightens back up, a box in his hands.

"Oh, god," Shane mumbles. He feels rooted in place, a little mesmerised by Ilya in front of this wall of puzzles, a box pressed to his chest secretively.

Ilya walks back toward him. "You are not ready, Hollander."

"The suspense is too much—"

Ilya flips the box, revealing a *hockey puzzle.* Well, it was a puzzle of a frozen lake, with a bunch of people playing hockey on it. It was a fail on Dr. Bridges' no-hockey rule, and one for two on Ilya's self-imposed puzzle criteria. They were one up with zero sand, though.

"It's perfect," Shane says honestly, his eyes flicking from the picture back to Ilya's face.

"Yes, it is," Ilya agrees, his grin tugging wider when he says, "Dr Bridges will not be happy."

"Whoa," someone from behind them gasps suddenly.

Shane spins in place to a man probably their age, wide eyes bouncing between them as if he can't believe they're real. He gets it. You don't see two hockey players in the puzzle aisle very often. He takes a step forward. "Oh, uh, hey—"

He points toward them. "Are you—"

"Yes," Ilya cuts in with a polite smile. Ilya had always been better at this part than Shane had. Whenever a fan pulled Shane aside, he felt awkward. He'd never denied anyone a photo, but he still had to fight through the brief uneasy feeling it instilled in him.

"Can I take a photo with you guys?" the guy asks, still looking a little shell-shocked.

Shane nods as Ilya says, "Of course."

He shuffles forward, pulling his phone out of his pocket. They get into some kind of formation, Ilya still clutching the puzzle against his chest, the guy holding his phone out in the middle, and Shane, somehow, in some miraculous turn of events, semi-relaxed about the whole thing. He smiles, and the guy snaps the photo, turning back to them. "Thank you."

"No problem," Shane says, trying his best to sound upbeat, "it was nice to meet you."

“You too.” The guy nods a little jerkily, then disappears into another aisle just like that.

"That will be all over Twitter," Shane muses, turning back to Ilya.

It comes to him in a jolt, the realisation that he hadn't been on high alert that entire time. He hadn't spent the past thirty minutes while they'd been looking at puzzles, eyes darting all around him in case someone had recognized them. He hadn't been thinking about a whole lot beyond *Ilya* and *puzzle criteria.*

"I hope our puzzle is in the picture," Ilya says, walking to the checkout, hockey puzzle in hand.

***

Lily: It is almost puzzle day.

Lily: 🧩

Lily: 3 days

Jane: Can’t wait.

Lily: That sounds sarcastic.

Jane: Not at all.

Jane: Can’t wait to team build with my rival.

Lily: 😈

Lily: Is that what they are calling it now?

***

Ilya slides the can of ginger ale across the table, cracking his own can of Coke as he slides into the chair next to Shane. He takes a sip before he turns to him with a serious expression. "Are you ready?"

Apparently, Ilya takes puzzling *very* seriously. Shane had hardly had one foot in the door before Ilya had started briefing him on their game plan. The game plan involved, in no particular order: start with the edge pieces, only hockey highlights on the TV in the background, and no distraction techniques. Shane had argued that the hockey highlights might violate the no-hockey deal. Ilya had insisted it didn't because it was the only thing that wouldn't distract them. Shane couldn't argue with that logic, even if his eyes kept flicking to the television.

"I'm ready." Shane nods, pulling his gaze back to the table. He shimmies the lid off the box, eye-to-eye with what feels like a million and one pieces. He shakes it, the pieces rattling against the cardboard. "How many pieces is this?"

"A thousand," Ilya replies, propping the lid of the box at the head of the table so they can see the picture better. "Is easy. Can do it in my sleep."

Shane pauses, watching as Ilya's eyes don't leave the box in his hands, waiting for Shane to tip it. "Are you really competitive about *puzzles*?"

Ilya shakes his head, offence crossing his face. "Is not competitive if I am the best."

And Shane's not sure that's how it works, or if a scale of best puzzler exists, but he presses anyway, mainly to delay tipping the box. "Can you be good at puzzles?"

"Yes. Maybe they will enter me into the best puzzler contest after this."

"That's not a thing."

"It is. Sorry. They don't invite you because you are very bad." Ilya's lips turn down into an exaggerated frown, then he gestures impatiently to the box Shane is still holding.

Shane tries not to laugh at the ridiculousness of the situation. It felt like this season, so far, had been a string of ridiculous events. They'd started strong with couples therapy, but Ilya hanging on to every movement he makes with this puzzle box is a close second.

Shane waits a few more seconds, then puts him out of his misery, tipping the box into the center of the table, the pieces scattering between them. He takes the opportunity to sip his ginger ale as Ilya starts flipping them so that they're the right way up. Best puzzler is up for debate, but Ilya definitely wins most enthusiastic participant.

"How often do you puzzle?" Shane asks. Ilya the puzzler is not what he expected, but now that he does know, he wants to uncover *everything* about it. He hides his probably too fond smile in his can at the image of Ilya sitting with hockey highlights on in the background, unwinding with a puzzle. Throw a shitty beer into the equation, and Ilya and his dad would get on like a house on fire.

Shane sips again, swallowing around the weird feeling in his throat. *That's* probably not a thought he should entertain.

Thankfully, Ilya shrugs, picking a corner piece out of the pile. He slides it up the table like the professional puzzler he is. "Sometimes."

"What kind?" Shane presses, half because he's interested and half because he wants to rid himself of the warm burst in his chest when he pictures Ilya and his family together. When he pictures a life together, a life he would have said was impossible just last week.

He's not entirely convinced it's possible now, but with a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle between them, and mandated homework from their reconciliation therapist, it doesn't feel so out of reach.

"So many questions—" Ilya's eyes flick to Shane judgmentally, one hand resting on his lap, the other around his can of ginger ale. "Not a lot of puzzling."

Shane can't help the laugh that bursts out of him. "Is that really what it's called? Puzzling?"

"Professionals call it that. You would not understand."

"Fuck you." Shane slides his can back onto the table, straightening back up, ready to join the puzzle party. "I can be a puzzler."

Ilya gestures toward the table as if to say, *"Be my guest."*

So, of course, Shane begins searching the pile for another corner piece, because the one way to get him to do something is to light some friendly fire.

A friendly fire between him and Ilya Rozanov? His kryptonite. It was an addiction at this point, embedded into him like a personality flaw. If only the MLH could see them now, two rivals demolishing a puzzle together.

Well.

They have one corner piece—

"Got one!" Shane nearly yells, slamming the piece he'd located next to Ilya's. *Two* corner pieces. And yes, he feels very smug about it, thank you. Professional puzzler status here he comes.

"Baby's first corner piece," Ilya mumbles under his breath, his eyes focused on the pile in front of them.

"Hey," Shane scoffs, watching Ilya start connecting the border. When did that happen?

Ilya looks up from his work, his lips tugging into a smirk. "First to find five edges wins."

Shane whips back to the table, scrambling through the pieces.

***

"This is a loophole," Shane says distractedly, trying with everything in him to find another edge piece. He's up to three. Ilya is only at two. It's a very high-stakes race. Neither of them has looked at the television since they started, eyes glued to the table.

"What is?" Ilya says back, just as distracted. He slides another into his pile, and Shane huffs.

Shane leans across the table to gather up a smaller pile of pieces, sliding it back over to himself.

"That is cheating," Ilya grumbles.

Shane ignores him, already sorting through them, so Ilya starts up his own mini pile. "This is a hockey puzzle. Dr Bridges said no hockey."

Ilya picks up a puzzle piece and holds it out to Shane. It's a floppy ear of some kind of dog. "There is a dog on it, too."

"That's also a loophole."

"You like loopholes," Ilya says plainly.

Shane pauses his search, looking at Ilya. "I do?"

Ilya hums. "You are taking me on first date because of couples therapy." He quickly looks up from his pile. "That is a loophole."

And Shane can't argue with that. It was the biggest loophole. And maybe his favorite. Shane Hollander, loophole superfan. He watches Ilya keep sorting through the puzzle pieces silently, his heart panging in his chest. He gets to wine and dine this man, this man who apparently was the world's best puzzler. It was overwhelming sometimes.

"Did you see if that photo at the store got posted?" He asks eventually, speaking past the burn.

"It did," Ilya confirms, "is all over Twitter. Good photo."

Shane waits for the anxiety to bubble up, but it doesn't. "What are they saying?"

Ilya pulls another piece into his pile, and Shane doesn't even care. He's so focused on this conversation, on this *feeling* coursing through his body.

"They are saying you are very bad at puzzles."

"Asshole," Shane mumbles. "Are they saying anything about us?"

Ilya shakes his head. "Not really. People think the therapy is working. Not so exciting anymore."

That sends something skirting up Shane's spine. But it's not anything he'd have expected. A handful of months ago, anxiety would've set up camp in his stomach, eating away at him. He'd have logged onto Twitter himself to double-check no one had any suspicions. And then he'd have done it another ten times. To triple check.

But now, he feels—

He feels so many things that he doesn't know where to start. He feels excited, and he doesn't care if he's getting ahead of himself. He wants to sit in this hopeful feeling for as long as he can, to soak it up like a sunflower. He has spent so long having zero, *negative* zero hope that this feels monumental.

And thank god Ilya is firing on all fronts because sometime between Shane’s epiphany and right now, Ilya has turned in his chair, leaning forward to place a gentle hand on Shane’s cheek. He catches his lips in a slow kiss, his tongue moving against his like syrup. It feels purposeful, like they're trading this giddiness back and forth between them to keep it alive.

It's soft, a promise of more, and it just makes everything more intense, a heady mix of relief, longing, and *love* dancing in Shane's stomach.

Love. So much love. It felt like it had crept up on him, a slow, determined trickle until the dam had broken. Fuck their puzzle; he was having life-changing revelations.

He kind of feels like he's about to burst, so he pulls back to recover, breathing into the small sliver of space between them.

Ilya's eyes blink open, his features soft around the edges. Shane doesn't give him a chance to say anything before he blurts, "I love you."

There's a beat of silence, and he's pretty sure his eyes are as wide as Ilya's. Just as he's about to invent a way to take words back, Ilya breathes out, "That is a loophole—"

"Fuck you—" Shane tries to pull away, but Ilya locks his hands around his back, keeping him in place.

"If you wanted to win, you should have looked harder—"

"Ilya," Shane breathes around a huff of a laugh, admitting defeat and letting his forehead fall to Ilya's. He stares at him from a breath away, hoping he looks intimidating.

Ilya's face turns serious, his eyes flicking to Shane's lips. "I love you too," he whispers, tipping his chin to catch Shane's lips with his again. He kisses him once, twice, three times, then pulls back, that smirk making a reappearance. "Even if you are a cheater."

***

Did you see the picture at the store?" Ilya asks Dr Bridges, and he sounds so thrilled about it that Shane has to bite the inside of his cheek to save from laughing.

It was a funny picture. Shane had eventually caved and pulled up Twitter to see what Ilya had been talking about. It hadn't disappointed. Ilya was smiling happily at the camera, the hockey puzzle clasped to his chest as if it were precious.

Ilya had joked about framing it. Shane had stopped laughing because he wasn't sure whether he was serious.

"I did. Very impressive." She shoots them a look, and something... understanding flicks in her eyes. "And no headlines about fights in the puzzle aisle. Sounds like a win in my book."

"People think you can work miracles," Ilya says. "They are saying that the therapy is a success because of the puzzle picture."

In a turn neither of them could have expected, but probably should have, the puzzle picture had somehow made headlines. Shane had liked the one titled *Are Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov swapping petty feuds for puzzles?* The alliteration had a nice ring to it. Ilya had reposted it to Instagram, followed by a picture of their puzzle. Shane had liked it. Well, Ilya had liked it on Shane's phone.

That gets a laugh out of Dr Bridges. "I don't know about that."

Shane sits up in his chair and raises his hand, mostly to annoy Ilya.

"Yes, Shane," Dr Bridges says, turning her attention back to him.

"Teacher's pet," Ilya mutters under his breath.

Shane smirks at him. "I would like it on the record that I said the hockey puzzle was technically hockey adjacent—"

Ilya shrugs, his voice serious when he says, "is a loophole."

Shane's heart somersaults in his chest, whatever he was about to say next dying in his throat. The word loophole is going to plague him for the rest of his life. He kind of loves it.

Ilya leans to one side, digging his phone out of his pocket. He pulls up the picture of the completed puzzle and proudly turns it to Dr Bridges. No one needs to know that there'd been

a handful of orgasms, and a few more I love yous traded before they'd gone back to it. It had been finished, and that was what mattered. *Loopholes*! So many loopholes!

Dr Bridges leans forward, assessing their work with great seriousness. "I'm impressed. Definitely a loophole I'll accept."

"Are you going to write it in your book?" Ilya asks, putting his phone away.

Dr Bridges taps her pen on the blank page. "If you tell me how it went."

Oh yeah, that's what they were here for. Truthfully, selling this friends thing was a whole lot more fun than their rehashed answers about their rivalry. At its core, it wasn't much different, but at least it finally felt rooted in the truth.

"It was fun." Ilya looks at Shane, and it's so intense that Shane has to look away, swallowing thickly.

He tries to keep his voice steady when he says, "Maybe working together helped."

Dr Bridges notes that down. She looks back at him. "Why do you think that is?"

Shane was used to these kinds of questions now. At the start, they'd knocked him on his ass, his mind floundering for something that felt like a substantial answer. But now he realises there isn't a correct answer. "I guess we're so used to competing against each other that it was, uh, a nice change of pace. It wasn't as bad as I expected."

"He had fun," Ilya tacks on. "He is very bad at puzzles, though—"

Shane holds a hand up, cutting him off. "That's not true."

Dr Bridges stifles a smile. "Any arguments?"

Shane shakes his head. "No. But he's competitive. Even when we're working together."

"I did all of it."

"I found four edge pieces—"

"Three."

"*Four*."

Dr Bridges jots something down, then looks between them, that same knowing look back on her face.

***

"Can you believe it's almost over?"

"No. One more, then we are therapy graduates."

Shane pulls a face. "Therapy graduates."

"Only took us a season."

"Do you think she knows?" Shane asks, looking around the empty hallway just to be sure.

"No. I don't think so," Ilya replies, his forehead popping into Shane's very nice view of his hotel room ceiling.

"Where am I?" Shane asks, squinting toward the screen.

"You are on bathroom counter. I just got out of the shower." Ilya tips the phone down, showcasing a towel wrapped around his waist.

Shane hums, appreciating that view a lot more than the ceiling. Then, he whips his head around to make sure no one has crept up on him. As crazy as it feels, he and Ilya on a FaceTime call wouldn't be so suspicious these days. But Ilya in a towel might raise a few alarm bells. Or not. He didn't want to test the theory.

"I just got this feeling today that she knew..." Shane hesitates, thinking back to that look on her face that he can't shake. The way she'd looked between them like she at least *suspected* something. "...knew something at least."

"Maybe. But she is nice, so—" Ilya pops back into frame, a t-shirt on this time. Shane curses the fact that he's walking down a hallway and the fact that he's rooming with Hayden.

"True," Shane agrees, not all that worried as he walks up to his room. He swipes the keycard and slips inside. He throws the phone onto the bed, and Ilya keeps talking, a comforting background noise as he kicks off his shoes.

"Where am I?" Ilya asks then, his voice muffled against the sheets.

"Bed."

Ilya's voice takes on that low tone that Shane loves so much. "Going to give me a show?"

Shane slips his jacket off, flopping onto his stomach next to the phone. "If you want Hayden as our audience—"

Ilya raises an unconvinced eyebrow. "Can be quick—"

The door slams open suddenly, and Shane jumps out of his skin, head whipping around just in time to watch the man in question stumble in with his hand clasped over his eyes as if they'd summoned him. "Sorry. *Sorry*."

"What are you doing?" Shane asks, watching him fumble to close the door, his vision impaired by his own giant hand.

"Heard something about a show, got real scared, Shane, man."

Shane looks back at the phone, shooting Ilya a glare he hopes is scathing. Ilya mutes himself, but Shane can see him laughing on screen. *Traitor*. Shane turns back to Hayden, still standing at the door, eyes squeezed close like he's about to open them to Shane naked or something.

"Is it safe?" he asks a little breathlessly.

"Do you really think—"

"I don't know what I thought. It all happened so fast."

Shane sighs, burying his face in the sheets for a second of reprieve. This was going to be good, especially with Ilya still on the line, probably ready to pounce. He looks back up. "It's, uh, Il— Rozanov."

Hayden drops his hand, blinking against the bright light, then toward Shane on the bed. "Oh. Oh. *Rozanov*."

"A show, like the show we are doing," Ilya pipes up from the phone, choosing now to unmute. "Therapy stuff, Pike. You would not understand."

Shane debates burying his face back in the sheets. Hayden knew about the therapy; the whole world did at this point, but they hadn't really talked about it. They definitely hadn't talked about the fact that it was *'working.'*

Seemingly working so much that Shane is Facetiming Ilya in his downtime.

Hayden wanders up to the bed, looking down at the phone suspiciously, probably considering how weird it is that Shane and Ilya are on—

"This is weird," Hayden says, narrowing his eyes at the little version of Ilya on the screen.

There we go. Shane hums. "Yeah." He holds the phone up higher. "Say hi, Rozanov."

Ilya doesn't miss a beat. "Hi, Rozanov."

Hayden scowls. "Real funny, Rozanov."

"Thank you, Pike," Ilya replies cheerfully. "Have you got any plans tonight?"

Shane can feel his face flushing. "Ilya," he grits out.

"*Ilya*?" Hayden repeats, looking between them.

"Therapy," Shane murmurs in explanation.

"Any parties?" Ilya prods.

Hayden looks back at the phone. "I plan to get in that bed right there, and sleep till my heart's content so I can play a good game of hockey tomorrow—"

"A coma would not be enough sleep."

"Bye, Ilya," Shane says, then, pulling the phone away from where Hayden is trying to grab it.

"Bye, Pike," Ilya singsongs down the line.

"Fuck that guy," Hayden huffs, flopping onto his bed. “That therapy worked too well.”

***

Ilya: 4356

Shane: ?

Ilya: Tell Hayden there is party there.

Ilya: Good loophole.

Shane: 🖕

***

The month before the fifth and final therapy session passes in a blur of hockey and a level of calmness Shane hadn't known existed. In the grand scheme of things, after a few teasing chirps, everyone had gotten over the friends thing pretty quickly. It was just a fact now, rivals crossed out, *friends* pasted over the top of it. Simple.

That hopeful feeling that had washed over him when he and Ilya were doing that puzzle had only tripled. He didn't know how or when, but one day, he was pretty sure things were going to work out. And for a guy who envisioned worst-case scenarios like it was his full-time job, that felt pretty euphoric.

It had gotten to the point that Hayden just assumed Shane was on the phone with Ilya whenever he walked into a hotel room they shared. Nine times out of ten, he was. But he wasn't sure if that had been the goal with this whole thing. Shane was taking it as a win anyway. Even if Ilya and Hayden might have taken the crown for top feud. Hayden was very offended that Ilya had *'stolen his best friend.'* Ilya, on the other hand, was thrilled.

"What are you wearing?" Shane asks down the phone as he stands aimlessly in his closet.

"Um." Ilya pauses, and then, "Nothing?"

"No, Ilya, this isn't a sex thing—"

Shane hears a shuffle, as if Ilya were putting his clothes back *on*. "I am wearing clothes."

"That's helpful, Ilya, really, what would I do without you?"

Ilya huffs a laugh, and Shane shoves the suit he'd considered for a second there back on the rail. It's a pizza date. Very boring. Very ordinary. Mundane, even. Not suit worthy. Probably not even an ironed-shirt-worthy. They could eat it while walking down the sidewalk; that's how not noteworthy it was.

"What are you thinking about?" Ilya presses. "And switch to FaceTime."

Shane sits on the end of his bed, ending the call and switching to FaceTime. After a single ring, Ilya's face fills his screen. "Hi."

"Hi," Shane replies, his eyes already flicking back to his closet. "What are you wearing for the, uh—" He lowers his voice even though he is very alone, "date?"

His words come out uncertain, and he wants to shove them back in and try again. But Ilya smiles at him through the screen. "Don't know. Is not for another four days."

The whole thing was ridiculous if Shane thought about it for too long. He'd planned a pizza date a month in advance. He'd booked a table! Who does that? He then asked Ilya every day for the last week whether he was sure. And now, he's staring at his closet like an acceptable outfit is going to materialise in front of him if he stays here long enough. What even is an acceptable pizza outfit between two reformed rival therapy graduates anyway?

"Why are you stressed? Is pizza. Friends go out for pizza." The importance Ilya places on the word *'friends'* draws a laugh from Shane.

"We've never done it," Shane says plainly. "As friends or—"

"Boyfriends," Ilya finishes smugly.

"Right," Shane hums, that familiar flutter in his stomach making a return.

The closest they'd got to this scenario was a drink in a hotel bar, or a night at the Kingfisher with Scott Hunter.

"It will be fun. We can say we are celebrating finishing therapy."

Shane stands back up, reentering his closet for round two. "That's not a bad idea."

"I know. We can make you pin that says happy therapy day—"

"You're an asshole."

"I know," Ilya beams.

Shane can't help but beam back.

***

After a few more days of deliberation, Shane had decided on a shirt. It wasn't fancy; it was plain, reliable, and perfect for the occasion.

He looks across the booth at Ilya, watching for any signs that he's as excited as he is. Ilya watches him right back, soft around the edges under the dim lighting in this shoddy pizza place. It was quite frankly the opposite of romantic. It was loud, cheap, and Shane's pretty sure he'd almost stepped in ketchup on the way in.

It was perfect.

"Are you nervous for tomorrow?" Ilya asks, his foot pressing into Shane's under the table like a grounding pressure.

This evening did feel like a celebration for completing therapy unscathed. There was probably a world in which agreeing to reconciliation therapy had been a disaster. But, somehow, in this one, they'd turned it around into something they could use to their advantage. They weren't anywhere close to the endgame, but they'd taken an enormous step. One Shane hadn't even known he was capable of.

He shakes his head. He can't remember the last time he'd been nervous about therapy. "I'm excited," he tells him honestly. “Mostly for it to be over, but…”

Ilya nods. "Yes. Me too. Big day. Maybe we should order cake?"

That gets a laugh out of Shane. "If you want."

Ilya's eyes widen as if he'd expected Shane to shoot the cake down. Shane's pretty sure Ilya could ask for a kiss right now over this greasy table, and he'd lean straight across, plain shirt be damned. He feels so happy he doesn't know what to do with it.

It’s probably for the best that the waiter chooses that moment to sidle up to their table, bursting their bubble to slide their pizzas toward them with a friendly smile. He tells them to enjoy their meal, then heads to the next table.

Shane picks up a slice, looking at Ilya. "We could be doing anything right now.”

Ilya follows suit, picking up his own slice. Shane thinks it’s some kind of barbecue base, basically the complete opposite of Shane’s cheese pizza. Ilya takes a bite, speaking around the mouthful when he says, “another puzzle—“

“Okay, almost anything.”

“Do you not want to team build with me, Hollander?”

“You’d get on with my dad—“ Shane takes a tactical bite of pizza to shut himself up. Should he be implying that Ilya would get on with his family? Was that weird? Ilya stares at him, seemingly waiting for the next part of the sentence, so Shane adds, “he loves puzzles.”

Ilya nods, not phased by the seriousness of whatever this conversation is. “I need a puzzle companion who is not so—“ He waves a hand in Shane’s direction. “Distracted.”

“Distracted?” Shane repeats, thinking back to the singular puzzle night they’d had. He hadn’t been the only distracted one. He fondly remembers trying to find the puzzle pieces that had scattered to the floor during the commotion.

Ilya hums, his eyes darkening as he looks at Shane across the table.

Shane sips his drink, narrowing his eyes at him until Ilya picks up another slice.

“Is this boring?" Shane asks. They really could have done anything tonight. Stayed in. Gone to a bar. Maybe gone to a fancier restaurant than this if Shane had worked up the courage.

Ilya tips his chin toward the first pizza on the table between them. "Just cheese? Yes." Shane kicks his foot under the table, and Ilya smiles. "Is not boring."

"No?"

"No," Ilya confirms, biting into his own probably objectively more exciting slice.

They fall into conversation about gross pizza, hockey, and Hayden and Ilya’s latest fight.

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Shane walks out of the pizza place, a takeout box in hand, and a light feeling fizzing in his chest. Ilya falls in step beside him, his own box clutched in his hand.

“This is nice,” Ilya says, swaying closer to Shane for a split second as they walk down the street. Shane doesn’t know where they’re going, and doesn’t care to press about it. He’s happy enough to follow Ilya and enjoy the evening settling over his skin.

Ilya side steps to the left to let someone pass, and Shane wants to chase the warmth, maybe more than he’s ever wanted anything. “It is,” he agrees when Ilya is back next to him.

Ilya hums, bumping his shoulder to Shane’s.

"It probably sounds stupid, but I've always wanted to do that with you," Shane admits after a minute or so of walking in comfortable silence, their arms brushing every now and then. He wants Ilya to know how much it had meant to him, even if it felt a little vulnerable to admit.

"Yeah?" Ilya asks, his eyes softening.

Shane nods. “Yeah. Get shitty pizza. Go to a store—“

“Walk down busy street carrying greasy pizza box?” Ilya teases, tapping his box against Shane’s.

Shane nods. “Yup.”

“Such a romantic, Shane Hollander.”

Shane shrugs, voice turning serious. “I want to be boring with you, Ilya.” Ilya looks like he’s fighting the grin off his face, but Shane continues, on a roll now that he’s started. "And I know it’s not—“ He glances around them. “Everything. I know this isn’t the, uh, end goal, and I don't know what that looks like. I can’t imagine what that will look like. But I do know I want it."

Shane suddenly feels nervous that this in between they’d found themselves in wasn’t enough, that the things he was so giddy about weren’t reciprocated. He was spilling his guts on a

sidewalk, and it felt vulnerable in a way he hadn't felt before. It ran through his blood like those first few seconds before a big game, excitement and nerves a potent mix.

He was carved open for Ilya Rozanov. That was the truth of it. No way to get around it, and believe him, he'd spent a long time trying.

But before he can spiral, Ilya turns toward where he's frozen in the middle of the sidewalk suddenly, his voice more serious than Shane thinks he's ever heard, "I want it, too."

Shane's pretty sure he lets out a sigh of relief right there outside a closed coffee shop, the LED coffee cup sign flashing temperamentally across both of their faces. He lowers his voice, more of a whisper than anything else. "If I could, I'd kiss you right now."

Ilya turns around comically quickly, his hair flopping with the movement as his eyes flick from side to side.

"What are you doing?" Shane asks as Ilya leans forward to pull the pizza box from his hands. He turns, dropping them both into a trash can.

"Come with me," Ilya says in a low voice, eyes landing on the alley between the coffee shop and the bookstore.

And Shane does, for maybe a generous half second, consider arguing, but then Ilya starts walking, and, of course, he follows. Ilya leads them until they're right at the end, next to a large bin probably full of discarded coffee beans and the books no one buys.

Shane's nose wrinkles. "This is disgusting."

"Shut up. Thought you wanted kiss."

And even though it's probably up there with the most disgusting, reckless thing Shane's ever experienced, his mouth tugs into a wide smile when Ilya pushes him against the wall, and smashes his lips to his in a flurry.

It's not the most measured kiss they've ever had, a little clumsy, their noses bumping together because Shane keeps laughing at the stupidity of it, but it's perfect.

Ilya pulls back, tilting his head to the side like he's deep in thought. "Hockey is very exciting. Maybe we need some boring."

Shane, honest to God, beams. "Do you think?"

Ilya nods, his own mouth tipping into a soft smile. "I think so."

***

"Well, I guess my last question is, do you think this experience has been beneficial for you? Ilya, you first."

Ilya nods. "Yes. Definitely."

“How so?” Dr Bridges presses, folding her hands on her lap. She’d ditched the notebook for today, and Shane kind of missed it.

Ilya doesn't miss a beat. “I did not know that Hollander was so fun.” His eyes widen. “Big surprise.”

Dr Bridges smiles. “Quite the compliment from you, Ilya.”

“Yes,” Ilya agrees, turning to look at Shane, his eyes glistening familiarly. “Not so good at hockey, though.”

Shane huffs a laugh. “We’ll see about that next week, Rozanov.”

Ilya hums in agreement, and it sends that competitiveness skirting up Shane’s spine. “Yes. We will see.”

They couldn’t let their feud fizzle out completely. Not when it was them. It would always be a part of their relationship, but more than that, Shane didn’t think they could shake it. The need to compete, the need to be better than everyone else and each other, whether in hockey or puzzles, was etched into them. It made them stronger players. And Shane’s pretty sure that in some roundabout way, it strengthened their relationship, too.

“And you, Shane?” Dr Bridges asks.

Shane had thought about what he wanted to say all morning, but he was still no more certain of what was about to come out of his mouth. He decided to hope for the best. It had worked for him this far. “I think I came into this thinking it wouldn’t work,” he admits.

“Me too,” Ilya agrees, “some dumb—“ His eyes widen, flicking briefly to Dr Bridges. “Sorry.”

Dr Bridges laughs at that. “I think you’ve spent enough time in this room to know I’m not going to scold you for the word dumb.” She raises an eyebrow. “Or for thinking therapy is dumb.”

Ilya’s lips tip into a smirk. “Some dumb therapy *show*,” he corrects.

“I thought it would be that too, honestly,” Shane continues. “I thought we couldn’t ever, uh, be friends. I guess it wasn’t something I’d considered before. I thought we’d go the rest of our careers with this rivalry thing hanging over us. Like that’s just how it was, and we had to get over it.”

Shane felt like he was saying one thing, the words acting as a mask for what he really wanted to say. He was speaking in front of all of these cameras, but the words were only for Ilya.

He hadn’t known this was possible or that they could have it. In his head, in some faraway plan that he never dared to let himself dream of, they hid until they could figure something else out. He hadn’t let himself imagine the in-between.

They were still hiding, but the door was cracked. It was a *loophole*.

“And this has taught you that what you think isn’t always the truth?” Dr Bridges asks, a satisfied smile blooming.

Shane huffs a laugh. He’s a little overwhelmed with it all. “Yeah. We’ll go with that.”

***

The producers are wheeling the cameras out for the final time when Dr Bridges pulls them aside, her expression warm when she asks, “can I talk to you both for a second?”

“Oh, uh, sure,” Shane says, glancing at Ilya. He nods.

“Of course.”

“Perfect, how about we leave these guys to it and find somewhere quiet.”

They weave around the cameras, then she leads them down the long hallway to a different office out of earshot. Shane shoots Ilya a confused look on the way in, but Ilya just shrugs, clueless too.

“I just wanted to have a quick talk with you away from the cameras,” she explains as she shuts the door, walking to stand in front of them. She looks between them, that warm expression never faltering.

Shane doesn’t really have any idea what this could be about, so he nods, waiting for her to speak again.

But she doesn’t, she digs in her pocket instead, pulling out a fancy-looking card. She leans forward and hands it to Ilya. Shane looks over for an explanation, his eyes catching on a business card—her business card for *couples therapy.*

Shane looks up wordlessly, then back to the card, his heart beating a little faster than usual, suddenly.

“I specialize in a lot of different therapies. I’ve seen a lot of people—“

Ilya clears his throat from beside Shane, but Shane can’t drag his eyes from the card. “You knew?”

Dr Bridges shrugs, but that kindness never disappears. “I don’t *know* anything you don’t tell me. I suspected something… and we can leave it at that. Sometimes my suspicions are wrong.”

Shane looks back up then. “The *entire* time?”

Dr Bridges tips her chin.

“You’re not going to tell anyone?” Ilya asks.

“Tell them what?” Dr Bridges throws back, and relief hits Shane at full force. They are so lucky. “I hope you didn’t feel like I ever pushed you too hard. I was very cautious with what I asked.”

Ilya shakes his head. “No. You did not.”

“Thank you,” Shane breathes out, mostly because he doesn’t know what else to say, and that feels as good a place as any to start. “The, uh, puzzle thing, it’s probably stupid, but it felt like a step for us—“ He hesitates. “Personally.”

Dr Bridges nods in understanding. “I thought it might.”

Ilya looks to Shane, and he seems a little bewildered. Shane can’t say he disagrees. “She is very good.”

Dr Bridges gestures to the business card still clasped in Ilya’s hand. “Well, if you ever need anything, you know where to find me.”

2 months later.

“Ilya,” Shane groans, righting the glass in the dishwasher.

“What?” Ilya asks from where he’s fiddling with the TV remote.

“It doesn’t clean properly if you put it that way; the water just gets stuck.”

Ilya flings the remote onto the couch, walking to Shane with a smirk on his face. He snakes his arms around his waist from the back, pressing an open-mouthed kiss under his jaw. Shane pulls away with a huff. “Gross. If you want to kiss me, learn which way to put a cup up first.”

“So many rules,” Ilya murmurs, turning Shane to place a kiss on his lips.

Shane complies, but only for a handful of seconds before he pulls back with another groan, whipping Ilya with the dishcloth he’s holding. “Right way up.”

“Maybe we can call Dr Bridges,” Ilya suggests, yanking the dishcloth from Shane’s hand to take over. He wipes the counter slowly. “She can fix us—“

“That isn’t for the counters—“

Ilya keeps wiping the counter. “Is a loophole.”

That does the trick, a probably lovesick grin spreading over Shane’s face at the stupid inside joke. He aims for stern, but his words come out soft around the edges, “How is that a loophole?”

Ilya shrugs. “Just is.”

“You don’t even know.”

“Loophole, because if you take all that time to find different cloth, we will miss our therapy airing.” Ilya straightens back up, shrugging. “Is a shame.”

They had run so far with the loophole thing that, half the time, it didn’t even make sense. But it was still a trump card they both enjoyed pulling.

“How long?” Shane asks, tugging the dishcloth back from Ilya to throw it in the sink.

“Ten minutes,” Ilya says, leaning back against the counter lazily.

They’d debated watching at all, but eventually they’d decided they couldn’t miss it. It was a big part of their story, no matter how embarrassing it was about to be. Shane’s pretty sure he’d been a babbling mess in those first couple of sessions. He might have to watch that from behind a cushion, but he’d be there.

“Maybe this can be our next TV appearance,” Shane says, tugging Ilya toward him. Ilya’s hands fall to his waist, gripping his hips as he pushes him back against the counter. He presses a hot kiss to his neck, and Shane’s breath hitches.

“What can?” Ilya murmurs against his ear.

“Couples therapy about you being terrible at cleaning.”

Ilya snorts against his neck, pulling his head back, looking at him seriously when he says, “I know a very good couples therapist.”

Shane hums. “Really?”

Ilya nods. “She is very good at loopholes.”

End Notes

thanks for reading <3

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