

## The Backup Plan

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# The Backup Plan

by [Soncasong](#)

## Summary

In which Shane's concussion is bundled with a career-ending leg injury, forcing him to give up the thing he had been working his entire life towards. Instead, Shane goes to university, picks a major, gets a roommate, and tries (and fails) to party, eight-years too old for this shit. He really wishes he was playing hockey instead. Ilya follows.

## Notes

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

“You’ll walk,” the doctor said, flipping through his copies of Shane’s x-rays with an expression expertly schooled to be unreadably neutral. He probably had years of experience delivering all kinds of news to all kinds of people, and Shane figured he’d learned how to twitch and shift all the muscles in his face the right way over the years to make this job easier. Or less stressful. Or both. Probably both. The man looked old, maybe forty, maybe more, so he’d got a good two - two? Shane sucked at math - decades of doing this on him. So he was good at it, the whole hiding the news thing, and that made Shane nervous even through the cocktail of painkillers he was hooked on.

His left leg still throbbed. That wasn’t good.

“Yeah, but can he play?” his mom asked, the same question Shane was dying to know the answer to.

The doctor’s face stayed unreadably neutral. “Probably not,” he said. Shane couldn’t tell if the man was being apologetic, or if he was just showing a professional amount of sympathy. “His leg will heal, but it’ll probably never be the same.”

Water. The feeling of his head being pulled underwater, of the world narrowing down to a single, unchangeable, harrowing fact, overtook his body, his mind. He couldn’t breathe. He felt himself collapsing inward, like his entire being was concentrated in a single, pinprick point, a mote of dust in the uncaring expanse of the universe.

He would never be able to play hockey again. Shane’s life shattered before his eyes.

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Ilya visited when Shane was in the middle of wishing that the doctors had upped his medication to the point where the world would stop making sense for a little bit. They did give him some pain meds, and he was feeling pleasantly not himself, he just wished he had... more. It was nice to see Ilya. It wasn’t nice to know what Ilya was going to ask him next.

“Are you okay?” Ilya asked. He ran a finger up Shane’s cheek, so gentle and tender that it hurt, somehow.

Shane giggled. There was nothing funny about what he had to tell Ilya. “No,” Shane said, his voice sounding light and airy and so, so far away, “I’m never playing hockey again.”

Ilya’s jaw clenched. That meant something, Shane knew that from the years and years and years of the two of them orbiting around each other, caught up in their...*everything*, but he still couldn’t really untangle what it specifically meant. Ilya might be angry. Ilya might be sad. Ilya might be horny, though Shane doubted that last one.

“I...” Ilya began. He trailed off like he was struggling with his search for the right English to express what he wanted to say. He settled for, “I’m sorry.”

Shane laughed. It didn't sound like a laugh. "You, my parents, my doctors, my teammates, everyone's sorry," Shane said. Then he cried, because of course he cried, of course he embarrassed himself in front of Ilya and made everything so...so *real*. Ilya being here felt final, somehow, because Shane's brain had decided that none of it was real, that his injury hadn't been that bad and that his parents and doctors and teammates were all lying to him because he'd been lying to them for all this time, so none of it was real.

None of it was real until Ilya made it real.

Shane had always been the kind of person who knew exactly what he was going to do tomorrow. Wake up, play hockey, eat, sleep, repeat.

Now he could no longer count on that stability. Now his entire life had been derailed. Shane didn't really know what to do with himself anymore. His feelings were entering territory he no longer had words to describe, and they felt too big, too clunky and overwhelming in his chest. He wanted them to go away. Maybe Ilya could help them go away.

"Can I...can I have a hug, please?" Shane asked. He hoped it was polite enough for Ilya, even through the tears and the snot.

It might've been, but Shane never got to find out. A nurse stepped in, probably because the machine next to him was being obnoxiously loud now and nothing was really helping, not really, and Ilya was going to leave. Shane understood why. He really did. It still sucked.

Ilya's jaw clenched again. He said something to the nurse, something quiet that Shane might've been able to hear if he wasn't so busy falling apart. Again. He hated falling apart. And he hated that he was doing it in front of Ilya.

"Get well soon," Ilya said. He squeezed Shane's hand. Then he left.

Yeah. Shane's life was over. Really, *really* over.

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His parents visited him often. It was what parents were supposed to do, but Shane could also see how frazzled both of them were. Especially his mom. The moment Shane had decided to tie his future to hockey was the moment she had decided to make it her life's goal to support him the whole way there. Or maybe that had always been her life goal, but it had been caught up in all the brand deals and sponsorships and contracts and the line between mom and manager had blurred until there was no longer a distinction between the two, not really. And now she looked just as lost as he was.

"Rolex is still interested in having you be their model," she said kindly, trying to cobble together a plan out of the rubble of Shane's life. "And you've got all that property you've invested in. You don't have to worry about money, at least."

She wasn't a miracle worker. She couldn't conjure stability out of debris. No one could. Shane wished he hadn't been so stupid, that he had paid attention to the angles, to where he was going, so he didn't have to have this conversation about a future where the one constant of his life was being yanked out from under him. He wished he had foresight. He wished that he had been careful. He wished the injury could've happened any other way. He wished for many, many things.

But that was a lot to put into words. Instead, Shane just said, "Okay."

He wanted Ilya.

"We'll figure it out, honey," his mom said, "You're still young. You've got your whole life ahead of you."

"Most hockey players retire in their forties. I'm barely twenty-five," Shane said flatly. Anything beyond that was too much energy for him to muster up right now.

His mom didn't have anything to say. That wasn't good.

Shane kept going. "I don't even know what I'm supposed to do. Just...just a week ago, I...I *knew*. I knew where I would be in the morning, in the afternoon, at night, and that it would be the same, it would be *predictable*, but now I..." Now he didn't know. And he hated feeling like he didn't know.

His dad spoke up, "What about university?"

What? "University?"

"David," his mom whispered, "I don't know...maybe he could coach?"

The thought of only being able to watch other people play on the sidelines and not being on the ice himself made Shane a little nauseous.

"It's not a bad idea," his dad said, "It'll be something to do. It'll let Shane explore other interests. And it's quite the experience."

Shane had no...interest, heh, in exploring other interests, but he also didn't want to deal with the fact that he was no longer able to engage with his one true calling like he could before. Shane glanced at his booted leg sadly. The stupid limb that cost him his life. Maybe he should just hack it off as punishment for ruining hockey. But that would be a lot of change all at once, and Shane would like to just deal with a normal amount of major life changes, please. University would be a change, but he knew it would be structure, too. Shane liked structure. He was never good at school, but he liked the steadiness of the routine, the way he could take the same path to the same classes five days a week and know exactly what he would be doing from eight-thirty to three. Maybe he could use that for another four years. Delay some of those major life changes for later.

"Okay, I think...I think I'll do university," Shane said.

His mom seemed surprised. "Yeah? You sure, honey?"

Shane nodded. “Yes. I’m sure.”

Ilya called that night, after his game, thirty minutes before Shane’s concussion-mandated bed time. Boston versus Ottawa. The Raiders probably won – Kirigan and Finley were good defenders, but they both had weak offsites that Ilya was notorious for exploiting, and their goalie was playing off the tailend of the world’s messiest, most public divorce. Shane didn’t know how the game actually went. He couldn’t bring himself to look at anything hockey related right now. But Ilya won. That, Shane knew by instinct.

“Shane?” Not Hollander. Shane. “Are you alright?”

“Kind of? Maybe? I don’t know,” Shane said, “I was talking to my parents about what I’m gonna do after...well, after.”

“Oh. Okay,” Ilya replied. “What is the plan, then? Are you going into coaching? Or...what’s the word, the charity thing?”

“I don’t think I can stomach coaching right now,” Shane said, “And I kinda feel like a charity case, so...No, I’m gonna go to uni.”

A beat. Then Ilya said, “Why would you subject yourself to that? You’ll be full eight years older than classmates. And college is so boring.”

Shane chuckled. “Uni. I know, Ilya. I just...I think the routine will be good for me. And it’ll give me more time to think about what I’m going to do without...you know...”

“Ah. So you are running away from problems by hanging out with teenagers.”

“Ilya!” He wasn’t wrong, but Shane would really appreciate it if Ilya would keep the quiet part to himself. But that wasn’t really Ilya, was it? Even when the two of them hadn’t really figured out what...*this* was, Ilya had always been so silently loud in what he wanted.

They probably should also talk about *this*, about Rozanov becoming Ilya and Hollander becoming Shane, about the set of Ilya’s jaw as he saw Shane hooked up to three different machines in a hospital bed. Yeah, they should talk about it, but this felt important. Like something they needed to talk about in person. It felt like something that would change what they were, and Shane wasn’t ready for more change in his life. Not yet.

“What are you even going to study?” Ilya asked.

“I dunno,” Shane said. He hadn’t really figured that part out yet. “Maybe...film? I like movies. Rose does movies.”

He could hear Ilya rolling his eyes on the other end of the line. “Holy shit, Shane, you are not considering your college major based on your ex’s career.”

“It’s not like I can major in fucking hockey,” Shane said.

“Oh, so I’m ex now?”

“I never said that,” Shane said, “Besides, I think I’d like it. There’s this...there’s this cottage I have, and it’s gorgeous in the summer and...I dunno, I thought maybe I could do those nature documentary type stuff. Film the loons around the lake.”

“What is loon?”

“It’s a waterbird.”

“Ah,” Ilya said, “So you are going to go from MLH star whose career was cut tragically short to...waterfowl film student?”

“Fuck you,” Shane huffed. Then he went quiet. Maybe Ilya was right. Maybe this was a stupid idea and Shane was about to waste four years of his life for absolutely no reason at all.

“Do you think it’ll help you?” Ilya asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe. Yes,” Shane said, “I think I...I think I just need something consistent in my life.”

Ilya hummed. The line went silent, save for the even rise and fall of Ilya’s breathing on the other side. This was probably awkward and probably weird and Shane should probably hang up before it got more awkward and more weird. But Shane didn’t want to. If he closed his eyes, he could pretend that Ilya was here, next to him, and that felt...nice.

“Hockey is fucking boring without you,” Ilya said quietly, “Everyone else either sucks or is fossil. I miss seeing you on the ice, Shane.”

Shane’s breath hitched. “I miss it too.”

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Scott Hunter, one of the two players Ilya loved to hate the most in the league, came out in the cutest, most public way possible.

Shane would be lying if he said he didn’t wish that was him. The hockey. The cup. The boyfriend. All of it.

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There were two weeks left before Shane’s first day of school and he was pacing in his living room, willing Ilya to pick up his stupid phone. He’d read the articles. They had been the only hockey-related media he’d consumed in the past five months. And he really, *really* needed to talk to Ilya.

“Hello?”

Ilya. *Finally*. “Why didn’t you pick up?”

“Sorry,” Ilya said, “Dealing with media shitstorm right now. My agent wants to kill me.”

“As he should,” Shane said, “What do you mean you’re taking a hiatus from hockey?”

“It means I’m taking a break,” Ilya said, all matter-of-fact and a little mocking, “I am pursuing higher education. Very self-improvement, *da?*”

“Fuck you,” Shane chirped, but there was no heat behind it, “Why did I read in three different tabloids that you’re going to Yates?”

“Because I am going to Yates,” Ilya said, like it was the simplest thing in the entire world.

“But *I’m* going to Yates,” Shane said. He paced the room – ten steps, deep breath, then another ten – but it didn’t help. “Fuck, Ilya, what’s going on?”

“Nothing.”

Shane was generally not that good at reading people, but this was definitely *not* nothing.

“*Ilya.*”

Ilya sighed. “Remember what I said? That hockey is fucking boring without you? I...was staring down a season with you gone and I...I couldn’t do it.”

Shane froze. “Ilya, are you telling me you’re throwing away your career, at your prime, because...because of *me?*”

“It sounds bad when you put it like that.”

“It is!” Shane said, “I...I didn’t get to *choose* this. Well, I *did*, but you...you know what I mean.” He suddenly fixated on how his gait was just slightly uneven as he was pacing his room, like it had been ever since he took off his boot, like it would be forever. Shane hated his own stupid fragile body.

“You...you get to choose,” Shane said softly, “It’s...it’s a lot of pressure that you’re choosing me.”

“I’m not choosing you,” Ilya said. Shane found that hard to believe. “Hockey is not forever. Maybe I want to get to my thirties without another fucking concussion. Maybe I want to do something else while I still have the time. The visa is nice, too.”

Shane sighed. His legs were starting to feel like jello, and he’d really like to stop thinking about his legs right now. “Ilya, what the hell are we doing?”

“School.”

Well, obviously. But Ilya didn't have to pick Shane's school. Yates was a no name private in upstate New York that barely broke the top 50 of American universities and wasn't even a blip internationally. If Ilya really wanted to do the higher education thing, there were so many better universities he could have picked. This felt significant in a way that Shane wasn't sure he was ready to deal with. This felt...this felt grand. And romantic. And way, *way* out of left field for the two of them.

Shane didn't know what to say. So he said, "I miss you."

Ilya took a sharp breath. "I'll see you in two weeks, Shane."

Shane nodded, which was silly because Ilya couldn't even see him. "Okay," he said.

"Okay."

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Shane tried his best to power through orientation. There were a lot of people, and some of them were uniformed in green and way too perky for absolutely no reason, and people recognized him. Most of them left him alone. Some of them didn't. He'd signed a lot of autographs today when all he really wanted to do was figure out how to get to his classes and drop his stuff off in his dorm. His parents had wanted to come. Shane begged them not to. Shane was nearly a decade older than most of his classmates - Ilya's words - and didn't need to have his parents help him with moving his stuff in when he'd spent the better part of his twenties on the road away from home. His parents had acquiesced. Just.

He managed to run into Ilya once.

"Shane," Ilya had called out, "Have you done circle cheer thingie?"

Shane blinked once, twice, three times, handing over the astronomy notebook he had just signed to the starstruck student he was just talking to. The guy did the double take when he saw Ilya, then he bolted. Huh. Felt kinda nice that he was the one giving away his signature and not Ilya, but just a little.

"Hey," Shane said, "Um...is it...is it okay for you to be seen with me?"

"What, is it fucking crime for me to be seen with fellow classmate on first day of school?" Ilya asked.

"...No," Shane said, "But isn't...we've got...wouldn't people *talk*?"

Ilya shrugged. "Maybe. Let them."

"What are you even studying, Ilya?" Shane asked. He shuffled awkwardly, favoring his good right foot.

“Business and economics,” Ilya said, “Might be good to help out with your real estate fetish, *da?*”

What? Did Ilya choose his major because of...because of Shane? Was Ilya implying what Shane thought he was implying? No. He couldn't be. Because they hadn't *talked* about it, which meant that it wasn't true. No matter how much Shane wanted it to be true.

Shane forced himself to chuckle like Ilya had made a really funny joke.

“Can I meet you later?” Ilya asked, voice low and quiet and intimate.

Shane shook his head. “Uh, I'm in the dorms. With a...with a roommate. So I won't be able to...you know.”

“Shane, why are you in fucking dorm rooms, sharing showers with disgusting teenagers, when you have the money to get your own place?” Ilya asked, incredulous.

Shane blushed. He hadn't really thought about that. “Uh, I just thought this was what I'm *supposed* to do. The whole dorm thing.”

“Shane, you are literal millionaire,” Ilya said.

Shane blushed harder. “I fucking know! I just...I thought...”

Ilya sighed. “Is okay. I got private by myself place off campus. Will text you address later. Have you done weird culty orientation circle thing yet?”

“Uh...not yet. I don't think mine is for another twenty minutes,” Shane said. It was actually in twenty-five minutes. Shane preferred to give himself five extra minutes of travel time. He'd memorized his itinerary today, just to make sure nothing caught him by surprise, and he was planning on following it meticulously. But Shane could always make room for Ilya.

“It sucks. Very strange and loud,” Ilya said, “Do you want me to come with you to yours?”

It was a kind offer. Shane considered it, but he remembered that they were still two high-profile hockey players. Well, former hockey players. The eyes of the public were still trained on them, especially with Ilya abruptly pausing his career at the same time Shane's was ended. There was speculation. Shane had seen some of it before he decided that he should just delete all his social media and not give himself an anxiety spiral before he started his university experience. He spiraled anyway. And he could feel the start of another one now, the tightness in his chest, the feeling of too many eyes on him all at once, the way the world seemed to be narrowing in on him.

He pushed through it. “No,” Shane said, hoping he didn't sound scared, or mean, or false. “I'll be fine.”

“You sure?”

Shane nodded. Then he fled.

The orientation was just as loud and strange and culty as Ilya claimed. The nice thing about being a hockey player was that there were still people out there who did not care about the sport and did not see Shane as anything other than a guy that was a little too old to be starting his uni career. There was one student in his orientation circle, a muscly jock type, who started whispering furiously to the blonde girl beside him the moment Shane sat down, and then the two of them kept glancing over at him, but no one else really cared about Shane.

Well, at least not until his orientation leaders, with their too-green t-shirts and too-bright smiles, began the icebreakers. The first one, a tiny girl with her hair done in pigtails, said – no, shouted, “Hi, I’m Tina! And this is how I NSO!” Then she did a little dance. Was Shane going to be asked to do a little dance too?

“Hi, I’m Tommy! And this is how I NSO!” Tina’s lanky partner in crime shouted. Then he also did a little dance. Shane fought the instinct to scowl, because it would be rude to scowl.

Tina then began talking in her too-fast, too-sweet voice. “So we know that having to do your NSO is a little intimidating, so we’re not gonna make you all do your own NSOs like the other NSO leaders. We’re cool like that.” She high-fived Tommy. “So let’s just do introductions! Name, major if you have one, and a fun fact! Who wants to start?”

No one said anything.

“I can start! My name is Tommy,” said Tommy, who already introduced his name to them two seconds ago, “My major is art history and for my fun fact...I’m a Scorpio.” Tommy pointed to the scary-looking girl with black lipstick and thick eyeliner sitting next to him and said, “And you’re next! We’ll go around the circle. And you all better pay attention. There’s gonna be a pop quiz at the end!”

Shane gulped. He paid attention.

Isobel. Computer science. Hates her dad. Bhryhttknee (pronounced Britney). Marketing. Has a fiancé. Kyle. Business. Wants to rush the frats. Gheorghe. Agriculture. From Romania. Hector. Mechanical engineering. Boxes for fun. Rinko. History. Knits in her free time. Paul Baker. Undeclared. Loves soup.

Then it was his turn. “Uh, Shane,” Shane said, just a few seconds later than he was supposed to. He tried his best not to retract back into his shell. “Film. I...” he blanked on his fun fact, realizing that he had been so focused on remembering everybody’s names, before remembering that he had lived an entire career before this. “I played professional hockey.”

Everyone stared at him. Shane tried his best to avoid the eye contact, but there were just too many pairs of eyeballs for him to look somewhere else without seeming weird.

“Holy shit. You *are* Shane Hollander. I thought you were, but I wasn't sure,” Kyle-business-wants-to-rush-the-frats said, “Montreal Metros Shane Hollander. Shit, I...I’m sorry about the leg.”

“It’s okay.” It wasn’t. But Kyle-business-wants-to-rush-the-frats didn’t need to know that.

The guy who was supposed to go next gasped excitedly. “Wait, I think you’re gonna be my roommate. That’s awesome.”

“Could you introduce yourself?” Shane asked. Someone coughed. Shane knew he was being awkward again. But he really needed these last two to go so he could pass his first college quiz before he started forgetting these people’s names, majors, and fun facts.

“Oh, right. Hi, I’m Benny,” his maybe-roommate said, “My major’s business and I...I played football in high school. State champs, baby!”

Kyle-business-wants-to-rush-the-frats whooped, but no one else reacted to Benny-business-high-school-football’s little cheer. It was awkward again, but at least this time it wasn’t Shane’s fault. He started at the last person in their circle, a small girl with straight cut bangs, until she finally decided to start.

“I’m Carmen. My major’s English. And I...really like playing video games, I guess.”

Tina and Tommy clapped and cheered. “Yay, we did it!” Tina said, “Now who’s ready to take a tour of campus and then get some dining hall food?”

Shane raised his hand.

“Yes, Shane?” Tommy called.

“Are we gonna have that quiz now?” Shane asked.

Tommy laughed. “What? No, silly, I was joking! You’re hilarious.”

Oh. Shane put his hand down. He glanced around the circle, realized that he had spent a ton of energy memorizing all of these people’s names for nothing, and wished he had taken up Ilya’s offer from earlier. This would be so much easier with Ilya here.

As Tina and Tommy began herding them on their campus tour, Benny – Shane couldn’t forget anyone’s name now that he’d spent so much effort on searing them into his brain – came up to him.

“Hi. Benny,” Benny said.

Shane nodded. “Yeah. Business. High school football champ.”

Benny flushed. He was tall, maybe a smidge taller than Shane, with a boyish face and the bulky football muscles that reminded Shane of enforcers on the ice. “You remembered.”

“Thought there would be a test,” Shane muttered.

Benny chuckled. “I – I’m your roommate. Missed you earlier when I was moving in.”

Shane nodded. “Yeah. Sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologize,” Benny said, “But, uh, listen. My sister’s boyfriend says there’s like a party they’re throwing tonight and it’s like...important for freshmen to, you know, *do* stuff, and uh...you wanna go? You know, like roomie bonding?”

Shane supposed partying was part of the university experience, too. “Sure,” he said. Then, a beat too late, he added, “Could I invite someone?”

“Yeah!” Benny replied, “Oooh, this is awesome. We’re gonna have a great year.”

Shane smiled, because he was pretty sure that was what he was supposed to do. Then he texted Ilya.

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It was way past his bedtime. But Benny had said that parties didn’t start until almost midnight, and that they had to do something called a pregame before they could go. Shane had followed along, because he didn’t really know what any of this meant, and ended up wishing that the vodka he had drank with Benny in their dorm room had been ginger ale instead. Ilya would probably complain about how shitty this vodka was. Shane missed Ilya. Good thing Ilya was going to be at this party, too. So was Carmen-English-plays-video-games, who Benny also invited along. Shane didn’t really know what to think of her yet.

The three of them ran into Ilya a block away from the party, with Ilya taking stock of Benny with undisguised judgment. He had clicked his tongue and whispered in Shane’s ear, “So you leave me for eighteen year old American with butt chin and short girlfriend?”

Shane shoved him. Ilya cackled. Benny and Carmen seemed confused.

They arrived at the house, an older building bursting at the seams with drunk uni students and loud bass music. A wiry guy with a patchy mustache and goatee answered the door.

“Bento! My guy!” he said.

“Peter!” Benny replied. The two of them did an elaborate ritual of hand movements, hugs, and grunts that felt very, *very* performative.

Peter’s smile twitched when he spotted Shane and Ilya. “Bento,” he said, his tone different from before, “What’s with this ratio, man?”

“Huh?” Benny said.

“One chick and three dudes? C’mon. *C’mon*, ” Peter said.

“I can text my roommate,” Carmen offered, “She’s with this group of girls and they all, like, *really* want to go out tonight.”

Shane didn’t really understand what was going on. But Ilya did.

“Are you threatened by presence of other men at your pathetic college party?” Ilya said.

Peter made some weird soundless hand motions Shane didn’t understand. He liked to talk with his hands a lot.

Ilya’s jaw twitched in that way it did when he was about to absolutely go in on some poor person. “Do you think Hollander and I would be interested in some girls who can’t legally get themselves into a club and have to resort to drinking cheap booze in a moldy townhouse? I have fucked women whose bank accounts have more digits than your cock has inches, and Shane dated Rose *fucking* Landry. If we wanted to get drunk, we can just go and do it, and with much nicer booze too.”

Ilya paused, took a breath, and kept going before Peter could say anything. “The only reason we are here is because Shane thinks he needs to drink with fuckass teenagers to have college experience. So are you going to let two-time Stanley Cup winning captain have fucking college experience or not? Or are you scared that we will get more attention than you?”

Peter didn’t say anything. Benny didn’t say anything. Carmen didn’t say anything. No one said anything.

Ilya nodded. “Okay. Shane, let’s go.”

Ilya stomped away. Shane awkwardly waved at Benny and Carmen. “Uh. Bye.”

“I...I’ll see you back at the dorm?” Benny said.

Shane nodded, because that was what he was supposed to do. But he had a feeling he was just going to end up wherever Ilya took him tonight.

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Shane ended up back in Ilya’s apartment. It was nice, the kind of upscale of somebody who could afford much better but didn’t have options, so they settled for the best they could get. There was good water pressure and an aircon system and an actual, functioning kitchen. When Shane opened the fridge, he found it stocked with ginger ale and ingredients that matched his macrobiotic diet.

“Ilya,” Shane said quietly, “You didn’t have to.”

Ilya shrugged. “You probably do not have access to your gross food in college cafeteria. Is no big deal.”

Shane kissed Ilya about it. Shane did a lot of *other* stuff to Ilya about it.

Later, when Shane was deliciously sore and naked in bed with Ilya, Shane quietly asked, “What are we doing?”

“We are going to school at shithole mid rate university when we both know we can do better,” Ilya muttered, pressing a soft kiss to the top of Shane’s head.

“Ilya...fuck,” Shane huffed. He sighed, counted to five in his head, and said, “Can we be honest? For...for just a minute? While we’re here.”

“...Sure,” Ilya said.

Shane took another deep breath and counted to five again. He snuggled closer to Ilya, just in case what he was about to say would cause the other man to leave him forever. “I like you,” Shane said.

Ilya hummed. “I like you too.”

That didn’t feel right. That didn’t feel...it didn’t feel enough. Shane turned, burying his face into the crook of Ilya’s neck, and breathed in the other man’s scent. Pine, musk, the lightest hint of expensive cologne. He counted to five one more time. Exhaled. Counted to five again.

“I love you,” Shane whispered into Ilya’s skin. He felt Ilya’s neck bobbed as he gulped, as he processed the secret truth Shane had just voiced into reality.

“I love you, too,” Ilya said.

Shane pulled back to look, really *look*, into Ilya’s eyes. They were so blue, shining with something fond and smitten and vulnerable, and Shane swallowed back the confirmation starting to take shape on his throat. He didn’t have to ask Ilya if he was sure. He didn’t need to have Ilya confirm that he wasn’t mistaken. For once, Shane knew, really *knew*, that Ilya meant what he said.

His heart felt like it was about to burst, but in a good way. He pulled Ilya closer. “I can’t believe you left hockey for me.”

“Worth it,” Ilya said, “We’re being honest, yes? You are worth it. Every time.”

Shane kissed Ilya. Then he kissed Ilya again. And again. And again.

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“Where were you last night?” Benny asked Shane as Shane was gathering his books for his first round of classes.

Shane’s throat tightened the way it always did when he knew he was about to lie. “Out.”

“Oh. Okay, me too,” Benny said. He fidgeted with the cuffs of his button up.

“Oh, cool,” Shane said.

“Yeah. Cool.”

“I’ll probably be out again tonight,” Shane said, just so Benny wouldn’t worry about him or something. It felt like the correct, polite thing to let his roommate know about.

“Ok. Cool.”

“Cool.”

---

Five minutes before Shane’s intro to film class was about to start, Benny stormed into the class, spotted the empty seat next to Shane, and plopped himself down in it.

“I didn’t know you had this class,” Shane said.

“I don’t,” Benny replied. The handsome doe-eyed guy in front of them turned around to wave at Benny. Benny waved back with a dopey smile on his face.

Oh? Oh. *Oh.*

Was Benny like...like Shane? Should Shane say something about it? Shane should say something about it, for the community of it all. The only other gay person Shane knew was Scott Hunter, but he thought of Scott more as a hockey player than a gay man he could have camaraderie with. And they also had that fight that kinda made every interaction they’ve had since a little awkward. But he didn’t know if he was allowed to ask Benny, if he was even correct in his assumptions, even if Benny was looking at the other boy with the same twinkling eyes that Ilya had when he looked at Shane. Shane should probably keep this to himself.

Their professor, a portly man who carried himself with an obscene amount of pride named Dr. Murphy, began class by asking everyone what their favorite movie was. Most of the male students replied with *The Godfather*. Any other answer was picked apart by their professor. Benny seemed to have noticed this, because he also replied with *The Godfather*.

Then it was Shane’s turn. He knew there was a right answer, one that would get the spotlight off him, but it would also not be an honest answer, and Shane didn’t like lying. With the same voice he once used for his press interviews, Shane said, “*Brokeback Mountain.*”

Silence.

Before Dr. Murphy could ask another condescension disguised as a question, Shane barrelled ahead. “Had lots of time to watch movies on the road. I like *X Squad* too, but that’s because my friend’s in it.”

Dr. Murphy nodded and moved on to the next student, who also answered with *The Godfather*. Somehow, Shane had avoided the man’s judgment, but he didn’t know exactly

how. Maybe he had so adequately humiliated himself that Dr. Murphy didn't feel the need to put him down further. Maybe Dr. Murphy liked *Brokeback Mountain*.

"You...you like *Brokeback Mountain*?" Benny whispered to Shane as Dr. Murphy kept going down the line.

"Yeah," Shane said, "Is that...a problem?"

"No!" Benny said, loud enough that they got some dirty looks from the other students. He made a gesture that was probably apologetic before lowering his voice a few decibels, "No. I've just never seen it. Is it...um..."

"It's good," Shane said. He did not elaborate.

"Cool. You know, my favorite movie's actually not *The Godfather*," Benny admitted, "It's *Jennifer's Body*."

"Oh. Cool," Shane hadn't watched that one yet, but Jackie really liked it. "Why didn't you say that?"

Benny jerked his head in the direction of their professor. "He seemed pretty judgy of everyone who listed something that wasn't *The Godfather*, so..."

Shane chuckled softly. "That's an understatement."

Benny ignored the dirty look Dr. Murphy was throwing them "Wanna do a roomie watch of it one day?" Benny asked, "And *Brokeback Mountain*, too?"

"Sure," Shane said, "If I'm around." He did not plan to be, not with Ilya warm and safe and inviting in his private apartment, but maybe one day Shane could indulge Benny.

---

"Hey, Ilya?" Shane called out from where he was bundled on Ilya's couch, his laptop open and warm in his lap as his unfinished homework stared him down. He'd spent exactly forty-five minutes on his readings, and now it was time for his fifteen minute break before he dove back in for another forty-five minutes.

"Yes, Shane?" Ilya replied from where he was working on the math homework bundled into his economics major.

"I...what do you think about...nevermind, it's a stupid idea," Shane muttered, psyching himself out before he could even finish his sentence.

"Shane," Ilya said, gesturing to his apartment, "This is safe. Be honest."

"I think I'd like to not hide this anymore," Shane said, and it felt like he was giving power to something dangerous. It had been less than a week since he and Ilya finally admitted they loved each other, and now Shane was suggesting that they go public. It was such a stupid idea. Shane might be retired, and Ilya might be on break, but that didn't mean there weren't eyes on them. Shane was literally doing a photoshoot with Reebok and an interview with the New Yorker this weekend. Ilya was still dealing with the media firestorm that followed in the wake of his break. They should not be this brazen, not yet. It would be such a bad idea.

"Oh. Sure," Ilya said, "It's not bad idea. I think I'd like world to know that Shane Hollander is mine."

Shane gawked. "Wait, really?"

"Yes, fucking hell, Shane, really," Ilya said, "I would be surprised no one has already figured it out, considering my very public break and very public enrollment in the college you are attending."

"But...would it be...you know, safe for you?" Shane asked.

"Probably not. But I got student visa," Ilya said, "Nothing left for me in Russia anyways. And I was thinking...you could use someone to help with finances for your real estate fetish, *da*? I could maybe do that and get work visa, or...well, four years is fucking long time to figure things out."

"Wow..." Shane muttered, "Okay. *Okay*. Fuck it, let's do it, but I want my parents to know first before we like...tell the world."

"Okay," Ilya said. He shifted slightly, like he was a little nervous now, before saying, "When are you seeing them again?"

"In November," Shane said, "So I guess we've gotta keep this under wraps until then, huh?"

Ilya dramatically groaned. "Fuck no! Is too long. I wanted to dress up in disgusting cute couples costume with you for Halloween. We could be gay cowboys from that movie you like. *Bareback Mountain*."

"*Brokeback Mountain*," Shane corrected, even though Ilya was smug, like he turned the title of the movie into something crass on purpose. "I mean...I can text them?"

"Yes!" Ilya cheered, "I will start looking for gay cowboy outfits for both of us. You want slutty or accurate?"

"Accurate," Shane said automatically, but he realized that it was way too early to be thinking about Halloween. "Ilya, it's September."

"Yes, perfect time to start Halloween shopping. Before rush. Don't be fucking boring, Shane," Ilya said, "Also, there is tailgate thing happening tomorrow, some sort of party with teenagers day drinking and people who peaked in college coming back here to be sad. We should go. Do that thing. Soft launch or something."

Shane chuckled. “Ilya, you want us to soft launch tomorrow at a university tailgate? What would that even look like?”

Ilya shrugged. “Me, you, hanging out together like friends, maybe? I don’t think we can kiss, but we can prepare people for idea of us together by being, uh, together.”

“It’s not a bad idea,” Shane said. The timer on his phone began going off. Oh, his fifteen minutes were up. He needed to get back to his work. “Hold on, Ilya, I’ll get back to you in forty-five?”

Ilya rolled his eyes. “Fucking nerd,” he huffed, but he did not bother Shane. Shane appreciated that.

---

The tailgate was loud. Really loud. There were also a lot of people, students mingling with alumni who looked way too old to be hanging out in this crowd – kinda like Shane and Ilya – as the smell of booze and other illicit substances wafted through the air. Shane was pretty sure he passed a few middle aged dads doing a keg stand in one of the tents, and in another tent there was a group of soccer moms doing lines of coke in broad daylight while a wet t-shirt contest happened a few feet away. If this was the university experience, then Shane was starting to be a little worried about what his parents were up to while they went to school. He wondered if this was even allowed. Not even school-rules allowed, legal allowed. Ilya was chewing on his nicotine gum and silently judging the debacle with a vaguely smug, vaguely annoyed look on his face.

“This is most pathetic fucking thing I’ve seen in my life,” Ilya muttered into Shane’s ear, “And I’ve played hockey against Hayden Pike.”

“Fuck you, Hayden’s a good friend. Literally called me last night to ask how I was doing,” Shane said.

“While I was sucking your cock, yes,” Ilya said.

Shane gasped. He wanted to reach out and pull Ilya into a headlock, but that would probably turn this soft launch into a hard launch and Shane wasn’t going to push it that far yet. “Ilya, fuck! We’re in public!”

“Yes. Am aware,” Ilya said. They had been flagged down at three times already for autographs, and that wasn’t counting all the staring that Shane had stopped trying to keep track of ever since they had shown up to this tailgate. Rozanov and Hollander, hockey’s greatest rivals, hanging out together at an unsanctioned university event. It would probably make headlines by the end of the hour, but Shane wasn’t on social media anymore. For his own sake.

He took a sip of his ginger ale, poured into a red solo cup so he could look like he was participating in the festivities without actually participating. “I think I saw street hockey somewhere.”

Ilya made a face. “Street hockey is just hockey without any skill. It is shitty and disgusting imitation of sport.”

“I dunno, do you think I’ve still got it in me to play a few rounds?” Shane said, trying not to think about his uneven gait and his bad leg.

“Of course,” Ilya said, “Even if you are cripple you would still score beautiful goals and run circles around these teenagers. And I would help. Together we can make them regret life decisions.”

“You’re fucking evil,” Shane said, “Let’s go look for street hockey.”

They wandered around the tailgate a little bit more, trying to find the elusive street hockey Shane had spotted amongst the maze of black and yellow tents. They were stopped by a middle aged man in a Raiders jersey for a quick selfie with Ilya and a pointed comment towards Shane, but Shane dragged Ilya away before the other man could start a brawl with the rude fan. They weaved through the local acapella group belting out a rendition of some Taylor Swift song and almost got pulled into the improv club’s impromptu performance, but managed to escape before someone offended Ilya with their rendition of a Russian accent. Bhryhttknee-marketing-has-fiancé bumped into them, tried to make out with Ilya, and face planted into the nearest trash can to throw up her breakfast.

Shane took a deep breath in, held for five seconds, and breathed out. Still no street hockey. This tailgate thing was too loud, too smelly, too messy. Shane was about ready to leave, but the thought of potentially getting to wreck some hockey wannabes with Ilya was super tempting, so he powered through.

Ilya tapped his shoulder and pointed over to the local GSA’s table. “Look. Gay people are spinning wheel and giving out condom and lube. We should go get free condom and lube.”

“Do you really want to?” Shane asked, “Don’t we have nicer stuff?”

Ilya considered it. “Yes, you’re right. I should not be tempted by lube just because is free. Probably not even silicone-based, like how you like it. We should skip.”

Shane would usually shy away from Ilya divulging so many intimate details while they were in public, but everyone around them was too inebriated or distracted or both to really listen in. So Shane leaned into the moment. They were soft launching – might be good practice for Shane, when they did the real launch.

“Yep. Only the best for my hole,” Shane said.

Ilya grinned, mischievous and handsome and just a little horny. “You fucking know it.”

Benny and Carmen chose that very moment to manifest from nowhere and butt into their conversation. “Are you two talking about hole?” Carmen asked.

Shane blinked. The beginning of panic began to settle in his chest – how much did they hear? How much did they know? Did Shane just accidentally turn this soft launch into a hard launch because he had decided to be a little silly with Ilya for a moment?

Ily pressed up against Shane, a smidge of pressure as their shoulders touched, before he said, “Yes. Was talking about how hole is goal. Very debaucherous, horny talk. Very college.”

Both Carmen and Benny nodded slowly as they glanced at each other like Ilya was a madman. Thankfully, they chose to ignore Ilya. The pressure in Shane’s chest loosened a little.

“So,” Benny started, “Did you two get your letters for Flesh and Gold?”

“What is this Flesh and Gold shit?” Ilya asked, “Is it cult?”

“Oh, Ilya, it’s that stamped letter thing I showed you the other day. Really fancy paper, wax seal and everything. You got one too, remember?” Shane said.

“Yes. Assumed was fanmail and put in pile to be dealt with during holidays,” Ilya said.

Shane remembered seeing the letter addressed to him slipped under the door of his dorm during one of the rare nights that he had deigned to stay in his shared room with Benny. He also hadn’t opened it, but it was because he liked the way the wax and parchment felt on his fingers and didn’t want to ruin the magic by popping it open. He had assumed it was some sort of new student care thing that the university was doing, since Benny got a letter to, but it seemed like his assumption was off.

“Yeah, you two got invitations to join Flesh and Gold,” Benny said, “It’s this like, super exclusive secret society here at Yates. Everyone who’s everyone is either in there or is connected to it in some way. They have some *crazy* connections, and they only send out their invitations to the most standout freshmen.”

“Stand out how?” Ilya asked, “Because yes, I am very stand out, but Shane is boring.”

“Hey! Fuck you, man,” Shane said, but he could feel that pleased pressure settle on his chest, the one he recognized he got when Ilya was teasing him.

“I mean, you’re both former professional hockey players,” Benny said, “Makes sense. And I got an invitation too, which is *awesome*, but Carmen didn’t get one and I really need her there, so...”

“Tailgate’s the last chance for me to do something to get them to notice me, so I’m gonna go show these guys how good I am at double fisting gallon jugs of beer,” Carmen said, “Wanna come see?”

“No thanks. We’re looking for street hockey,” Shane said.

“Why do you need short girlfriend to be there in secret society?” Ilya asked Benny at the same time. Shane was still pretty sure that Benny wasn’t, well, *straight*, but he was also not the type to wildly speculate or anything like that.

Benny chuckled nervously, making eye contact with Shane. Shane broke it, but Benny stubbornly tracked him. “Oh, you know...nice to have someone familiar there, yeah! But I’m glad you got invited, too. Can’t wait to see you there, Shane.”

Ilya’s eyes narrowed the way it did whenever he got jealous. He opened his mouth, probably to say something rude, so Shane subtly pinched Ilya’s arm before worming his way into the conversation. Ilya yelped. Shane ignored it. He’d make it up to Ilya later.

“Yeah, sure,” Shane said, “Have you two seen where the street hockey is?”

“Oh yeah, it’s back there,” Carmen said, pointing towards the quad where all four of Yates’ libraries faced each other. Why one school needed four libraries, and why all four of those libraries were in the same area, Shane did not know. But he was still grateful to Carmen for the directions.

“Thanks. Good luck with your...binge drinking?” Shane said.

Carmen bounced up to him, in all her five- something glory, and said, “I don’t need luck. See you at the Flesh and Gold meeting.”

Huh. But Shane thought she didn’t even have an invitation.

Later, Shane would find out from Benny that Carmen had set a new campus record for how fast she could drink from two gallon jugs of alcohol, and that she had cut her hands so badly by clapping the glass bottles together that they had to call an ambulance to take her to the hospital. He would also find out that Carmen got an invitation to Flesh and Gold for her little debacle. It was all very dramatic and very unnecessary.

But that was later. Now, Shane was headed to amateur street hockey with Ilya, and he was determined to prove that even if he could not keep up with the pros, he could still run circles around everyone else.

And he did. Shane and Ilya humiliated their opposition. Just like the All Stars game. It was awesome.

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“You look good,” Ilya whispered in Shane’s ear.

“So do you,” Shane whispered back.

“Glad you still stick to training routine instead of developing dad bod like other retired players,” Ilya said.

Shane blushed. He had maintained the same workout schedule he had when he was still playing for the MLH, and Ilya had joined him when they figured out a configuration of gym hours that also fit their class schedules. It meant he was filling out his suit nicely, and Ilya had been very, very appreciative of it.

“You are wasted here,” Ilya muttered, taking a sip of his wine. He frowned. “This tastes like ass.”

“Yeah. I – I’m pretty sure it’s stuff meant to make you drunk, not stuff to be...to be enjoyed,” Shane said.

Ilya scanned the room, staring down the assembled students in their ill-fitting suits and mall dresses as they waited for the Flesh and Gold meeting to start. One girl still had the tag sticking out of the back of her satin dress, the cut of it low and awkward on her back. They were making conversation, but none of the topics matched the sophisticated air they were trying and failing to create. Football matches. Fake ID hunting. Testing help. One guy was talking to another guy about all the STIs he had to test for after he felt something itchy down there. Shane was suddenly reminded of kids playing pretend, mimicking the motions of adulthood without knowing what adulthood truly was. Which was funny, because they were all legally adults, but Ilya and Shane were the only two that could drink, at least in this country. It made no sense to Shane.

“God, this is a fucking...a fucking pastiche,” Ilya muttered. He took another sip of his drink and scowled.

“Pastiche? That’s a new word,” Shane said, “Where’d you learn that?”

“Reading for general education theater class. Very interesting stuff,” Ilya said, “But this is still pastiche. Your suit is tuition for freshman year. My suit is tuition for sophomore year. If they all pawned off their clothes I doubt they would be able to afford watch on your wrist. Pisses me off.”

“Yeah, well, I think this is a good reminder of how much privilege comes with our kind of money,” Shane said.

Ilya hummed. “When revolution comes and you are hunted down for being greedy landlord, I will make sure your pretty neck is not subject to guillotine. Is why I am studying business and economics.”

Shane could not see the correlation there, but Ilya seemed pretty pleased with himself, so he dropped it.

Across the room, Benny was nervously chatting to Carmen about something. The doe-eyed guy with the sharp nose from their film class was here too, and Shane could see Benny try and fail to keep his eyes off the other man. At one point, Benny’s eyes met Shane’s, and he waved. Shane waved back.

Ilya scowled. “I do not like him.”

“Ilya, fuck off. He’s sweet,” Shane said.

Before Ilya could bite back with something wildly inappropriate, the room was suddenly filled with a group of masked students in cheap polyester robes. They circled the waiting prospects, corralling everyone together tighter and tighter until Shane could feel Ilya’s back pressing against his chest. It was a little uncomfortable. Shane took a breath, held it for five seconds, and released it. He wondered what possessed him to even show up to this in the first place.

“Hmmm. This is new,” Ilya said softly.

“Yeah,” Shane muttered, “Kinda culty and weird. I don’t like it.”

“I wasn’t talking about that,” Ilya said. He grinned. Then he grinded his butt against Shane’s crotch.

Oh. *Oh*.

“Shit, *Ilya*,” Shane hissed.

“Huh. This is nice. I kind of like it,” Ilya said, “We should explore this more later.”

Before Shane could tell Ilya off, one of the weird culty people stepped forwards. This one was wearing a second cape over his first cape, and his mask was bigger, more ornate, and shinier than the other masks Shane could see around the room. It was shaped like the head of an eagle, and spray painted to give the impression that it was made of gold, though Shane could tell that the thing was probably styrofoam or papier-mâché. Cheap imitation of luxury, like everything else about this event. It was a pastiche. Ilya had called it exactly what it was.

The man under the mask spoke. No one could understand a word he was saying.

“We can’t hear you!” Carmen called out.

The eagle-mask guy tried talking again. None of his words were intelligible.

“Still can’t hear you,” Carmen said again.

Thank goodness the guy gave up on a third attempt and just peeled the mask off. It was Peter, the jerk from that first-day-of-school party Ilya and Shane skipped out on. Ilya and Shane exchanged a look.

“Is...is he in charge?” Shane whispered.

“I think so,” Ilya replied.

“Huh.”

Peter gave them a speech about tradition and legacy and whatever that Shane tuned out, already pretty sure that this wasn’t really for him or for Ilya. When Peter gave the signal for the girls to be taken away to a different place for their initiation, Shane finally had the room

to back away from Ilya. Ilya had the audacity to whine. Shane resisted the urge to jab him in the backside with his knee. Better to quit now before Ilya gained an even bigger lead.

“Alright boys,” Peter said, something wicked glinting in his eyes, “Drop and give me twenty.”

No one moved.

“Pushups! Twenty pushups!” Peter shouted, “God, are you all stupid or something? I said your fucking initiation fucking starts *now!*”

Everyone around them dropped and started doing pushups in their loose suits and clip-on ties. Shane looked at Ilya. Ilya looked at Shane.

“I’m not sweating in this suit,” Shane said.

“Yes. Me neither. Is Italian,” Ilya said.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

---

His parents were in New York for the weekend, seeing some new Broadway show that was making the pop culture rounds right now that Shane didn’t particularly care about. Yates was just a few hours north of the city, so Shane had asked to meet them and booked a cab there.

The restaurant they were at had ginger ale, which was nice, and were willing to make a few substitutions to their menu to accommodate Shane’s macrobiotic diet. He was cutting into his salmon slice as his mom and dad bombarded him with questions about university.

“How are your classes?” his mom asked.

“Good. Fun,” Shane said. Even if he was a little stuck up, Dr. Murphy was pretty engaging.

“Have you made any friends?” his dad asked.

“My roommate’s nice,” Shane said. Benny was nice, but he’d been weird and distant ever since he got into that Flesh and Gold thing Shane and Ilya had skipped out on. Shane was pretty sure that the two of them weren’t even friends.

“And why is Ilya Rozanov here?” his mom asked. Maybe accused.

Next to him, Ilya waved at his parents between mouthfuls of pasta. “Hi.”

Shane gulped. He had meant to tell his parents about him and Ilya the moment they sat down for lunch, but then he had gotten nervous and put it off until the waiter came around for their drinks orders, then until the waiter came around for the menu, then until the waiter took their

order, then until their food arrived. His parents hadn't really pushed, and Ilya had insisted that Shane be the one to take charge of starting the conversation, but Shane was...he was nervous. Other than Ilya, Rose was the only other person aware of his secret, and Shane didn't really know how to handle the fact that it would just be...out there. For anyone to scrutinize, to judge, to condemn. Shane knew he couldn't control other people's reactions, not his parents, not the public, not the media, but he wished he could. He wished he could just tell everyone to not make a big deal out of his sexuality and they would just listen, but that wasn't how the world worked. Shane knew that. So he delayed instead, delayed until the big blond Russian elephant in the room couldn't be ignored anymore because he was about to finish his penne alla vodka on Shane's parents' bill and Shane's mom had finally called attention to the absurdity of it all.

"Um...I...I need to tell you two something," Shane said.

His mom and dad nodded. "Okay," his mom said, "You know you can tell us anything, honey."

Objectively, Shane knew that. Shane knew that he could tell his parents anything and they would not shun him for it, even if they had opinions they might share with him. But objectively knowing something wasn't the same as actually knowing it, in his heart and his chest and his mind in a way that would chase the anxiety away.

Under the table, Ilya's foot touched Shane's. The barest hint of pressure, safe and grounding. Shane took a deep breath. Counted to five. Exhaled. He kept his eyes trained on his plate.

"I'm gay," Shane said, without any inflection.

His mom's expression changed, going softer than the steady, unwavering neutral that was her default. "Oh, *Shane*. You know that's okay, right? You know your dad and I still love you, no matter what, right?"

Shane nodded. "I'm also dating Ilya."

A beat. Then his dad said, "Yeah. Yeah, that makes sense. That tracks. And that's okay too."

"Woah. Okay, I think a part of me expected that, since he's, you know, *here*, but...just give me a second." His mom folded her hands in her lap, sighed, and reset herself. Shane knew this wasn't a bad thing, but the nagging feeling that he had done something wrong lingered in his chest. His mom shot him a little smile. "I'm not mad, honey. It's just...how long has this been going on?"

Shane looked at Ilya. Ilya looked at Shane. The issue was the majority of their relationship was spent tangled up in sheets in the space between their games, scant and fleeting. It had been just fucking, until it wasn't, and Shane couldn't really tell where it truly began. It felt like he had always been a little bit in love with Ilya, ever since he saw the other man smoking in a smoke-free zone, but saying that they had been dating, that they had been *in love*, since 2008 felt...incorrect.

"Um..."

“Uh...”

“Was it the All Stars game?” his dad asked.

Shane and Ilya floundered.

“Was it the first time you won the Stanley Cup?” his mom asked.

More floundering.

“The first time *he* won the cup?”

“The Olympics?”

“The awards night?”

They fucked at every single one of those events, yes, but Shane couldn’t really pinpoint any of those moments as the point when he fell in love with Ilya.

“Juniors?” his mom said, growing even more incredulous.

Ilya sighed and mumbled, “Uh. Before.”

“Before...” his mom muttered, “Oh my god, Shane, eight years?”

It was more romantic to let his parents believe that. Also he really didn’t like the idea of his parents being aware that he had sex, even though logically he knew that they knew. He just didn’t want to highlight it even further. So Shane dropped the subject there.

“And do you two plan to ever...make this public?” his mom asked.

“Yeah,” Shane said.

Ilya concurred. “We are hard launching on Halloween with matching costume. Will be very cute. Cuter than Scott Hunter and his short little gay boy who took four whole minutes to get on the ice.”

“Okay...do you two want me to arrange something with some publicists? Prep some statements? Get ahead of the press?” his mom asked.

“I think we’ll do it organically,” Ilya said.

“Yeah,” Shane said, “Besides, I’m basically irrelevant anyways.”

“Honey, you’re not!” his mom said.

“No, I am,” Shane said, “Would’ve been, you know, cooler to have been out with Ilya while we were both playing, maybe even play for the same team but...Life didn’t work out like that, right?”

Under the table, Ilya reached for Shane’s hand and squeezed. Shane squeezed back.

“You’re still not irrelevant, Shane,” his dad said.

“Okay. Thanks, dad.”

“One more thing...Ilya?” his mom said, and Shane feared his boyfriend was about to be given the shovel talk right in front of him. “Do you love Shane?”

“Yes,” Ilya said, nearly automatic, like he was tripping over himself to say his confirmation.

“Did you leave your extremely promising hockey career behind so you could be with my son?” his mom accused.

“Mom!” Shane whined. He had to admit he’d wondered the same thing multiple times, but Ilya had never given him a definitive answer to this speculation.

“Yes,” Ilya said.

Shane felt his jaw drop.

“I knew it,” his mom said, “Ilya, *why*? You really gave up hockey for *him*?”

“Thanks mom,” Shane muttered, “Nice to know where I stand in your hierarchy.”

“Yes I did,” Ilya said, his jaw set and stubborn, “And I would do it again.”

He looked at Shane, really *looked*, intense and burning with so much affection it made Shane dizzy. Shane had to look away.

“I do not love hockey the way you two love hockey,” Ilya said, “Is just something I am good at. Something that could help me get away from my family. I pushed myself to improve so I could escape. Different, very different, from your passion. From Shane’s passion.”

Ilya let go of Shane’s hand to reach up and run his fingers through the hairs on the back of Shane’s head. “But I love Shane. I love Shane the way Shane loves hockey.”

Shane had to interrupt. “Ilya, I love you too.”

“Shhh,” Ilya shushed, “Do not worry, I know where I stand with you. Let me make point. I love Shane the way Shane loves hockey. I would always choose Shane over hockey. Always. I’ve never had the chance to make many choices in my life. Not ones that matter. This was chance to do that. To make a choice that matters. To choose what I want. And I want Shane.”

Shane’s heart threatened to melt in his chest. Ilya chose him. *Ilya chose him*. A weight Shane wasn’t aware of before lifted from his chest. He wanted to pounce on Ilya, to press him against the nearest wall and kiss him until the two of them melted into each other and he couldn’t tell where Shane ended and Ilya began. But that wasn’t appropriate for the situation. So Shane looked at Ilya, really *looked*, and hoped that his gaze could communicate all the tender little feelings he couldn’t name jostling to burst out of his chest. A familiar pressure began to build behind his eyes. Shane tried to blink it away.

“...Wow,” his mom said, “Okay. We can talk more about a gameplan for Halloween later. You two get out of here.”

“...Mom?” Shane croaked out, still a little lovestruck by what Ilya had just said.

“You two look like you’re about to jump each other,” his mom said, “So go do that. *Go.*”

“Mom!”

“You’re in love,” his dad added, “That’s a beautiful thing.”

His mom nodded. “And we’re glad, Shane. Ilya. Thank you, both of you, for telling us.”

The pressure behind his eyes threatened to spill over. “Mom...Dad...”

“We love you, Shane,” his parents said.

“I...I love you two too.”

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From the conversations Shane had overheard from the students around him, the chemistry majors, the hosts of this Halloween party, had spiked the drinks with *something*. Shane really didn’t want to know what. But it was making everyone an extra degree of inebriated that was a little uncomfortable to watch. The room felt just a little too warm, and Shane wanted to take off the green flannel he was wearing, but then it would ruin his costume and no one would know that he was matching with Ilya. Today was supposed to be their hard launch. They were going to wait for the moment the DJ played a slow romantic song and kiss in the middle of the dance floor as Jack Twist and Ennis del Mar from *Brokeback Mountain*. Issue was Shane’s Ennis had gone off to find the bathroom five minutes ago and still hadn’t returned. Shane should probably try and find Ilya. Especially since that stupid frat guy, Peter, was at this party and had spotted Shane, looking like he wanted to punch something, and Shane would like to not have a black eye on his hard launch day with Ilya, thanks.

He began muscling his way through the throngs of compromised uni students when he ran into Carmen. Without Benny. Huh. Shane thought that the two of them were connected at the hip. He saw Benny earlier, but they hadn’t really said anything more than their usual greetings to each other either. Did something happen?

“Hi Carmen,” Shane greeted, because it was the polite and correct thing to do.

“Oh, hey Shane,” Carmen said. She looked him up and down, “Huh. Cowboy?”

“Jack Twist,” Shane replied.

Carmen’s face was blank.

“Uh. *Brokeback Mountain*.” Shane said. He also looked Carmen up and down, in her plastic purple dress and bubble braids. “What about you?”

“Don’t worry about it. Just some video game character,” Carmen said, “Where’s the Russian guy you’re always with?”

Knowing that people, non-hockey, non-sports fanatic people, were already associating him with Ilya made Shane’s heart flutter. In a good way. “Ilya’s looking for the bathroom. It’s taking him a while, though.”

“Oh, yeah. That’s because the lines at these parties are always crazy,” Carmen said.

“Why?” Shane asked.

“People...you know...” Carmen said.

Shane didn’t know, but he felt like he should, so he nodded along so Carmen wouldn’t think he was weird or something. “Um, where’s Benny?”

“We’re not really talking,” Carmen muttered, “Thought you’d know, since you’re his roommate.”

Shane shrugged. “He’s been a lot more closed off ever since he joined that *Flesh and Gold* thing. We only really talk about class now.” And Shane had been spending most of his time at Ilya’s apartment, but Carmen didn’t need to know that.

“Oh. I’m sorry,” Carmen said, “But I heard you and Ilya left the moment they started doing the initiation stuff. Good for you. I heard from Benny that it was some gross shit.”

“Yeah. Our suits were too expensive to ruin,” Shane chuckled.

“Okay, look at you with your hockey money,” Carmen said. It was real estate, mostly, but Shane knew people didn’t really like it when he corrected them on tiny details, so he didn’t say anything. Carmen seemed to have spotted someone on the ground, so she quickly excused herself with a, “Gotta go, Shane, but I’ll see you later, okay?”

“Okay,” Shane said. He waved her goodbye before continuing to push through the crowd in search of his boyfriend.

When he made it halfway to the DJ booth, Shane spotted Benny. It was hard not to, not when Benny was six-foot-something of muscle and dressed in mildly offensive fringed leather, dancing and smiling at the guy from their film class. Shane was pretty sure his name was Miles. Miles was wearing the same outfit as Benny and oh. *Oh*. Okay. Shane could see what was happening here.

His phone dinged with a notification. Not Ilya. Benny. His roommate was asking Shane if he could have the room for the night.

Good for him. *Good for him*. Shane replied with a yes, followed by a lot of exclamation points and a thumbs up emoji.

By the time he had slipped his phone back into his pocket, Shane finally spotted Ilya again. Ilya locked eyes with Shane before barrelling his way through the drunken university students like he was aggressively chasing down a runaway attacker on the ice. It was a smidge violent. Someone yelped. Shane felt his collar go hot.

Ilya looked great in his cowboy hat and his tan jacket, Ennis del Mar from that iconic still of *Brokeback Mountain* in flesh and blood. Shane didn't know how Ilya managed to track down such screen accurate costumes for the two of them, but he appreciated the effort Ilya had put in for this day. For them.

He began pushing his way through the crowd, too. They met each other halfway.

"Hey," Shane greeted, pulling Ilya in and keeping his hands planted there. People would probably see, but that was the point. He – they – wanted people to see.

"I had to go pee in fucking bushes because two girls were fingering each other in men's bathroom," Ilya grumbled, "Sorry it took so long."

"Hey, no worries," Shane said, grinning, "I missed you. You look good."

He leaned in for the hard launch kiss, but Ilya stopped him. "Wait," Ilya said, "I also took long time because I needed to bribe DJ. Song should be switching soon."

Shane waited. The current stuttering EDM track dropped out, transitioning into t.A.T.u.'s All the Things She Said.

Shane stared at Ilya. "No."

Ilya grinned. "Yes."

"No," Shane said, giggling, "You did *not* have the DJ play our...our...our fucking break up song, I guess?" Because that was what this song was, wasn't it? It was the song blasting in that club when Shane was trying so, so hard to run away from this thing he had with Ilya, when he was desperate to deny that what the two of them had was real. He knew he had broken Ilya's heart that night. He still hadn't apologized for it. Maybe...maybe this was how he was going to.

"Wanted to make new memories," Ilya said. "Better ones."

And he would. They both would. "I love you," Shane said. He cupped Ilya's cheek.

"I love you too," Ilya replied.

They met each other halfway. All the things she said, all the things she said, all the things she said, took on new meaning for Shane that night. It was kissing Ilya in a crowd of people in matching costumes. It was holding Ilya's hand and laughing as they danced together in the drunken throngs. It was freedom.

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Benny was holding back his sniffles as the credits rolled. “He...he couldn’t quit him...” Benny mumbled, “Jack, I swear...god, the way Heath Ledger delivered that line. Shane, this is so good.”

“I know,” Shane said, blinking back the pressure behind his own eyes. “*Jennifer’s Body* was good too, just a little more...graphic, I guess? But good.”

“Do you wanna watch anything else?” Benny asked, “What does Ilya like watching?”

“In front of other people? Action flicks,” Shane said, “In front of me? Romcoms. He loves *Love, Actually*. And the entire *Before* trilogy.”

“Oh, those are good,” Benny said.

The two of them had finally made good on that promise to watch each other’s favorite films. It was primarily for bonding, but they were also technically doing research for their film final. Shane was already starting to get a pretty good idea of what he wanted his short film project to be about. Ilya. And hockey. His two greatest loves. Ilya was supposed to join them, but had texted Shane about being held up, so Shane had gone ahead and watched the movies with just Benny to make sure they still had time leftover to discuss the movies with each other. Thirty minutes, with five minutes of wiggle room, before Shane would need to go back to Ilya’s to meal prep for the week.

“So...what’s it like?” Benny asked, quiet and tentative, as he hugged his pillow to his chest. It made him look small, young, and reminded Shane that there were eight whole years between him and his roommate.

“What’s what like?”

“You know. Being out,” Benny whispered, like it was something he wasn’t allowed to have.

Shane shrugged. “It’s fine...? I mean, we literally went public yesterday, so there’s still the media shitstorm to deal with. We’re not active hockey players anymore, but it’s enough of a story that we’ll probably be dealing with it for the next few weeks.”

Oh no. Was Shane rambling? He probably was rambling, but Benny just kind of nodded along.

“Is it...scary?” Benny asked.

“The media? Yes,” Shane answered honestly, “Being out? Kind of. But getting to love Ilya as...as loud or as quiet as I want to, when I want to, it’s...it’s nice. It really is.”

Benny nodded. Then he took a deep shuddering breath. “Can I...can I tell you something?”

“Go ahead,” Shane said, even though he had an idea of what this was going to be about.

“I’m...I’m gay,” Benny said. He paused, taking a moment to collect himself. Shane allowed him the space. Then Benny added, “I...I’ve only ever told one other person. Wow. *Wow.*”

“Thank you for trusting me with this,” Shane said.

“You can...you can tell Ilya too, if you want,” Benny muttered.

“Are you sure?”

Benny nodded.

“This other person,” Shane started, trying to not seem like he was prying but a little desperate to satisfy his curiosity, “Is it Miles? Is that why you asked if you could have the room yesterday?”

Benny laughed. It didn’t sound genuine. “No. No, no, no. It’s Carmen. Miles, he’s...he’s not like us...” Benny sounded so small as he said that, so disappointed and broken, that it made Shane’s heart ache. Was this how Ilya was when Shane spurned him for an experiment that fizzled out before it could even begin? It made Shane feel guilty. Really guilty. And other emotions he couldn’t name.

“Oh. I’m sorry, Benny,” Shane said.

“It’s okay,” Benny replied, “It happens.”

Ilya chose that moment to burst into their room, looking frazzled. “Hey. Sorry I’m late.”

Shane took one look at the bruise starting to form on Ilya’s cheek and stood, protective instinct flaring deep inside his gut. “Ilya? What happened?”

“Fuckass reporters happened. They have swarmed your dorms. Wanted to talk about us. Last night,” Ilya said, “I got into a fight with microphone. Microphone lost.”

“Good,” Shane said. There went his carefully laid out schedule for the day, but Shane could feel the anxiety swallowing itself down as he grabbed Ilya’s hand and the other man leaned into his touch. “We should probably go and...deal with the media.”

“Perks of being famous,” Ilya chuckled.

“Hey, Shane?” Benny called out, “Um...I’m happy for you. What you have with Ilya, it’s...”

Shane smiled. “I know. And when you find something like it, you hold on to it, Benny.”

Benny nodded.

The two of them walked out of Shane’s dorm, Shane instinctively matching his step to Ilya’s despite his uneven gait. He could hear the reporters now, the clicks of cameras and the jostling of microphones as they crowded around the entrances to the building. A pair of university girls walked past them, loudly complaining about the crowd outside and wondering what was going on. Shane grabbed Ilya’s hand. Ilya held on tight.

“You ready?” Ilya asked.

“Yes,” Shane said, “You’re here.”

They walked out into the sunlight together.

## End Notes

I'll be honest I don't know where I was going with this. It was supposed to be a fun idea but then I realized the implications and then it wasn't fun anymore and got all angsty, but I didn't fully commit to the angst. Oh well. It's finished. It's out there. I hope someone enjoys it. Partially inspired by the fact that I was recently dragged to an undergraduate college party and realized that I'm way too old for this.

There's like 4 references in the names of the students in Shane's orientation group, idk I'll come up with a prize for anyone who gets them all.

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