

The Spirit Stick

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/74234801) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/74234801>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid
Relationship:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Shane Hollander , Ilya Rozanov , Ottawa Centaurs Team Ensemble (Game Changers)
Additional Tags:	Forced Proximity , Belligerent Sexual Tension , Crack Treated Seriously , Rivals to Lovers , Awkward Sexual Situations , Feelings Realization , Dry Humoring , Touching , Hockey , Banter
Language:	English
Collections:	Fulfill A Crave-ing
Stats:	Published: 2025-11-15 Words: 20,853 Chapters: 1/1

The Spirit Stick

by [FestiveFerret](#)

Summary

Ilya Rozanov is the thorn in Shane's side. He's rude, cocky, stressfully perceptive, and his stats are the only ones better than Shane's in the whole OUA. Even worse, they play on the same team, and the only person who might beat Shane out for the C next year is Rozanov.

Ilya and Shane are so at odds they can't even manage to complete a stupid challenge at Playoff Camp without making fools of themselves and, according to Hazy, getting cursed.

It's frustrating and embarrassing, until it becomes clear that the curse is very very real and it becomes horrifying instead. For the next six weeks (at least) Shane is stuck by Ilya's side, unable to go more than a few feet away without unbearable pain.

Now, they somehow have to pull off going to class, winning the playoffs, and not killing each other, not to mention keeping their secret from their friends and teammates.

Shane is so fucked.

Notes

First off, both gratitude and apologies to Bring it On - IYKYK

Thanks as ever to my soulmate and beta, ashes.

This prompt immediately grabbed me so hard and it all came out in a rush, so thank you cellarcervix for this awesome prompt. It was super fun to do! I also just took your tags whole hog because *chef's kiss*.

I set this in southern Ontario OUA sports world. Despite being a former OUA athlete, my sports were extremely different, so if I got things wrong, no I didn't this is just an AU of reality where things are different. I did tweak a few things like timeline and stuff. After like ten years of almost exclusively writing stuff set in the US, it's very fun to write something set much closer to home!

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

Pass to me, pass to me, pass to me, fucking pass to me! Shane yelled in his head, but Ilya "The Sun Shines Out of My Ass" Rozanov didn't even flick his eyes in Shane's direction.

Shane groaned in frustration as Rozanov scored easily against Andersson and swooped around the net, arms in the air. As he passed Shane, he gave him a little hipcheck. "Our team scored, Hollander. Why aren't you celebrating?" He turned backwards on his skates, shooting Shane a smirk as he disappeared down the ice while Coach set up the next practice lines.

Shane gritted his teeth so hard they nearly cracked. Wyatt Hayes was graduating at the end of the year and everyone knew there were two contenders to replace him as team captain: Shane and Ilya. Shane was of the opinion that a good captain showed sportsmanship, supported his teammates, and made the best play even if it meant missing out on some of the glory. Rozanov, apparently, thought a good captain was loud, cocky, selfish, and scored a lot of goals. On his own.

They'd had a really good start to the season, and were topping their division, but after Christmas, when Hazy officially announced he was graduating instead of doing a victory lap, the tension between Shane and Ilya had ramped up, and it was showing on the ice. At least, that was the politically correct way to phrase it. The way Shane would phrase it was that Rozanov had turned into a right asshole as soon as he had a shot at the C and he was making it Shane's problem.

Shane didn't know how Ilya would phrase it. Though, when he was being especially honest with himself, he suspected his framing of their current situation wouldn't be particularly generous in Shane's direction either.

The thing was, they'd always been competitive with each other, and it had always worked for the best. Ever since tryouts in first year, focusing on beating out Rozanov had pushed Shane to make the cut for second line center and try his damndest to oust Rozanov for first each year. It meant they were aggressive against each other in practice, which showed off the best sides of both of them and meant neither had a single day they could slack off. Nothing kept Shane's edge sharper than Ilya being that little bit ahead of him, and it was pretty obvious - Shane assumed to everyone - that having Shane stepping on the back of his heels did the same for Ilya. They didn't share a line, except when Coach mixed things up in practice, so it was almost easier to think of Ilya as an opposing player than a teammate.

But after Christmas, everything went to shit.

Wyatt announced his graduation, and everyone assumed either Shane or Ilya would take his place. They each had two years left in their degrees, they topped the stats across the board for the team, and they were both well liked.

Though why anyone would like Rozanov, Shane had no idea.

Then Evan had sprained his ankle sledding with his four year old niece over the break and Coach decided to move Shane up to play right wing to Ilya's center on the first line since their next alternate was a better fit for center and "you're versatile, Shane, you'll do well there."

Shane was not doing well there, and it was all Rozanov's fault.

"Coming with?" Hayden called, as Shane shoved his pads in his bag. "We're going to Sid's for perogies."

Shane sighed. "I have to study for a biology test tomorrow. And pack for Playoff Camp."

"Bummer. See you tomorrow!"

Shane waved a hand towards him as he walked off, flanked by J.J. and Bood. Troy and Ilya followed after, and Shane stomped down a seething wave of irritation that Rozanov could waltz off any time he liked and stuff himself with sour cream and apparently not worry about anything like grades, or staying fit, or how secure his place on the team was.

**

"Fuck, is early," Ilya groaned, yawning and cupping a Tim's cup between his hands. "Why can't the bus leave at reasonable hour?"

Shane rolled his eyes, but didn't say anything. It wasn't like Rozanov had been talking to him. Shane's annoyed huff was visible in the brisk, February air and he shoved his hands deeper in his pocket. There was something about standing in a line outside in the cold while the growling rumble of a bus vibrated in his chest that felt like Hockey to Shane. Hazy graduating reminded Shane that he would be following in his footsteps in two years, and he didn't know if he'd ever experience this again after that. He breathed it in then coughed when the frigid air froze the inside of his nose. Okay, maybe he should have stopped for coffee too.

"Come on, man," Wyatt said, bumping Ilya's shoulder with his own. "It's Playoff Camp! It's worth getting up early for."

Every year, for the first half of reading week, the whole team took a bus up the Bruce to an old kids' sports camp that had a hockey arena and got their heads in the game for playoffs, which started two weeks after. They also spent two weeks in August at training camp, just outside of Toronto, but Shane's favourite was Playoff Camp. It was cold and fresh out. The camp was quiet and the lake was iced over. All there was to do was play hockey. They slept in the (barely) heated staff quarters on stacked bunk beds, and only three people from the camp worked there that week: the owner, Becky, who organized the admin and made sure no one set fire to a cabin, a support staff worker who was different every year and helped clean - though the boys were supposed to clean up after themselves - and Archie, the incredibly fabulous, takes-no-shit, chef who cooked all their meals.

They all practiced twice a day, worked out in the gym, and did team building exercises, before piling onto the bus and driving back down to school where they'd furiously cram in studying and finishing assignments before classes started again.

Shane threw his duffle in the luggage compartment under the bus and climbed up the steps. He found a seat next to Hayden, who had already claimed the window, and threw himself in with a yawn.

"Why do buses always smell like this?" Hayden asked.

Shane shrugged. "Some cleaning thing they use, probably." He flipped through the notifications on his phone, sending back a *lol* to a meme Rose had sent and sending a text to his mom letting her know he'd made it on the bus okay and yes, he remembered to pack deodorant.

The two hour drive started out quiet and devolved into raucous by the time they pulled up at the camp. The shabby brown and yellow buildings looked exactly the same as they had last year, like time didn't touch this little pocket of the world. It was funny to think that for the vast majority of kids who went here, their memory was stamped with visions of summer fun - swimming, tee ball, soccer, sunburns. But for the Gryphons, Playoff Camp was about ice and snow and sticks and pads.

"Alright, guys!" Coach clapped his hands together at the front of the bus. "Go claim your bunks and dump your bags. Warmup starts in the gym in twenty minutes. Last one there is going to regret being last as will anyone who tries to ask me what they'll have to do if it's them. Let's go!"

Shane and his friends rocketed off towards the staff building, the freshman players following their older teammates with a distinct air of confusion and panic. Shane and Hayden managed to secure corner bunks, heads side by side and they high fived as they threw their bags up to claim them. The gym was in a separate outbuilding, and despite the twenty minute warning, no one wanted to face whatever punishment Coach had for being last, so like a flock of birds, they all turned and raced up the icy path to the gym, arriving in a mess of shoving, laughing, pink-cheeked silliness.

Coach decided they were all too piled up to name a last place, so they were safe from the mystery punishment, but an hour into dryland training, it felt like they were all getting punished instead.

"My thighs hurt," Hazy groaned.

"My spleen hurts," Bood added.

"You don't even know where your spleen is," Troy shot back.

"It's somewhere in the middle, and everything there hurts, so it's gotta be one of the things hurting too."

They had half an hour to shower and change and then it was back to the main gathering hall for dinner. After dinner they'd do team building games and then early to bed so they could be up before the sun for their first on-ice practice.

Dinner was a raucous event, and shortly after, Coach, their team manager, and Becky all headed off to bed, reminding them not to stay up too late. The only adult who remained was Archie who they could hear tidying up in the kitchen.

They joked around about starting a bonfire in the snow, then Hazy stood up and held up his hand until everyone fell silent. "As you all know, I'm graduating this year." Everyone booed. "I know, I know. I love you all, but I can't afford another year of school." The team laughed and someone threw a paper ball that bounced off the side of Wyatt's head. "Since this is a captain year, everyone who was here two years ago knows about the Spirit Stick, but the rookies do not."

"Ooooooh," said a few of the older players, while Shane tried not to curse. He had forgotten about the Spirit Stick. They hadn't done it his rookie year because Hazy had been voted in the year before, but a few of the older players had told him about it.

Troy raised his hand. "As a transfer student I also don't know what a 'spirit stick' is."

"Luca!"

Luca, the team baby, sprang to his feet and snapped to attention.

"Go to the staff storage closet and fetch the Spirit Stick," Wyatt demanded.

"Yes, sir!" Luca took two steps towards the hallway. "Um. Will I know it when I see it, or..."

"Yeah, it's pretty obvious." Hazy waited until Luca returned with a very beaten up hockey stick covered in a mix of what looked like bedazzling, crude drawings, and incomprehensible signatures. He pulled out a Sharpie and added his own scrawl to a tiny bare spot on the blade. "So in time honoured tradition, we're all going to vote right now for team captain. The top two candidates have to take this stick -" he held it aloft above his head "- all the way to the ice rink and back." There was no reaction. "With their hands tied behind their backs."

"Oooooh."

"And if it touches the ground...*they'll be cursed forever!*"

That got a laugh out of everyone.

Shane very aggressively avoided eye contact with Rozanov. There was pretty much no question it was going to be the two of them. He had entirely forgotten they would have to do this but hopefully they could get it over with pretty quickly. A part of Shane he didn't want to admit to was curious how the votes were going to turn out. The captainship was decided on by Coach, but the team's input was taken into account. Who would they chose, if it was entirely up to them? Him or Ilya?

Wyatt dug a notepad out of his pocket and tore off tiny strips. He handed them out with the Sharpie and everyone scribbled down their vote. Shane voted for Hayden because it seemed like a nice thing to do even though there was no chance he'd get chosen. All the votes went back to Hazy's hand and he counted them up.

"I don't think anyone's surprised that our winners are Roz and Hollander!"

"Winners?" Shane said. "Doesn't really feel like a prize having to go out in the snow with no hands."

Wyatt laughed. "Look, if you can handle the Spirit Stick, you can handle everything having the C will throw at you."

"Sounds like pretty easy job then, Hazy. Why did you make it sound so hard before?" Rozanov joked.

Wyatt smacked him then gestured to Luca again who dug two scarves at random out of the pile of woolies by the door. "Come here you two."

Shane sighed but stood and made his way to stand beside Wyatt. Ilya smirked at him, but Shane ignored him.

"Hands please."

Wyatt tied both of their hands behind their backs with the scarves.

"What if Hollander falls in the lake?" Ilya asked. "Without his hands he cannot swim."

"If I fall in the lake it's cause you pushed me. We're not going anywhere near there."

"Don't worry," Hazy said, "All the rookies have to go with you to make sure you don't drop it. They'll report back to me if there's any indictable offenses like murder."

Luca suddenly looked less excited about the entire adventure, and he and the other two rookies went and piled on their coats and hats. Wyatt held out the stick with a mischievous smile, and Shane stared down at it.

"You both have to be touching it at all times," Wyatt said.

"You should hold it with your mouth," Shane told Ilya, "cause then you won't be able to talk and it'll give everyone a break."

"I'd say you should hold it up your ass," Ilya shot back, "but there is already such a big stick there."

"Okay, it's fucking cold, let's get this over with." Shane hooked his chin over the stick and squeezed it up against his chest and Ilya followed suit.

"You need to go all the way to the arena, touch the ice, and bring it back."

"No problem," Ilya said, cocky as always. "We will be right back. Come on, Hollander."

Shane stumbled out into the cold with Ilya, trying to keep up as he marched out into the snow. The rookies followed after them like a pack of puppies.

Ilya's stride was longer than Shane's and he was a little taller, so keeping the stick from twisting out of his hold was challenging. "Slow down," Shane hissed. "We're going to drop it."

"Maybe you need to hurry up."

It was dark and cold as fuck. Thankfully, Shane had his boots on, but he was only wearing a long-sleeve athletic shirt, and with his arms tied behind him, his chest was open to the cold. The area was on the other side of the parking area, which seemed like a short distance when they were walking there after breakfast, but right now it felt very, very long.

"It's slipping, wait." Shane tried to wiggle the stick back under his chin.

"Stop twisting. You will knock it out."

"If I don't twist it back in, it's going to fall for sure. So suck it up."

"You could suck something else."

Shane huffed with frustration and lengthened his stride through the snow, trying to keep up. It was uncomfortable and awkward, and the eager little eyes of the rookies bore into his back. He and Ilya probably shouldn't be fighting in front of the very kids one of them was supposed to be leading next year, but Shane couldn't help himself. Ilya was just so *antagonizing*.

They finally stumbled up the stairs to the arena and through the door in the boards to the ice. They stood there for a second, three little faces pressed against the glass watching them.

"How do we do this without falling over?" Shane asked.

"Hmm." Ilya tilted a little. "I guess we just -" he moved more.

"Stop! You can't just flail around. You have to tell me what you're doing so we can do it together."

"Like this! Is obvious! Just bend down."

"For fucks sake," Shane muttered, but he could kind of see what Ilya meant by the gesture, so he copied it, and they were able to awkwardly bend-squat until Ilya was able to tap the blade of the stick to the ice.

They wriggled their way back up, Shane's anxiety at peak levels the whole time because the one thing he desperately did not want to have to do was sit out playoffs because he'd slipped on the ice during a stupid dare and broken his face. "This is such an incredibly stupid thing to do," he said.

Ilya laughed. "Is fun. You are too uptight. Relax."

"And you're too relaxed. You're going to fall and break your ass and have to explain to Coach why you can't play."

"Pff," Ilya scoffed. "I am invincible."

They finally stepped off the ice and Shane breathed a sigh of relief. The snow was still slippery but at least it was deep enough that broken bones were unlikely. They started the long march back.

"You did not actually need to do this," Ilya said, cocky as ever, "since I will be winning Captain for sure."

"I think part of being a good captain is not being a total dick all the time, so it seems unlikely."

"You are jealous. Is okay, Hollander. Sadly, you are too boring to be captain, but when I am in charge I will only make you clean up the equipment bins some of the time."

"That's not even up to the team captain. You don't even know what your duties would be. You just want the glory."

"What I want is to lead a kickass team to Queen's Cup victory," Ilya shot Shane one of his infuriating smirks over the top of the stick. "You will be too busy getting everyone to alphabetize their socks and eat their greens to win any games."

"And you'll be too busy getting drunk and picking up dates to even show up for any games."

They reached the threshold to the main hall. The doors had been easy to push from the inside, but now they needed to be pulled to open.

"Rookies!" Ilya called imperiously. "Open the doors." Either too scared to disobey, or with a genuine desire to help them succeed, Luca ran and pulled one of the doors open.

"Turn this way," Shane said, turning one way.

"No, we should go like this," Ilya said, tugging the other.

"Fuck off, you're going to drop it," Shane snapped.

Ilya grunted and pushed his end of the stick, making Shane stumble back a step. Shane turned and launched himself through the door, pulling Ilya after him. His neck was sore, his chin was sore, his feet were cold, and he was fucking sick of this. They stepped through the door, turned towards their waiting teammates, and the blade of the stick caught on the door frame.

It was like everything went into slow motion. The stick bowed, then popped back into shape launching itself across the mess hall in a graceful arc, bedazzlings flying off and pinging off the plastic chairs. The rookies gasped collectively, and then the stick hit the floor.

There was a moment of complete silence and then a collective gasp rose up from the Gryphons, echoed in stereo for Ilya and Shane by the rookies who still stood behind them.

"Oh, you are so cursed!" Wyatt called out.

"Ugh," Shane wiggled free of the scarf then dropped his face in his hands and scrubbed. He just wanted to go to bed. He grabbed the stick off the floor and shoved it into Luca's arms. "Put that back where you found it. Okay. We made it to the ice and back, so technically we did it. That was horrible." He plopped into a chair next to Hayden and knocked back half of the ginger ale he'd left behind.

"I don't think that counts," Bood said. "You have to get it all the way back to Hazy without dropping it."

"Okay, well I guess we're cursed then. Oops."

"What happens if you are cursed?" Ilya asked, also sliding back into his seat. "Will Hollander be cursed to be even more boring?"

"Well," Wyatt said, "The details have been lost to time -"

"It's only been like six years since that stupid thing was made," Bood called out and several people laughed.

"Lost to time!" Wyatt said louder, "but the legend has it that any pair of potential captains who can't complete the Spirit Stick challenge have been shown to lack the collaborative skills to lead the team. So the curse will force them to work together."

"What breaks it?" Hayden asked, stuffing a handful of popcorn in his mouth.

Wyatt shrugged. "A show of good sportsmanship?"

"You just made that up," Shane accused. "If you're going to do seasonal hazing, you at least have to write the rules down or something."

Wyatt laughed, and kicked his feet up over the arm of his chair. "All I know is you guys are cursed and that sucks for you and we will all be mocking you for it for the rest of time."

Bood raised his can. "I'll drink to that."

The rest of the evening was mostly hockey chat. At some point, Coach came out in his sweatpants and threatened to move practice up an hour if they didn't all get off to bed, and they scurried off for their cabin.

As Shane fell asleep on the hard wood of his bunk, snuggled down in his thick sleeping bag, he thought about the curse of the Spirit Stick. It was a silly tradition, of course, but it got him thinking about teamwork. If he and Rozanov couldn't figure out how to work well together, their chance at a playoff win was dwindling. While carrying a stick without hands wasn't the way to fix it, it was something that needed some work.

Even if Ilya wasn't willing, Shane was going to put some effort in, here at hockey camp, and see if - at least on the ice - they could get along a little better.

**

Shane woke with a gasp at a stabbing pain somewhere in the centre of his chest. The room was dark and the sounds of his sleeping teammates surrounded him. His hand snapped to press over his sternum as another wave of pain burst outward, crumpling him in on himself.

Was this a heart attack? He was only 20 years old! But it didn't feel like that kind of pain. It was...different, somehow. It was an ache more like longing, like the desperate pressure of an

out of whack joint begging to be cracked back into place. Like if he could stretch just right, the pain would release. But instead, it got stronger.

Once Shane's eyes adjusted to dark, the little sliver of moonlight coming in through the uncovered window revealed someone else sitting up in their bunk, awake. On the opposite side of the large room, Ilya Rozanov was hunched over, clutching his chest in a way that perfectly mirrored Shane.

There was no way...was there?

Shane hopped down off his bunk as quietly as he could and slipped his feet in his boots. He tiptoed across the room, the ache fading a little as he reached Ilya.

"Hey," Shane whispered, and Ilya looked up sharply, noticing him for the first time. Shane tapped his chest, then tipped his head towards the door and Ilya nodded.

They both grabbed the first coats they could get their hands on and stepped out into the bitter February night.

"Fuck, I am Russian and this is still too fucking cold."

Shane huffed hot breath on his hands. "Your chest. It hurt."

Ilya rubbed his palm over the same place where Shane still felt an echo of the pain. "Yes. Is better now. Why?"

"Because I woke up for the exact same reason."

The anxiety twisting Ilya's features made it clear he'd noticed already. "Is not... that was just dumb fairy stories."

Shane shrugged. "It's either that or we both suddenly developed severe heartburn in our twenties on the same night," he offered dryly.

"Okay. Curse says we have to work together, be close to each other like with the stick, yes? So go away and see what happens."

Shane rolled his eyes. "You just wanted to tell me to go away."

Ilya said something in Russian and laughed, then gave Shane a little shooing gesture.

Eager to resolve this and get back to bed, Shane started hiking off into the woods. It was dark and a little eerie out here. Not much was up and about in weather like this, but getting eaten by a bear was looking like one of the more positive outcomes of the night, so Shane's footsteps didn't slow as the night closed around him.

But he'd barely gone fifteen feet away from Ilya before the pain started. By twenty feet, his hand was at his chest again, and once Ilya was fully out of view, the pain nearly brought Shane to his knees. He turned and stumbled back the way he came only to collide with Ilya who had clearly run after him when he hit his farthest point.

For a moment, they just stood there, nearly chest to chest, breathing through the pain as it slowly shrunk down to manageable and finally, to nothing.

"Oh my god," Shane breathed out shakily. "That's impossible. It's just a dumb superstition. It's not *real*."

"Being dumb superstition never stops you from putting on right sock before left every time."

"Yeah, but it doesn't hurt if I do it wrong!" Shane nearly shouted, flinching as he imagined waking his team and being found out here with Rozanov. He dropped back to a whisper. "There's no way this is really a curse. It's just a random fluke. It's food poisoning. Or - or asthma..."

Ilya stared at him for a moment, then shrugged and started walking off into the woods again, leaving Shane behind. He barely made it ten feet before Shane launched himself at him, the pain roaring up even stronger than before.

"Fuck," Shane panted, his hand coming out to grip Ilya's elbow to steady himself. The pain abruptly subsided, much faster than last time. Shane let go and he could feel the ghost of the pain echoing in his chest. He touched Ilya again; it disappeared. "Oh come on!"

Ilya groaned. "Of all the people, of course it had to be you."

"What do we do?"

"Well, first, we go back to sleep because if I'm not dying of heart attack, I'd like to get some sleep before Coach kicks our asses again. Then during free time tomorrow, we figure this out and get it fixed or turned off or whatever."

"I can't sleep with this pain."

"The bunk next to mine is empty. Come sleep there. That should be close enough." Ilya took three steps towards the staff quarters, then stopped and looked back at Shane, who hadn't moved. "Coming?"

"I'm just - I - I don't -" Shane stammered, but he didn't have a decent argument back. As crazy as it was, it seemed that the curse they'd been warned about was real. But two in the morning wasn't the time to try to figure it out, drenched in a tempestuous mixture of exhaustion, eerie moonlight, and adrenaline. Tomorrow. They'd get it fixed tomorrow. "Okay."

Shane followed Ilya back into the cabin, and grabbed his sleeping bag as quietly as he could. He tossed it up on the bunk next to Ilya's and climbed up after it. Ilya moved his pillow to the opposite side, so they could lay head to head. The pain wasn't not there, but it was distant and slight, like a memory of an old injury that still flared up when it rained.

Shane was not going to be able to sleep.

**

At 5:45, Shane hopped down out of the bed beside Ilya and tossed his sleeping bag back up on the bed he was supposed to be in. He got dressed as quietly as possible, then waited by the foot of Ilya's bed for the alarms to start going off. A few minutes later, Ilya slipped out of bed and landed beside him. Shane raised an eyebrow at him like, *did last night really happen?* And Ilya reached out and grabbed his arm in response. Something immediately settled inside Shane. Even though the pain hadn't been there - they were standing close enough together - touching still brought a sense of peace that Shane wasn't used to feeling at all, like it didn't just dull the pain, it dulled his baseline anxiety as well.

Shane nodded, accepting it had really happened, and Rozanov shook his head with a little smile then turned to get dressed. With his boots pulled on, he bent to whisper in Shane's ear, his breath hot. "Let's go get started on warmup."

Shane gestured towards their sleeping teammates, who'd be waking up any minute now. "Won't they think that's weird?"

"Maybe they will think the team building is finally working and we are getting along."

"Or maybe they'll think hell froze over," Shane muttered, but he still stomped out into the snow behind Ilya.

"Fuck, I think maybe hell did freeze." Ilya blew on his hands.

"Are you kidding? Hockey camp isn't hell, it's heaven." Shane set off towards the rink.

"Even when you're cursed by stupid hockey stick?"

"Okay, that part's less than ideal." Shane slowed til Ilya was walking at his side. "So what are we going to do about that?"

"I don't know. Is still hard to believe is real."

"It doesn't make any sense." Shane slowed to a stop silently and watched Ilya walk away, wondering if maybe it was psychosomatic. If Ilya didn't know they were far apart, maybe -

"*Ugh* -" Ilya paused and slapped a hand to his chest. He spun around and found Shane hanging back. "What are you doing?"

"Just testing."

"I think we have done enough testing. Is real. Now we just need the way to fix it."

Shane caught up to him again and they made their way to the locker rooms by the rink. Practice didn't start until 6:30, but no one would mind them getting a head start - though, them doing it together would not go unnoticed. Shane sat on the bench next to his duffel and Ilya sat down next to him, so close their hips nearly touched.

"We should ask Hazy for more details."

Ilya bent to pull on his socks. "Yes, maybe. Do you think he will believe us?"

"We don't need to tell him it's real." Shane shrugged. "We could just make it sound like we're interested in the myth of the place. Or say we want to play a prank on the rookies that it was real or something."

Ilya hummed, considering. "Might work. Or he might not know more than he already said."

"It's worth a try. We'll ask at lunch."

Ilya sat up and met Shane's gaze. "What if we get no answers before is time to go home?"

Shane swallowed hard. "I don't know," he scratched out. "Maybe it won't follow us home?"

"Maybe even if it follows us home, it will not go past end of hockey season? Is hockey curse - must end with hockey, right?"

"Maybe..."

Ilya bumped Shane's shoulder with his. "Get ready. Let's see how well we can play like this."

Fuck, Shane hadn't even thought about that. Sure, a line was supposed to stay together, but the length of the rink had been enough distance to cause real pain last night. What if they couldn't play? What would they tell Coach?

Shane pulled his skates on in a hurry, already coming up with excuses. But it wasn't like one of them could pretend to be sick, that would just mean being even further apart with one back in the cabin and one on the ice. But if they both said they were sick but no one else was... that was too weird.

But the second Shane's blades hit the ice, his anxiety disappeared. The curse hummed in his chest instead of clawed at his insides. He and Ilya skated freely up and down the length of the rink without the telltale ache flaring up again. Shane took a corner around the far crease and Ilya flipped backwards to cut across the rink and collide with him, grinning.

"See!" Ilya said, "Is hockey curse."

But Shane still shook his head. "Even if it does let us play and even if it'll wear off by the end of the season, how are we going to get through six more weeks of classes like this? We're not exactly besties, Rozanov. People are going to notice we're being weird."

"Am I interrupting a murder?" a voice called from the boards, and Shane snapped back out of Ilya's space, nearly losing his footing as he pushed off and skated as far away as he could.

"Not yet," Shane said to Barrett, now that he could see who it was. Noises came from the locker room that suggested the ice would be full pretty soon. "But the day is still young."

**

The rest of the day, it wasn't very hard to stay close enough to Rozanov to satisfy the curse. Every moment on the ice was perfect, as it always was, and then the rest of the camp activities had them all so tightly packed anyway, it didn't matter. They chose back-to-back

tables at lunch, chose spots near each other for dryland, and picked neighbouring treadmills in the gym. Shane pretty much ignored Ilya besides making sure they were within touching distance as much as possible. The curse reminded him abruptly every time he wasn't, anyway.

During free time, they drilled Wyatt about the curse, and even asked Becky and Archie, but no one knew any more than they'd already said.

At night, they suffered the distance until everyone else was asleep, then Shane climbed back up into the spare bunk and finally caught a few hours. Playoff Camp was so intense and fast-paced that Shane barely had time to think about the curse until they were piling their bags up in front of the bus on Wednesday morning, ready to head back to school.

Shane made eye contact with Ilya while they all climbed on the bus, and Ilya slipped ahead to stand behind Shane in line. Shane slid into a window seat and let out a relieved breath when Ilya swung into the seat right behind his. It would've been horrible being stuck on the bus for hours with enough space between them to rev up the pain.

Hayden shot Ilya a strange look as he took the seat next to Shane's, but Ilya ignored him, continuing his conversation with Troy about Pokemon cards, or something. Shane wasn't really listening. He was hyper aware of Ilya's physical presence, but trying desperately to tune the rest of him out.

As the bus lumbered its way down endless farm-lined two lane roads, Shane's anxiety climbed higher and higher. The bus was going to drop them off and everyone was going to go back to where they lived, and he and Ilya would have to separate. But they couldn't.

Unless by some miracle the curse ended when the trip ended.

Shane's hand went to the centre of his chest and he focused on the trees in the distance, outside his window. *It'll be okay. You'll figure something out.*

Something bumped against Shane's foot and he looked down to see Ilya's shoe stretching out under the seat until it hit the side of Shane's. The contact immediately soothed Shane's pounding heart and he let out a slow careful breath and sunk back into his seat.

Ilya's foot stayed there the entire rest of the trip.

**

Shane crouched down and pretended to be looking for something in his bag as the team grabbed their stuff and headed off towards their various dorms and apartments. Hayden bumped Shane's arm with his calf. "You wanna walk to the UC with me? I need a coffee."

"Nah, I think I'm going to go take a shower. I'll catch you later."

"Alright. Bye."

Slowly everyone dispersed. Then the ache in Shane's chest flared up. He shot to his feet immediately, eyes cutting around, looking for Ilya. There was no way he just left, right? They needed to figure out what they were going to do about this.

Then Ilya came around from the other side of the bus and the pain subsided again. "Sorry." Ilya's hand was also pressed over his sternum. "Thought it was good to wait for everyone else to go."

"Yeah. Good idea. Should we go somewhere and talk?"

"Come to my apartment."

"Don't you have roommates?"

"Just one. And he might as well live at his girlfriend's house. He is never there. His parents did not want him to live with a girl so early." Ilya snorted out a laugh. "If only they knew they were paying rent on behalf of his potted plant."

Shane gathered up his things and gestured for Ilya to lead the way. "Okay, then. Let's go there to talk."

Ilya lived a few blocks off campus, in the upper floor apartment of a divided brick house in Old University. It was a nice neighbourhood, single family homes mixed in with divided rentals, pretty much all of them old and full of character. Shane liked the area, but he'd opted to live in the res again for second year. The hockey team always got corralled to a certain corner of one of the dorms, and Coach always hinted that it'd be good for a few second and third years to stick around and keep the first years from getting too stupid. But that meant that Shane's room was a minefield of other players who knew Shane and knew Ilya and would absolutely want to know why they were refusing to leave each other's side.

Ilya led Shane up a set of steps to his apartment and unlocked the door. It was a two bedroom with a small kitchen, a bathroom with a laundry, and an even smaller sitting area. True to his word, Ilya's roommate was nowhere to be seen.

They both dumped their stuff on the floor and then stood there staring at each other.

"So what the fuck?" Shane asked. "This curse is really real and we are really fucked."

Ilya sat down hard on the couch and let out a long breath. "We are pretty fucked yes. We need to make it to end of playoffs without anyone finding out."

"Do we? Maybe we should tell someone. Maybe student health?"

"You think they will believe us? I wouldn't believe us if not for -" Ilya's hand went to his chest and Shane couldn't help but mirror the move. "Is crazy."

"Yeah. It is crazy."

"Okay. So you stay here."

"What?"

"Like I say, my roommate is always gone. You stay here while we figure it out. We skip any classes we can and go with the other to classes we can't. We already go to practice at the

same time, so no one will think that is weird. We focus on playoffs and when the season is over the curse will be over."

"You think we can make it six weeks never leaving each other's side without killing each other?"

Ilya grinned. "No, definitely not! But what else do we do?"

Shane couldn't think of anything else. "I don't know."

"Then that's all we have."

"We can also try and research the curse. See if there's a way we can break it."

"Sounds good."

"Okay." Shane let out a tight breath. He looked down at his bag. "I think I have everything I need to last a few more days, especially if I can do laundry here, and then I'll need to go to the dorm."

"Is settled then. Welcome home, Shane Hollander."

**

This fucking sucked.

After sleeping on a hard bunk bed for three nights, now Shane was sleeping on Ilya's equally hard floor. The couch in the living room was more like a loveseat and Shane's feet would have fully hung off it, besides, the curse really didn't like them being in different rooms.

They'd tested it out a little more, in the privacy of Ilya's apartment, and determined that the curse liked it best if they were touching and liked it worst if they couldn't see each other. Bathroom breaks had not gone well, so far, and Shane wasn't looking forward to needing a shower the next morning.

It was even more awkward than staying in a hotel with a stranger - which Shane had done more than once in his years in all levels of hockey - because he and Ilya couldn't just go about their lives and pretend the other didn't exist, they needed to constantly coordinate everything they did and it was exhausting.

Shane was also already feeling the need for some...alone time. Playoff Camp was always tricky in that regard, and Shane was sure he wasn't the only guy who came back feeling a little pent up. But now he had zero privacy for the foreseeable future. Even if they could survive showering with the other person outside the door, the pain would be too distracting to enjoy anything else. Really, the only opportunity was right now, with Ilya hopefully asleep. But though Shane's body would have happily been up for it, his brain was too much of a mess to bother.

Things didn't get much better as the next week started. They'd barely squeaked by during Reading Week when all they had was practice and sitting at home doing homework, but when

classes started on Monday, everything went to shit. They were arguing all the time, sleeping terribly, and taking it out on each other on the ice - the one time they didn't have to worry about how far away the other person was.

By Wednesday afternoon, Shane was done.

Shane stormed through the apartment door, Ilya close on his heels. "I can't be late anymore, Rozanov! My grade is in jeopardy!"

"Oh, you mean your perfect four-point-oh." Ilya rolled his eyes. "Oh no Shane Hollander will die if he gets ninety-nine percent on a single test."

"I have to keep my grades up to keep my scholarship."

"So do I! But we went to your boring Fundamentals of Nutrition class instead of mine because you had midterm. And now I am behind also. But of course, no. Is all about Hollander."

"This is not going to work. Oh my god. What the fuck am I going to do?" Shane sat down hard on the couch and dropped his face in his hands. Anxiety welled up, filling his chest and squeezing his lungs. What if they just got on buses going in opposite directions? Maybe they could stretch the curse far enough that it would snap. Or maybe it would just kill them both and then Shane wouldn't have to listen to Rozanov hum the alphabet song to himself while he edited an assignment one more fucking time.

"Okay." Ilya sat down on the couch next to Shane, close enough that their sides were pressed together, and a wave of calm pushed down the rising torrent of panic. "We are okay."

Shane took a deep breath in and let it out. "Okay," he echoed.

"I will make us some food and we will eat and look at our class schedules and work something out."

Shane raised an eyebrow at Ilya. "You can cook?"

"Enough to live. You like tuna?"

"Sure. It's protein."

Ten minutes later, Ilya returned with two mis-matched plates, each with a tuna melt. He set them on the coffee table and sat down next to Shane.

"I get the Paddington Bear plate, huh?"

"Is my roommate's," Ilya said, smirking.

"Uh huh." Shane picked up his sandwich and bit into it. The warmth and the salty comfort of the cheese helped calm him down almost as much as the solid presence of Ilya beside him on the couch.

"Okay. Now we figure it out."

They laid out everything - their class and hockey schedules, upcoming assignments and tests, and appointments. Shane scribbled out the dates on the empty calendar at the back of his agenda, and together they broke each day of the week into blocks with enough time to go to both of their most important classes, alternate the ones that didn't take attendance, not miss any tests, and still fit in practice and workouts.

They could work on homework and assignments while in each other's classes, and as long as they stayed at the back of the classroom and looked like they belonged there, they both thought the other wouldn't be noticed.

Things still sucked, but Shane felt slightly less like he was spiraling into despair, and Ilya was radiating more calm than he had been before as well. They still had no lead on breaking the curse, but at least it finally felt like the next few weeks of dealing with it - if it lasted that long - would be doable.

Ilya picked up the calendar and scanned it with his eyes. "Guess I need to cancel my hot date this week. Who takes a 6pm class on Fridays? You are so boring, Hollander."

Shane blanched. "You have a date?"

Ilya laughed. "No, Is joke. But I guess now, I cannot make one. Unless she likes double dates."

Shane's stomach twisted up in a way that had nothing to do with the curse or their hectic timetable. "Uh. Yeah," he said flatly.

Ilya turned perceptive eyes on Shane, one eyebrow quirking up a little. "No? Not interested? I date very beautiful women. I am sure I could convince a friend of one to suffer going out with you one time."

"I'm - I'm not - No. That sounds like a recipe for disaster."

"You need to relax, Hollander. Some fun would help you relax."

"I'm not interested in dating during school. I'm waiting until I'm less busy."

Ilya laughed at that. "You think you will be less busy after you graduate? When you have real job and have to pay rent without scholarship?"

Shane frowned at the faded grey carpet. "It's not..." It was like the words were bubbling up inside him, like mentos in coke, and Shane didn't think he could stop them. "I'm not interested in dating women. So I'd feel like a dick making someone think I was interested when I wasn't," tumbled out of him in a rush.

All was silent for a moment.

Then Ilya said, "So you are interested in dating men?"

"I - I didn't say that -"

"You said you are not interested in dating women, not that you are not interested in dating at all."

Shane's stomach twisted up in knots. This wasn't how he'd seen this conversation going, but Rozanov hadn't punched him yet, so that was a good sign. "Maybe," he mumbled. "I don't know."

Ilya blinked at him. "What, you think my beautiful dates don't have beautiful male friends too?"

"I'm just not - I don't want to think about it right now. I'll think about dating when I've graduated." *And when I'm done with competitive hockey*, he added silently to himself. He knew what locker rooms could be like.

"Why wait? You are only getting older and more boring every year. I will find you a date. You are boring, but very pretty, so shouldn't be too hard. After that, is on you, I'm afraid."

Shane gaped at him. "It doesn't bother you?" Did Ilya just call him pretty?

Ilya shrugged. "That would be very stupid to hate someone for something that is the same with me. Except I do like to also date women. I like anyone fun and beautiful."

Shane stared for a long time. "Oh," he finally said weakly. "That's good. I mean...okay."

"Okay. Good talk." Ilya squeezed Shane's leg above the knee then gave him a pat like he was Coach giving him a pep talk. The touch simultaneously sent a shock of surprise and a soothing wave of curse-satisfaction through Shane's veins. Ilya stood and took their plates to the kitchen while Shane stared after him.

"Wait! Ilya, don't find me a date. I'm serious. I - thank you for not freaking out about this, but I'm really not looking right now. Especially not if we're magically glued to each other."

Ilya laughed but said, "Okay." and started puttering around in the kitchen putting things away.

Ilya liked guys? Shane had *come out* to Ilya Rozanov. What the fuck was he thinking? But then...Ilya had come out to him back? And like it was nothing. That made no fucking sense. Because Shane had always known he was alone in this. It was a fact. Like: *Shane has freckles and plays hockey, and is the only one in the locker room holding on to a secret like this*. But he wasn't. Ilya was too. Or maybe it wasn't a secret for Ilya. He had friends on the team but Shane wasn't one of them. Maybe they knew.

Shane's brain was still short circuiting when Ilya tapped him on the top of his head and nodded towards the bedroom. "We should sleep soon, Hollander. Early practice tomorrow."

"Uh huh." Shane followed Ilya in and lay down on the floor but it was a long time before he could fall asleep. He spent the time scrolling endlessly on his phone, looking for anything about the Spirit Stick curse or curses in general, but the internet had nothing useful to offer, and Shane didn't think posting on reddit would be likely to help very much.

**

"Oh shit." Shane sat up from where he'd been laying with his feet hanging off the end of Ilya's loveseat, scrolling his phone instead of outlining an assignment.

Ilya looked up from his spot on the floor, laptop in his lap. "What?"

"My friend Rose just texted me reminding me I said I'd go to her play this weekend. Shit."

"Play?"

"Yeah, it's Shakespeare or something. She's in one of the local drama groups and she asked me to go and I said I would. I guess I'll tell her I'm sick or something. She'll be gutted if she finds out I lied, though. She's really excited about the play and it'd look like I skipped it cause I didn't want to go."

"When is it?"

"Saturday night."

"Okay, no problem." Ilya glanced at the combined schedule they'd pinned to the fridge. "We have nothing else then."

"You'd come with me?" Shane asked.

Ilya shrugged. "Sure, why not."

"People are going to ask why we're going to something like that together."

"Maybe I just really like Shakespeare."

Shane narrowed his eyes at Ilya.

"Is fine! You worry too much. I will pretend I don't know you and I just happen to want to stand two feet from your back, yes?"

Shane snorted. "Rose knows who you are, Ilya. She's been to a few of our games. She also knows we can't stand each other. So it's going to look pretty weird if we go to a play together."

"Then we get there right before it starts and we leave as soon as it's over and you text her that you had to go do something boring like water your plants or knit a quilt and she will be like yes that sounds like normal Shane and she will never know we were there together. But you won't have to lie about not going or pretend you did go when you didn't."

"Okay...that sounds like a pretty good plan, actually."

"I know. I am amazing at deciding things. You should let me decide all the things, really. Is your problem on the ice, Hollander. You think too much about things that aren't happening instead of just doing the things that are."

Though his gut reaction was to snap back and Ilya for his constant ribbing, Shane sat back and let himself really think about that. Maybe it was a little bit true. "Okay, we'll go."

**

Instead of being twenty minutes early, Shane let Ilya hold them back until they'd be arriving at the theatre only a few minutes before the curtain went up, definitely no time to say hi to Rose beforehand. Feeling bad, Shane took a picture of the stage and sent her a *break a leg* text to let her know he was there.

They found their seats and settled in, but the fluttering anxiety over potentially being late hadn't calmed any, and Shane squirmed while he waited for the lights to go down. Then he remembered the bus and he decided to try something. He slid his foot over until the side of his leg was touching Ilya's. The stress immediately subsided. Ilya didn't move his foot away.

The play was fine. Shane wasn't a big fan of Shakespeare and it was hard to follow sometimes, but Rose was very obviously good and Shane focused on being happy for her and enjoying seeing her on stage instead of trying to enjoy the story too much.

As soon as the cast took their last bow, Shane shoved at Ilya. "Okay, let's go."

"There are people in front of me," Ilya hissed back. "Relax."

The aisle emptied at a glacial rate. Shane's phone buzzed. He snuck a peek.

Rose: I'm so glad you came!! I'm by the side door talking to some people. Come say hi!

"Shit." Shane poked Ilya in the back. "Rose wants me to come say hi."

"Tell her you can't because you are late to go eat plain oatmeal and do your old man sudoku."

"You are so unhelpful."

"Is good thing I am so handsome and good at hockey then. Makes up for it."

They finally broke through the doors into the lobby, the bottleneck spilling out into a mingling crowd.

And Shane made immediate accidental eye contact with Rose.

"Oh, fuck. She's right there and she sees us."

"She sees *you*. Maybe she will not notice me."

So Shane gave Rose a wave and shuffled over to her, Ilya hanging nearby but trying to look unconnected. The curse pulled Shane in Ilya's direction, but he ignored it.

"Shane!" Rose flung her arms around Shane's neck and squeezed him tight. He hugged her back and immediately felt guilty for trying to avoid her. He loved Rose and he would have been really sad to miss the play.

"You were incredible," he told her honestly. "I'm really glad I came."

"Yay! That was so fun. I want to just do that for the rest of my whole life."

"I'm sure you will."

Rose looked past Shane's shoulder and tilted her head like a confused puppy. "You brought Rozanov?"

Caught out, Ilya, hands shoved into his pockets, smiled at her and sidled up next to Shane's shoulder. His presence was comforting even as Shane panicked over what to say. "Hi, Rose. You were fantastic," Ilya said. "Great show. I really liked the bit with all the little lights."

"Oh, uh. Thank you. The set designers were amazing." Her eyes cut back to Shane, brows raised in question.

"He's uh - um -"

"It was Coach's idea," Ilya said. "At Playoff Camp we were not getting along so well, so Coach said we have to do one not hockey thing each week together. For team spirit."

"Yup," Shane said, perhaps a little too loudly. "Team building."

"Oh, okay. That's...nice." Rose looked back and forth between them, clearly aware something wasn't being said. "Well, the cast and crew are going out for drinks after and lots of people are inviting friends. Do you want to come?" She was asking Shane, but then her eyes cut to Ilya. "You're invited too, of course," she added politely. It was very clear Ilya was supposed to decline.

"Oh, yeah -" Shane tried to feign genuine disappointment "- sorry. I'd love to but I have an essay due that I really need to work on."

"Aww, come on. You have all day tomorrow for that!"

"I'm really sorry. With playoffs starting, everything's just a bit crazy. But I'm really glad tonight went well. I'll venmo you a round on me." Shane bent in and kissed her cheek. "We'll get together really soon, okay?"

"Okay. Thanks for coming. Uh, bye Rozanov."

"Goodnight."

Shane pinched Ilya's sleeve in case he was thinking about saying anything else at all and dragged him off towards the doors. He couldn't help looking back at Rose over his shoulder and she was watching them go with a very curious look on her face. "That was awful."

"Wow, such a terrible thing to say about your dear friend's performance."

Shane whacked him on the shoulder. "You know that's not what I meant. That's the kind of awkward shit we're going to have to navigate until this is all over."

"I think it went fine."

"That's because you're not the one who is going to get dragged out for coffee and grilled to within an inch of their life."

"You know, Rose is hot and good actress. Perhaps I should ask her to coffee and be the one who gets to be grilled."

"Don't you fucking dare," Shane growled.

"I thought you were not interested in her like that."

"I'm not." Shane tugged his toque down over his ears. "I'm just - she's my friend. She's off limits." But there was a little twist in his stomach that made that sound not-quite-right. If Rose and Hayden wanted to date, Shane didn't think he'd mind. It was just Ilya.

It was probably just that he wanted to protect Rose from an asshole like Ilya. Right?

Not like Rose couldn't hold her own; she wasn't really someone Shane felt like he had to protect. If anything, she was protective of him.

But it was the only thing that explained Shane's churning stomach as they walked back to Ilya's apartment. That and the ongoing terror that this was only the beginning of embarrassing themselves in front of their friends.

**

Sunday morning, they had agreed to go for a run together instead of risking the busy Athletics Centre on a weekend. It could be hard to find two machines together and they'd likely spend more time waiting on something than actually getting a workout in.

It was brisk out, but the sidewalks were clear, so they were able to push and set a good pace. A pace perhaps a little faster than either of them would have done alone.

But then they got back to the apartment and Shane realized a glaring problem with this plan. "Shit, I need a shower." They'd been saving all their showers for after practice, in the locker rooms, with the rest of the guys. It worked out well because they could easily take showers side by side and effectively ignore each other while still getting clean. Practice was often enough that it hadn't been an issue. But now Shane was gross and they both had class in the morning before playing their first playoff game Monday night. So their next chance to shower was a ways away.

"Me too." Ilya sniffed himself and grimaced.

"I could sit outside the door and then we could swap," Shane suggested.

"Is too far." Ilya's hand went to his chest and rubbed the spot Shane knew all too well.

"We could tough it out for ten minutes."

Their eyes met and Shane knew they were both thinking the same thing - it'd be ten pretty awful minutes. "Just come with me," Ilya said. "Same as the locker room. Is no big deal. Why hurt ourselves for no reason?"

"Right." Shane swallowed hard. "Makes sense." Didn't it? What was the difference between showering side by side in the locker room and showering side by side at Ilya's apartment? Sure, they'd have to awkwardly take turns with the water, but Shane had gotten really good at averting his eyes over the years. He could do it.

They each grabbed a towel and tucked into Ilya's bathroom. The bathroom had clearly been expanded when the upstairs of the house had been turned into an apartment, so it was bigger than the average bathroom, but it still felt incredibly small as Shane tried to ignore Ilya taking his running clothes off.

"I'll just wait here and you can go first," Shane said. He plunked himself down on the toilet seat. Shane had the distinct impression that Ilya wouldn't have minded sharing the shower itself, but that seemed chilly and inefficient and even more awkward than waiting here.

Ilya leaned over to turn on the tap, and Shane forced his eyes up into the corner where one of the flower patterned tiles didn't match up quite right. As irritating as Ilya Rozanov was, Shane couldn't even pretend that he wasn't stunningly gorgeous. Meeting Ilya had been one of the moments that secured for Shane that sexual attraction wasn't something that only happened to other people, it was something that only happened around men for Shane. So despite the fact that Shane was usually trying to resist stabbing Ilya in the face with his hockey stick, it still took real effort not to stare at the stunningly perfect ass that was currently all but shoved in his face.

Ilya stepped in the shower, and Shane let out a sigh of relief at the visual distraction being gone, but the slight ache in his chest flared up as soon as Ilya was out of view. Shane tried very hard not to imagine which parts Ilya was washing as he listened to the breaks in the steady sound of the water hitting the tub.

He couldn't help wondering if Ilya was having as much trouble as he was with not being able to get private time to jack off. For all he knew, Ilya was taking care of that in bed, after Shane was asleep. But Shane hadn't been sleeping much at all, so that'd be limited too.

Could he get away with doing it with his shower time? If he tried, and Ilya figured it out, would he be a gentleman and pretend he hadn't heard, or would he be himself and tease Shane mercilessly? It probably wasn't worth the risk, but the longer this went on, the more difficult it was going to be, both to resist stabbing Ilya with his hockey stick, and to resist looking at his perfect ass.

**

Things went well the next few days. They won their game against Lakehead but it was a tight one. Shane had to admit that their line was working together better than ever after Playoff Camp. It was probably because he and Ilya were so sick of being stuck together all the time, that the one time they got to enjoy themselves was when they were free on the ice, able to move and play however they wanted. Whatever it was, it was working.

But that didn't make the curse any easier to handle the rest of the time.

"Hey, Rozanov." Shane poked Ilya's foot where it stuck out of the sheets. "You're going to be late for class."

"Whatever," Ilya mumbled into his pillow.

Shane peeked his head around the door jamb at the schedule they'd posted. Their only class today was Ilya's, and it was one he hadn't marked as urgent. He slipped back in the door and sat on the edge of Ilya's bed. "Are you sick?" That would suck. Shane would have to call out of his classes for being sick too, but being stuck in close quarters like this would mean he'd inevitably actually get sick right after and they'd both be stuck out for twice as long, maybe even miss a playoff game.

"No. I'm fine. Fuck class. Just - do whatever. Ignore me."

Shane shrugged and pulled his laptop out from under Ilya's bed. He sat in the corner and brought up his Research Methods essay and started digging through his notes. When an hour had passed and Ilya hadn't moved. Shane went and poked him again. "I'm hungry. We should make breakfast."

Ilya heaved a huge sigh. "Can you reach the kitchen without me?"

"Aren't you hungry?"

"Not really."

"Okay..." Shane had never seen Ilya like this before. He was always bright and attentive, always smirking, always on top of everything. Even though he approached life infuriatingly casually, it never seemed like he didn't care. Today, it seemed like he didn't care.

Shane left the door open and stretched the curse as he shuffled over to the kitchen. The pain flared up, but he grabbed a bran muffin and some precut cheese sticks and deemed that good enough. He took them back to the bedroom and ate while he stared at the lump that was Ilya Rozanov. "Do you need anything?" he finally asked.

Ilya huffed. "I need you to fuck off, Shane Hollander."

But there was something in Ilya's voice that didn't sound like that was what he wanted. "Fuck you," Shane said without heat, and he perched on the edge of the bed again. "Sit up and eat this. If you don't eat and you skip dryland today your muscles are going to start eating themselves."

Ilya groaned but this time he pushed up to sitting and accepted one of the cheese sticks. He chewed it morosely, staring off into the middle distance.

"What's wrong?" Shane asked quietly.

Ilya shrugged. "Is just..."

Shane waited.

"Some days are hard days for everyone, yeah?"

"Yeah...but I dunno. I never have trouble getting out of bed."

Ilya's bright eyes cut to Shane's and held them intensely, like he was evaluating everything Shane had ever thought and figuring out if he was worthy of whatever Ilya was going to say next. Ilya said a word in Russian, then followed it with, "Some days are...I don't know the word. Everything is all the time." He waved his hand expressively through the air.

Somehow, Shane got it. "Relentless. It's all relentless. There's no break from all the bullshit that is life."

Ilya nodded, snagging another cheese stick. "Yeah, that's it. Relentless. I go hard and then sometimes I have days where hard is not possible. Easy is not possible. I have to...not."

"And this is a Not Day?"

"Yes."

"Okay." Shane handed Ilya the rest of the cheese sticks and dragged his laptop up on the bed. He shoved Ilya's hip until he slid over, then started scrolling through his saved movies, calling out titles. "Have you seen The Princess Bride?"

Ilya shook his head.

"Okay. We need to order real food at some point and this afternoon you need to at least drag yourself to the living room so I can get a workout in, but if we're going to do a Not Day, we're going to do it right."

Ilya stared at Shane with a curious look on his face. "Okay."

Shane hit play on the movie.

**

"Dinner at UC?" Ilya asked, and Shane nodded. They had mostly been eating quick meals and things they could microwave, not wanting to risk the awkward public shuffle of lining up at the student centre, but there wasn't much in the way of groceries left, and Shane had a balance burning a hole in his student card.

They got toggled up then headed out and started the walk down to campus and towards the University Centre mess hall. Ilya ordered the special, which was lasagna, and Shane grabbed a salad bar box and started filling it up, Ilya trailing along behind him while he waited for his order to be called.

"Oh, hey, Hollander."

Shane's heart dropped to his feet. He looked up to find Wyatt, Troy, and Bood eating at a table under the window. Wyatt waved, then he frowned. "Roz?"

Ilya looked up like he was just noticing all of them and waved. "Hello."

Hazy and Bood looked back and forth between Shane and Ilya with matching frowns. Troy glanced between them once, snorted, then went back to devouring his pizza. "Are you guys hanging out together?" Bood asked.

"No," Shane said, trying not to throw up and run away. "We ran into each other coming in. I guess everyone had the same idea." He gestured at their table. "Too tired to cook tonight." As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Shane's heart stopped. He couldn't cook at his dorm. He didn't have a kitchen. But the guys didn't seem to notice his slip up.

Ilya nodded. "I am waiting for my meal."

"So how about our chances against London tomorrow?" Shane said, a little too loudly to be normal.

Bood shrugged. "If we play like we have been, we're gonna crush them."

Ilya's name was called from the counter and his hand gently tapped the centre of Shane's back in warning that he was about to move away. He stepped back to grab his order and the curse grabbed Shane's sternum and pulled, trying to drag him backwards towards Ilya.

Shane tried to smile but knew it came out more of a grimace. He held up his half-filled salad box. "Whelp. Better get my kinesiology assignment done so it's not hanging over me at the game tomorrow. See ya."

But instead of waving him off, the whole table was giving him a weird look. "Why are you guys acting so weird?" Hazy said. "I don't think I've ever seen you in the same building not chirping each other continuously before."

"Just focused on winning," Shane said, feeling Ilya come up behind him again. The curse eased and he let out a relieved breath.

"Are you wearing Roz's sweater?" Barrett asked.

"No."

He was.

**

The next day at practice was like the magical hockey fairies had come down from the sky and blessed them all. No matter where on the ice Ilya was, Shane was there, ready to receive the puck, and every time Shane was on a breakaway, there was Ilya, backing him up. It was like fucking Disney on ice and Shane was so revved up by the end, he was nearly in tears.

Ilya skated into his side when Coach blew the whistle and wrapped an arm around Shane's shoulders. "Well, Hollander. Turns out you can actually skate if you put some effort into it."

"Turns out you can actually be a team player if you pull your head out of your ass long enough to realize you've got teammates out here," Shane shot back.

Ilya laughed so genuinely, Hayden shot them a strange look.

Shane shook Ilya's arm off his shoulders. "Play like that tomorrow and we've got a chance of moving on."

Putting a few players strategically between them, but still staying close enough to satisfy the curse, Shane made his way into the locker room, took a quick shower, and dressed. He hung back as the team filed out, until it was just him and Ilya.

Or he thought it was. "Hey, Shane, can I talk to you for a second?"

Shane nearly jumped out of his skin as he realized Hayden was right behind him. "Uh, yeah. Sure." He shot Ilya a loaded look, and Ilya stood and stretched, watching Shane and Hayden out of the corner of his eye.

Hayden started to walk away, expecting Shane to follow him, and Shane looked at Ilya in panic. Ilya tipped his head to the bank of lockers that divided the room, and Shane gave a little nod. "Over here," he said to Hayden, gesturing to the other side of the lockers.

Shane backed up against the lockers and a moment later, felt Ilya settle in on the other side. It wasn't ideal, there was a twinge of pain in his chest, but it was better than being separated entirely. "What's up?"

Hayden looked around like he was making sure Ilya couldn't hear them, and Shane tried his best to keep a neutral, unflustered expression. "Are you okay?" Hayden finally asked quietly. "I've barely seen you since Playoff Camp."

"Oh. Yeah, of course. I'm awesome. Did you see us out there? We're kicking ass."

"Sure, but I mean, like, off the ice."

"Yeah. I'm busy. My classes are all going crazy right now at the worst possible time."

"We haven't hung out in a while."

"I know. I'm really sorry. I just really need a few weeks to focus on my school work and get through playoffs." Shane gave Hayden a playful tap on the shoulder with his fist. "I miss you too buddy."

"Okay..." It seemed like there was still something he wanted to say. Shane waited. "So people keep telling me they see you hanging out with Rozanov," he finally blurted out.

Shane felt his cheeks heat and crossed his fingers behind his back that the blush wasn't visible. "Really? I mean I bumped into him at the UC the other night, but..."

"J.J. saw you guys running together."

"Did he? I don't think that was me."

"You guys are both kind of distinctive looking."

"Hmmm," Shane tried to look as dumb as possible, like it was all as much a mystery to him as it was to Hayden.

"I just... Roz is kind of an asshole and I want to make sure everything's okay."

"Everything's fine, Hayden. If I hung out with Ilya, it'd be because I wanted to. Which I don't. So I won't." He could feel Ilya trying not to laugh on the other side of the lockers.

Hayden leaned in. "I just want to make sure he's not...you know."

"I don't know."

"Taking advantage of your...weird little obsession."

"What?"

"You know. I don't really know what the deal is cause you don't talk to me about it, but you've always had like a crush or something on him. And he seems like the kind of dick who might take advantage of that to torment you so I was just -"

"A crush!" Shane nearly screeched. "What are you talking about?"

"You stare at him all the time and you're obsessed with what he's doing and his stats and you talk about him nonstop."

"Because he's my *rival*, Hayden. I want his place on the team. Not cause I have a crush!"

Hayden held his hands up. "Okay, okay. I just want you to know I've got your back. And if you need me to, you know, tell him to back off a little or give you an excuse to duck out on him, I'm here for you, man."

"Wow, okay. Well, while I appreciate that, I really don't need any help. Ilya and I have been trying to play down the whole rival thing because we know the captain vote is going to be tight and we don't want to create a rift on the team when one of us wins, okay? It's nothing more than that. Just good sportsmanship. It was fun pretending to hate each other but at the end of the day, we're all teammates, right?"

Hayden narrowed his eyes and dropped his voice again. "But you do hate him, right?"

"Yeah, he's a complete asshole." Shane coughed to cover the small sound of glee he heard behind the lockers. "But I'm fine. I can handle pretending to be friends with him for a few more weeks. Then I'll win the C and that'll shut him up pretty effectively."

"Alright, man. Makes sense." Hayden held up his hand for a high five. "Come over to J.J.'s with me?"

Shane sighed. "Nah. Wish I could, but biology two is kicking my ass and I'm going to see if I can hit up my TA's late office hours."

Hayden was visibly disappointed but he didn't push it. "We'll hang out over the summer, right?"

"All the time," Shane promised.

"Awesome. Okay. Good luck with the class." Hayden grabbed his bag and walked off.

Shane walked back around the lockers to find Ilya sprawled across the bench, only half dressed, clutching his sides as he laughed silently. "Fuck you," Shane told him, gathering up the rest of his stuff.

"Oh, but is so cute! You have a crush on me. And I am so bad and taking advantage of baby Shane. How...what is word? *Wicked* of me."

"Shut up. Get dressed. I wasn't lying about needing to study for bio." Shane bumped him with his bag.

Ilya rocked up to his feet and looked down at Shane, his lip sliding between his teeth. "I don't know. You sure you feel safe with me? What if I take you home to have my way with you?" He leaned in a little and Shane's skin heated from head to foot.

"I think I've proven I can take you," Shane said, then he realized what he said and gestured wildly to the ice. "Out there! I'll kick your ass any day. Shut up. Just get dressed or I'm dragging you home half naked and we'll see what our friends have to say about that."

Ilya pulled his sweater on and hooked his bag over his shoulder, following Shane out of the locker room and into the chill air. "Is very sweet of Hayden to look out for you."

"It is," Shane insisted.

"Well, he doesn't need to worry. I will take very good care of you," Ilya said with a chuckle.

Shane wasn't sure why that made his heart skip a beat.

**

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," Shane dashed up the steps to the apartment, Ilya tight on his heels.

"Move, Hollander!"

"I'm going as fast as I can!" Shane shoved the key in the lock and fumbled the door open. They both stumbled through the door and out of the pelting sleet.

"Holy fuck," Ilya cursed, jumping up and down on the welcome mat that said "Wipe Your Paws" with a bunch of pawprints on it. Ilya claimed it had come with the apartment, but Shane was pretty sure he bought it.

"I'm so cold." Shane's teeth chattered as he rubbed his hands up and down his biceps. What had started as a cool but sunny Sunday morning had devolved rapidly into a frigid, wet sleet that soaked them right when they reached the farthest point of their run. Despite dashing back at top speed, they were both drenched and chilled to the bone. Ilya's lips looked a little blue.

"Shower," Ilya said. "Now."

Shane grabbed two towels and threw them in the dryer on high while Ilya got the water running. There was a moment where they both faltered with who should get in first, then Ilya peeled off his clothes and unceremoniously dragged Shane into the tub with him.

"If you die of freezing on my bathroom floor, no one will believe it was not murder and I will go to jail," Ilya explained.

"Fair enough." Shane pulled his shirt, shorts, and boxers off and tossed them on the other side of the curtain, awkwardness be damned. They huddled together under the hot water until feeling started pouring back into Shane's feet. "Fuck," he breathed out as the shivering finally subsided.

"We should have gone to the gym."

"And what? Had one of us awkwardly stand next to the other's treadmill if they're too full? We should have just checked the weather forecast and come back before the rain started."

Ilya shrugged then turned his face into the water. Shane was abruptly aware of just how close they were standing, that they were very naked, and he hadn't been able to give himself any measure of release for several days now. The last time had also been very quick, very still, and very quiet, after Ilya had fallen asleep, so it hadn't been particularly satisfying.

But now he was alone in a hot shower with a naked man who also admitted to being attracted to men, and his dick was very *very* pleased about the situation. Shane tried to tell his dick to fuck off, but Ilya moaned softly as the warm water sluiced down his muscled back and that ship sailed faster than a superyacht.

Then Ilya opened his eyes and looked right down at Shane's hardening cock as if he could hear it calling to him. He grinned. "See something you like?" he asked.

"Fuck off." Shane curled his body away, like he could hide his nudity in a tub designed for one with a man whose side he wasn't able to leave. "It's kind of been a while since I had any privacy."

"Oh, I know. Is very *hard* for me too."

Shane told his eyes not to take the bait but they couldn't resist. They flicked down to see Ilya rapidly facing the same problem as Shane. Though he seemed zero percent bothered by it.

"This fucking sucks," Shane breathed, hoping either the cold or the heat had already reddened his cheeks enough that the blush wouldn't show.

"Doesn't have to suck." Ilya's hand brushed down his chest and over his stomach. It was one of those gestures that was either innocent or very very not depending on the eye of the beholder, and Ilya's beholder's eye was currently struggling to look anywhere else.

"What are you -?"

"I just think, you know, we could take care of ourselves. No need to suffer in more ways than we have to with this stupid curse. We both need it, right?"

"Right," Shane squeaked out.

"Then no shame in it. And we both like men, so is not too bad of a turn off that the other is here, yeah?"

Shane swallowed hard, not sure if that was how he'd put it. "Yeah..."

"Okay, then you do what you need to do and so will I, and then we go have lunch and do our homework."

Ilya turned away, just a little, giving Shane space but not fully blocking his view. But when Ilya's hand drifted lower, Shane snapped around, turning them back to back. It wasn't that he didn't want to see Ilya touch himself, it was that he couldn't believe just how badly he *did* want to see Ilya touch himself. He'd never in a million years say it to the man's face - his ego was big enough already, thank you very much - but Ilya was hot and there was no point in denying it. With Shane's experience with men being as limited but as coveted as it was, if he had mental footage of Ilya Rozanov jerking off in the shower burned into his mind, he'd quite possibly never be able to think of anything else whenever he jerked off himself.

It became abruptly clear that there were two downsides to turning his back 1) he could still hear Ilya, and apparently "we'll each just do our own thing" included being as loud as he wanted and 2) Shane had a very very good imagination so footage was being created, even with his eyes shut.

Still, it had been two weeks since Shane had had a decent orgasm, and awkward or not, he wasn't going to waste this - especially if Ilya wasn't holding back. Shane wrapped his right hand around his cock and braced his left against the tile wall of the shower enclosure. He stroked up, squeezing around the head, and his legs almost went to jelly.

Fuck. It felt so good. Shane kept his eyes closed tight and tried to ignore the wet sounds and soft gasps coming from right behind him. He focused entirely on the way his hand felt around his dick.

But then the noises from Ilya's side ramped up. The splashes from the water shifted and Shane imagined he was moving faster now, speeding up as the pleasure grew. Shane's hand started moving faster too, a shiver of heat urging him on.

A small groan leaked out of Shane's lips, despite his best effort, and he heard a soft thud behind him, like Ilya's hand had hit the tile. It was impossible to forget Ilya was there. It was impossible to ignore the fantasies that pressed in at the edges of Shane's mind: that Ilya would turn and wrap his arms around him, jerk off against his back, push him down until his hands hit the tile wall and fuck him until he couldn't walk straight.

When Shane came, it felt like it went on for an hour, waves of pleasure pushing gasps out of his throat and coating the side of the tub in come. Behind him, he heard a cut off moan and then several sharp intakes of breath that suggested Ilya had followed right after him. For a while, all was quiet, and then something bumped into Shane's back.

His heart rate skyrocketed, but when he turned, Ilya was handing him the shampoo bottle as if nothing at all out of the ordinary had happened.

The cold threatened to creep back in as soon as they stepped out of the shower, so Shane dressed hurriedly, and they both were in sweats and hoodies when they came out of Ilya's bedroom. There was a strange, not-quite-awkward-but-definitely-unsure moment where they both just stood there staring at each other.

Then the front door to the apartment opened.

"Ah!" Shane yelled, launching himself backwards from Ilya as if they'd been caught making out in a janitor's closet in high school.

Ilya's roommate kicked his shoes off on the front mat. "Oh, hey," he said. "Sorry to interrupt. Just need to grab a few things." He walked past them to his room. "How's it going man," he said to Ilya. "Uh... You're one of the hockey guys. Sean, right?"

"Um. Shane." Shane offered his hand to shake and the guy - Jeff, Shane abruptly remembered - shook it.

"Right. Sorry." Jeff disappeared into his room.

Shane turned wide, shocked eyes on Ilya, who for once in his life had the decency to also look stunned. There was some shuffling from Jeff's room then he came back out with an armful of stuff - some clothes, a pair of boots, and a set of high-end headphones.

"Have a good night!" he called as he shoved his feet in his boots and disappeared out the door again.

There was a long silence and Ilya and Shane both stared after him, then, simultaneously, they broke into cackling, uncontrolled laughter.

"I guess not everyone cares that we're spending time together," Shane barely managed to squeak out between peels.

Ilya just shook his head, eyes shining, unable to speak.

Things really couldn't get any weirder than this.

**

Things didn't get weirder, in fact, if anything, they just got easier. Orbiting around Ilya became as natural as breathing. They went to class, they went to practice, they touched often and on mutual unspoken agreement, to relieve the pain from the curse. And on the rare occasions they showered alone together at the apartment, they jerked off, back to back and then pretended it wasn't happening the rest of the time.

On the ice, they were killing it. They were winning almost all their playoff games. Practice was like a dream. Their line was destroying every play Coach tried against them, and Shane and Ilya worked together like one hockey god split into two bodies. When the semi-finals against London came, Shane felt readier than he ever had in his life.

From the first faceoff, the Gryphons dominated the game. London's goalie was good, but that was all they had against them that night, and the Gryphons pushed and pushed and pushed and ultimately, it was too much. They were up 5-3 going into the third period, and Shane was flushed full of spiced adrenaline.

Coach called for a line change, and Shane launched himself over the boards, his blades hitting the ice the same moment Ilya's did. They split up, circling the action wide, then Shane, seeing an opening, dove in. He flicked the puck out from between London's left winger's feet and flicked it across to Ilya who circled behind Hazy and pushed out hard into enemy territory.

Defense descended on them, but Shane snuck around back and took an easy pass from Ilya, bounced it to Bood, then took it back to fire one on goal. The goalie took it in the chest but it rebounded into Ilya's stick and he backed off, ready to try again. Without an opening, Ilya passed to Shane, but Shane turned left when he should have turned right and suddenly found himself surrounded by London's defense.

"Shit," Shane panted out, scanning for an opening for either himself or the puck, but it took him a moment too long to make a decision, and as he rounded the far corner, still calculating, a solid chest checked him hard into the boards.

Shane was used to being checked, but as he bounced back off the boards, another player came up from behind him with no time to stop. He collided with Shane's right side and his stick hooked up under Shane's pads and the hard end rammed up painfully just under Shane's ribs.

Shane stumbled and went down as the unexpectedly hard hit knocked the breath from his lungs. Ilya was at his side in a heartbeat, grabbing at him.

"I'm fine," Shane called, holding up a hand. "I'm fine," he said again, quieter, just to Ilya.

"For real?" Ilya asked, because they both shared the same horrifying fear of one of them being benched and thereby benching the other.

"For real." Shane pulled his glove off and managed to give Ilya's wrist a private squeeze to help himself up. "I just need a minute."

As soon as Shane was on his feet, Ilya turned to the player who had brought him down. "What the fuck was that?!" he yelled.

"An accident, Rozanov, calm down," the other London defenseman said.

"Like, fuck it was."

The player that had stick checked Shane was suddenly all up in Ilya's face. "Back off."

Ilya shoved him away. "Only way you can win is cheating, huh? Take out one of our best scorers with a cheap shot!"

The ref skated to a halt next to them. "Alright, boys," he said. "Let's keep the penalties to a minimum here."

"There'd better fucking be at least one." Ilya stood his ground until the other team skated off, ignoring the warning look the ref was giving him for mouthing off. Ilya leaned backwards on his skates a little, sliding a few feet until his back slowly collided with Shane's chest, staying firmly in front of him. Shane grabbed Ilya's jersey with both hands, letting him know he was there, but also steadying his own off balance. He resisted the urge to lean his forehead against Ilya's back while he continued to try and catch his breath against the tight band of pain around his middle.

"I'm pretty sure it *was* an accident," Shane gasped.

Ilya growled. "Like fuck it was."

"You guys are being astonishingly weird," Bood said from beside them. "Coach is calling us off, come on."

They skated off to the bench, and Ilya used Shane's elbow to help him up and off the ice, as if he'd broken his leg. Shane shot him a look and was surprised to see that Ilya looked genuinely angry.

Ilya was a shit-talker on the ice, everyone knew that, but his approach was usually slinging painfully perceptive zingers with a cocky smirk, not spitting vitriol with a glare. But he was *pissed*, and Shane couldn't quite see why.

London got two minutes for crosschecking, but Coach put Barrett on the power play instead of Ilya, perhaps sensing that if Ilya went out there, all he'd do was put another man in the box and level the playing field.

The team trainer asked Shane if he wanted to go back and get checked out but he shook his head and asked for an ice pack. Shane shoved it under his pads and over the spot that was still throbbing. He took a deep breath in and let it out. His ribs moved easily and there wasn't that horrifying catch of a broken bone, so at worst they were bruised. Even more likely was that he'd gotten the breath knocked out of him but the bruise was lower, on the squishy part of him, and while it would look awful for a few days, at worst he'd be a little stiff. It was possible for one of them to be on the bench and the other on the ice, but the curse didn't like

it. Shane knew neither he nor Ilya wanted to test if they could manage it longer than a penalty kill, let alone for a whole game.

Shane could still play but that didn't stop him from being eager for this particular game to end. Ilya pressed up against him while they watched play restarting, the crowded bench an easy cover for how close they needed to be. He kept shooting worried little glances at Shane who was trying to breathe normally and look the picture of health, despite the throbbing pain in his side.

It was reasonable for Ilya to be anxious - if Shane couldn't go back in, they'd have to come up with some reason why Ilya couldn't either and lose two thirds of their first line, or they'd have to split and somehow play through the game. It was impossible. It was just unusual for Ilya to lose both his temper and his chill. Shane leaned forward to cover the moment then reached over and squeezed Ilya's knee, trying to be as reassuring as possible.

When the line change approached, Coach gave Shane a questioning eyebrow and he nodded. Their line went in a moment later. It hurt - it hurt like fuck - but it didn't stop him from playing just well enough to hold their lead to the final buzzer.

Shane was slow getting changed after the game, standing under the shower for a long time, even though he knew the hot water would make the bruise more stiff and he should really be in the ice tub. As usual, he and Ilya hung back, waiting until the locker room emptied before they headed home. Shane pulled on his shirt and turned to find Ilya beside him, already holding both their bags. "Should I order an Uber?" Ilya asked.

"Nah, I can walk."

They didn't say much during the long trek back to Old University. Back at the apartment, while they heated up yesterday's pasta, Ilya kept shooting Shane looks.

"I'm really okay. You can stop worrying."

"If one of us gets -"

"I know, okay. I know. It's not like I took the hit on purpose."

Ilya held up his hands. "I was not saying that. It was a cheap shot. Just...worried."

"Yeah, me too. Not much we can do about it though."

"Yeah."

They sat on the couch working on their assignments that night, Ilya turned sideways so his toes would press against Shane's thigh. It always felt good to physically touch again after stretching the curse in the locker room.

But that night, Shane struggled to sleep. When he lay on his good side, the stretched skin made the bruise throb. He grunted and rolled to his other side, but that was even worse, the firm floor under his thin camping pads digging painfully into his bruised side. He flopped back on his back with a sigh. He wasn't going to be able to sleep.

"For fucks sake," Ilya groaned, "what are you doing down there? A dance routine?"

"I can't get comfortable," Shane muttered. "I'm too sore from the hit earlier."

Shane heard Ilya sit up. "You said it was not too bad."

"It's not too bad, but it's bad enough that once I don't have any distractions, it's all I can think about."

"Oh, yeah? You looking for distraction?" Ilya drawled, and Shane blushed hot as he realized how that sounded.

"Injuries always hurt worse at night," Shane said in a rush, trampling over whatever innuendo Ilya was on his way to make.

"Come here," Ilya said, flicking on the bedside lamp.

"What?"

"Let me see. Sometimes maybe it hurts more because is worse than you thought. We need you healthy so we can both play in the finals. Show me."

Shane pushed to his feet then sat down on the edge of the bed. Ilya was shirtless, his hair down in a mess of glowing curls around his head. The sheets were pooled at his hips, and Shane knew he was wearing flannel pajama pants underneath, but it was far too easy to imagine that all that was between them was the thin layer of the cotton sheet.

Shane tugged up his t-shirt, and showed Ilya the purpled patch just below his ribs. It'd go yellow in a few days and then linger endlessly, he knew that from experience, but he also knew there wasn't any serious damage.

Ilya frowned at him then poked his ribs, his large, warm hand, squeezing each bone gently as he worked his way down Shane's chest.

"They're fine," Shane husked out, his voice suddenly pack-a-day rough. "I didn't break anything."

"No offense," Ilya said, with a smirk that made whatever came out of his mouth offensive no matter what it was, "but that guy was like forty times your size. Is a miracle you survived at all. Like bulldozer running over field mouse."

Shane punched him in the shoulder, but then Ilya's fingers reached the edge of the bruise and Shane flinched away. "It's sore there."

"Sorry." Ilya was back to frowning.

"I'm really fine." Shane dropped his t-shirt back down, but Ilya's hand stayed settled just above his hip, right below the bottom of the bruise. His eyes stayed fixed on Shane's injury even after it was hidden.

"Sleep up here," Ilya said softly.

"What?"

"Sleep up here. The curse will be happier and we will sleep better if we are closer. Plus you will never be comfortable down there with bruise like that. Sleep up here."

Shane tried to swallow, but his throat was suddenly tight. It wasn't like Ilya was proposing anything insane. Not only had they seen each other naked, they'd been party to a lot more than just looking. So lying together clothed in a queen sized bed was barely suggestive compared to where they'd been.

And yet...

It was intimate in a way the shower wasn't. And the tension in the air made it clear they were both aware of that difference.

Shane nodded, not sure if he could speak, and he bent down to grab his pillow and move his water glass to the bedside table. Ilya shuffled over, making room with his pillows. They lay down on their backs, side by side.

"Is better?" Ilya asked.

"Much. Thanks." It actually was. The last of the tension in Shane's lower back melted away as he sunk into the luxurious mattress. Three and a half weeks of sleeping on a hard floor after a week of sleeping on a crappy bunk at camp had done him in. This was like lying on a cloud. Shane groaned, making Ilya laugh. "It's been a while since I slept in a nice bed."

Shane could hear the laughter in Ilya's voice when he said, "Such a shame. Well, I hope you will give mine a good review."

"Sure." Shane rolled his eyes. "Let me just pull up your Yelp page. I'm sure my review will get lost among the dozens."

"More like hundreds," Ilya teased. "Are you jealous, Hollander?"

With writhing discomfort, Shane realized he was. And not in the way Ilya meant it - that Shane was envious that Ilya was getting laid - but in the other way, that Shane was jealous of those that got to share Ilya's bed. And now here he was sharing it, but only because of a stupid curse, and not because Ilya would ever have invited him here otherwise. "I'm really tired," Shane said grumpily, and he turned on his side, back to Ilya, and stared at the wall.

The room went silent for a moment, then Ilya shifted a little, making the mattress bounce. "You know..." Ilya started, voice dripping with mischief.

Just the tone alone shot a bolt of electricity straight to Shane's groin. He stopped breathing. *Pretend to be asleep.*

"The curse always seems happier when we are closer."

"I guess," Shane said, immediately ruining any believability to his ruse.

"So you could come closer," Ilya purred.

"I -" Shane didn't know what to say. Every inch of his body was urging him to wriggle backwards right into Ilya's arms. Their couple of little shower trysts had done more for Shane's wellbeing and his game than the entire University sports medicine team ever had, and if they had that much fun without even looking at each other, he couldn't even imagine how it could be with Ilya's hands on him.

Ilya stayed still and quiet, letting the invitation hang in the air between them. He wasn't going to make a move without Shane's permission, and Shane wasn't sure if he could bring himself to close the gap. Wasn't it a terrible idea?

But even as he had that thought, he couldn't voice exactly why it was a terrible idea. This curse had already taken all semblance of privacy from them. He'd seen every facet of Ilya over the last three weeks and he knew without a shadow of a doubt that though Ilya would mock Shane privately for everything under the sun, if Shane backed up right now, Ilya would never use it *against* him. And Ilya would also respect that it was up to Shane when and if he wanted to come out. Ilya was a dick, sure, but he wasn't a cruel one. And Shane was finding it harder and harder to convince himself that he disliked the man he was currently sharing a bed with.

Shane backed up, shifting towards the centre of the bed, and Ilya's hand slid under the covers, up over Shane's back, to grip his hip. Ilya's touch was calming, as it always was, but this time it was also electrifying. Shane was already tenting his boxers, so he stayed facing away, still not sure what exactly Ilya was inviting him to do. But when Ilya guided Shane's hips back to nestle in the curve of his own, Shane could feel Ilya's hardness digging into his ass. That knocked an involuntary groan from Shane's throat, and Ilya huffed hot breath on his neck in response.

Ilya ground against Shane's back, ignoring all pretense that they might just be cuddling, and immediately showing Shane exactly what he had in mind. Shane cursed and pushed back against Ilya, silently begging for more. This wasn't like the shower. This wasn't going to be just the two of them each doing what they needed to do. Shane was finally going to get to find out what Ilya's touch felt like.

Shane ground backward and Ilya thrust forward until Shane couldn't take the lack of contact on his dick anymore and he rolled over, facing Ilya. Ilya immediately hummed with delight and pushed Shane on his back, rolling up on his elbow to cover over him. Ilya's thigh slipped between Shane's leg and Shane's hips thrust forward of their own volition, grinding his too-long ignored cock against Ilya's thick thigh.

"Oh, fuck," Shane breathed trying to keep from whining at finally getting the touch he'd been torturing himself thinking about for so long.

Ilya dropped his face into Shane's neck in reply, breathing hot air under Shane's ear as he panted heavily. He rolled his hips, grinding down and dragging the soft curve inside his hipbone over Shane's cock. His left hand wrapped under and around Shane's shoulder,

anchoring them together, while his other hand braced on the mattress to keep himself from crushing Shane completely.

Shane closed his eyes and hooked his arms around Ilya's neck, twisted his fingers through Ilya's curls, and held on for dear life.

Their bodies rocked together, the rhythm almost desperate in its intensity. Ilya rubbed up against Shane in so many places: his hot mouth on Shane's neck, his arms, their chests pressed together, and his hard thigh grinding over Shane's cock, maxing out the possible friction.

The air filled with their combined gasps and moans as the tension ratcheted tighter. Shane was getting close, pleasure building deep in his core with little tingles that pushed him closer and closer to the edge. He wanted to drown in the sensation of being covered over, pressed down, locked in Ilya's hold. He knew he was making feral noises but he couldn't even hear properly over the rushing of blood in his ears and the sounds Ilya was making right back. His balls tightened, every nerve in his body a live wire.

Ilya pushed himself up a little, his rough cheek scraping over Shane's as he moved, until their mouths were only centimetres apart. Their eyes met for a moment, and Ilya must have seen something encouraging there, because a heartbeat later, he bent and devoured Shane's mouth.

That was all it took; Shane exploded.

He panted and groaned as he came in his boxers, the wet spot growing as their bodies continued to grind together. Ilya nipped at Shane's bottom lip as he thrust against Shane's stomach and only a few minutes later, he gasped and jerked, warm wet soaking through his thin cotton pajama pants to mix with Shane's release.

"Fuck," Ilya groaned, then he flopped to the side.

"Well," Shane said softly, more to himself than anything else.

Ilya stripped his pants off and used them to wipe himself up, then leaned over the edge of the bed to open the bottom drawer of his dresser and pull out a fresh pair. Shane copied him, tossing his dirty boxers in the hamper and digging out clean ones from his duffle. He wasn't sure what to do now, but he lay back down, since Ilya had invited him up to sleep, not to rub off on each other.

Ilya smiled, cocky and satisfied, then he closed his eyes with a yawn. "Bet you sleep like a fucking baby now, Hollander." And he rolled over and went to sleep.

Shane stared at the dark of Ilya's ceiling, thoughts swirling, wondering what the fuck had just happened. They had sex - sort of. Certainly more sex-like than the shower had been. And Ilya had *kissed him*. But now Ilya was playing it off like it was nothing. Was it nothing? The electricity currently thrumming through Shane's body didn't want it to be nothing. It wanted it to be something. Something they did again. And a lot.

But there was also a new, fluttery feeling in Shane's stomach, something like anxiety but lighter. There was no way he was developing actual feelings for Ilya, though. It was just being stuck together. The forced closeness. It was making him think there was something there when there wasn't. As soon as the season was over and the curse was broken, Shane was going right back to his old life, which contained as little Ilya as possible.

**

Practice next afternoon was amazing again. Shane and Ilya worked together like they were telepathic instead of just physically bound to each other. Shane couldn't even feel the bruise that still coloured his side.

The puck moved and they both moved with it, like planets orbiting around a sun. Shane was starting to feel a little bit sorry for Boob because he had so little to do. Everything just *worked*.

They went straight from practice to Ilya's class, then Shane's, grabbed lunch without being spotted, and headed back to the apartment.

Ilya had an assignment due the next day, so Shane sat at the tiny table while Ilya spread out on the couch with his laptop. Shane was mostly caught up on his school work so he scrolled the internet, texted back and forth with Rose for a bit, and sent his mom a few hockey memes.

A string of rapid Russian that was unmistakably impressive cursing came from the couch and Shane startled up. "You okay?"

"Sorry," Ilya grumbled. "Is...frustrating."

"What are you working on?"

"This is essay for media analysis. But this prof is hardass for grammar and -" Ilya shrugged.

"Do you want some help?"

Ilya looked up sharply, like he had been expecting Shane to say something different. "You are busy?"

"Not really."

"Oh. Okay. Yes, please."

Shane came over and sat next to Ilya, enjoying the way their closeness settled him. "Let me see."

Ilya put his computer in Shane's lap and Shane scrolled through the essay. He hadn't seen the advertisement they were analyzing so he couldn't speak to the argument Ilya was making, but it seemed sound to him. "It's just the editing?"

"Yeah, the little red line says I have all the mistakes, but I do not always know how to fix them. My English brain is tired."

"Right." Shane read through, stopping every now and then to make edits. Ilya leaned in close, over his shoulder, watching as Shane changed the spellings and sentence structures. His breath was warm on Shane's neck, the press of his shoulder firmly tucked between the couch and the back of Shane's arm.

Shane found himself fumbling the keys as he tried to stay focused on the essay instead of on how close Ilya was. By sheer force of will, Shane managed to make it through the last sentence.

"There," Shane croaked out, turning to meet Ilya's eyes. But Ilya was sitting so closely that just put them face to face, barely a few inches between their noses.

"Thank you," Ilya smiled, and it seemed genuine, no trace of his usual smirk. "That would have taken me all night."

"No problem." Did Shane's voice always sound that rough?

Ilya's eyes flicked from Shane's eyes to his mouth and back up again and Shane couldn't help but wonder if he was thinking about their kiss last night. Shane had certainly been thinking about it. All day.

Then Ilya cleared his throat and leaned back, taking his computer with him and giving Shane the tiniest amount of space to find some oxygen to suck in. "Do you want to watch a movie before bed?" Ilya asked.

"Sure." Shane scurried off to tidy up the table and attempt to settle his pounding heart.

They threw together some dinner and piled into Ilya's bed. They watched Galaxy Quest, and when neither of them seemed inclined to move after, Shane queued up Miracle, which somehow Ilya had also never seen.

As the movie went on, they snuggled further down in bed, and when it ended, Ilya yawned. "How is your ribs?" he asked, and there was an edge of something in his voice, like he was teasing Shane but also like maybe there was a particular answer he wanted.

"Better." Shane glanced over to find Ilya looking at him with something akin to hope. "But still sore," he added.

"You'd better sleep here again, then," Ilya said. There was laughter in his voice, like they both kinda knew it was mostly bullshit.

"Yeah. Wouldn't want a bad night to affect the game tomorrow."

"Exactly."

They brushed their teeth and got changed, orbiting around each other the way that had become natural over the last few weeks. Shane climbed into bed on the same side as last

night, and Ilya tucked in next to him. Shane plugged his phone in to charge and watched as Ilya's eyes flickered back and forth across the pages of a book in Russian. It was pretty incredible, actually, that Ilya did all his schoolwork in a language that wasn't his first, and still did well enough to keep the sports scholarship that had brought him here.

"Your essay was really good," Shane blurted out.

Ilya's eyebrow shot up as he turned his attention to Shane. "Thank you."

"You can ask me to edit any time. I don't mind."

Ilya nodded, brow still furrowed like he was waiting for the other shoe to drop. He didn't look away and neither did Shane, not sure what exactly was crackling between them but not willing to be the one to break it. Then Ilya tossed his book to the side and bent over to press a kiss to the top of Shane's head like they were an old married couple. "Goodnight, Hollander."

Shane swallowed. "Goodnight."

They stayed close, all night, close enough that Shane could feel heat radiating off Ilya's side of the bed, but he couldn't quite bring himself to close the gap.

**

The next night, Shane found himself stretched out on Ilya's couch with the top of his head pressed against Ilya's thigh. Ilya sat with his other leg folded up and flipped through a book that Shane couldn't read the title of. Shane flipped through the flash card app he kept on his phone, trying to memorize all the ligaments for human bio. It felt normal to touch each other, at least a little bit, all of the time now.

Ilya's phone buzzed against the side of Shane's head, and he dug it out of his pocket then hummed.

"What's that?" Shane asked, not recognizing the odd tone to Ilya's voice.

"My father," Ilya said flatly. "Asking about flights home for the summer."

"What?" Shane sat up and stared at Ilya. "Home?"

"I am international student," Ilya said, looking at Shane like he was an idiot. "I always go home for summer break. I am not allowed to get job here and there is no hockey or classes in the summer. So I go to my family."

"There's team camp in August," Shane argued back.

Ilya shrugged. "Is optional."

"That's not really captainly behaviour," Shane muttered.

"Well, we don't know yet who is captain." Ilya's eyes went hard. "And I have no choice."

"Of course you have a choice. You can tell your family no. That you have something more important here."

Ilya's eyebrow quirked up. "Something more important?"

"Yeah, your team!" Shane huffed and pushed to his feet. "Besides, what if this stupid curse isn't broken? It's not like I can go with you."

"It will be broken by summer. Is a hockey curse, and hockey is over in three weeks."

"You don't know that!"

"But it makes sense, no?"

"Argh!" Shane threw his arms in the air and spun in a tight circle. "We haven't even been trying to solve it. What if it *never goes away*. What if we're stuck like this forever? I can't live like this forever!"

"I thought the plan was wait for hockey to be over and see if that fixes it and if not, then we work harder on it. What do you want me to do?"

Shane's anger built like a pressure cooker until he was on the edge of hitting or throwing something. Ilya just didn't *get it*. He just fucked around and expected everything to work out in his favour. "Not everything just works out, Rozanov. Sometimes you have to work hard at something. You can't just dick around and expect the universe to throw everything you want in your lap."

Ilya's frown deepened. "You think I have everything I want?"

"I don't think you care about whether anyone else does, that's for sure. You just swan through life and everything is easy for you. Maybe this curse was your fault, maybe it was the universe finally trying to even everything out and I've just been collateral damage!"

"Shane..."

But Shane was too worked up now and he couldn't stop the rising frustration, like a baking soda and vinegar volcano. He didn't even notice Ilya using his first name. "This is insane! I can't believe my life is actually being dictated by a stupid hockey stick curse right now. I can't - I can't do this anymore!" He spun on his heel and stomped out the front door, slamming it shut behind him. He knew it was all for show - the curse would barely let him get halfway down the block before the pain was too overwhelming, but it was the principle of the matter.

The air wasn't as cold as it had been the last few days, a hint of the first wave of false spring lightening up the frigid ice of winter, so Shane just stuffed his hands in his pockets and walked as far as he could. He reached the end of the block and stopped. He waited for the pain. It didn't come.

He turned at random and tried another block. No pain.

Three blocks later, and there was no escaping the truth now - the curse had been broken.

"Holy shit," Shane breathed. He spun in a slow circle, like he expected to find Ilya standing right behind him, but he'd made it all the way to the edge of a park, and there wasn't a single other soul out on the street. He was truly alone for the first time in two weeks. "Oh my god."

And now that he was thinking about it... when had the curse broken? He'd expected, like, a flash of light, or a great feeling of a weight lifting off his shoulders, but he and Ilya hadn't been more than a few feet from each other for days now. There wasn't much of anything that had pulled them apart for long enough or far enough to trigger the pain.

So...who knew? Maybe for the last few days they'd been living in each other's pockets when they hadn't needed to. But it didn't really matter *when* it had happened, all that did matter was it *had* happened, and they were free.

Shane told his feet to walk him back towards his dorm room for the first time in way too long, but instead they took him to a park bench and sat him down. He was alone, the curse was broken, for the first time since Playoff Camp, he could do whatever he wanted without worrying about anyone else, and all he wanted to do...

...was go back to Ilya.

He couldn't stand ending things on a fight, couldn't stand the thought of Ilya waiting there at home, waiting for the pain to kick in, not knowing if Shane was angry enough to hurt them both just to stay away from him. He couldn't stand the idea of leaving now and never getting the chance to figure out what the fuck had happened between them the last few weeks, what the fuck the last few nights had meant, and where they were going to go from here.

Would Ilya just fly back to Russia in a few months and then they'd start next year's hockey season pretending nothing had happened? Could Shane even live like that?

His hand came up to clutch the spot over his heart where the pain would hit when the curse was there. There was an old echo there, like a healed injury that still carried the ghost of pain with it. Could Shane really walk away right now, do the one thing he'd been dying to do for two weeks: go home by himself, and leave Ilya alone wondering what just happened?

**

When Shane pushed the front door open, he found Ilya sitting on the couch, staring down at his phone. He startled up at the sound of footsteps and his eyes met Shane's. His mouth fell open but no words came out.

"The curse is broken," Shane said.

"I know," Ilya replied, his gaze falling back down. "I watched you turn the corner out the window and nothing came." His hand went to the same spot on his chest that Shane had been rubbing just a little while ago. Ilya swallowed hard and it seemed to take a great effort to drag his eyes up from the carpet to meet Shane's again. "You came back. To get your stuff?"

Shane slowly shook his head. "I came back because being apart from you hurts too much," he confessed.

Ilya swallowed hard. "But the curse..."

Shane shook his head again. "The reason I got upset about you going to Russia for the summer wasn't because of hockey or because of the curse. It was because I'll miss you. And I was afraid to say that. So I got mad instead. I'm sorry."

Ilya stared at Shane in complete shock for a long moment, then broke into a wide smile. "You will miss me, huh?"

Shane frowned. "Don't let it go to your head."

"Maybe this whole curse thing was actually from you, yeah? Excuse to spend more time with me." He was grinning like a shark now, and he pushed off the couch and advanced towards Shane.

"Fuck no. This curse was one of the worst things that has ever happened to me."

Ilya arrived in front of Shane, standing far too close to be casual. "But?" he prompted softly, apparently hearing the caveat in Shane's voice, his own tinged with hope.

"But...getting to spend four weeks stuck to you...wasn't so bad. In the end."

"Just 'not so bad'?" Ilya's arms came up and wrapped around Shane's waist, drawing him in.

But Shane couldn't take not knowing anymore. His hands landed on Ilya's chest. "What about you? Don't you have anything to say?"

"I was waiting for you. I could not tell if you wanted this or not." Ilya leaned in until they were sharing breath. "I would drop that stick again in one heartbeat if it meant I got to do this." And he kissed Shane stupid, like his life depended on it.

**

TWO WEEKS LATER

Pass to me, pass to me, pass to me! The puck flew off Ilya's stick, hit the boards, and bounced directly into the curve of Shane's. They were going to win, no question, they were up by three and the final period clock was already down into single digits. But one more insurance goal couldn't hurt. Shane flicked it in the top corner and the goalie dove but didn't even come close. The light went on and the crowd went wild.

Shane threw his arms in the air and a second later, a large, familiar body collided with his. Shane didn't even try to maintain his balance - he knew Ilya wouldn't let him fall.

"I love you so fucking much," Ilya whisper-shouted in Shane's ear, over the din of the crowd and the yells of their teammates.

Shane just grinned at him as the rest of the team piled on. It took all Shane had to focus for the last nine seconds of play, several stoppages dragging out UofT's inevitable demise. Shane

and Ilya spent most of it on the bench, watching the third and fourth lines waste time keeping the puck out of reach, running out the clock.

When the buzzer sounded, it was all Shane could do to stop from ripping Ilya's pads off and devouring his mouth in front of a couple thousand people and their coaches and teammates. They'd agreed to wait until the fall semester to reveal their relationship to the others. It would seem like too much of a surprise to spring it on everyone during playoffs, but come September, they could explain that they'd spent a bunch of time together over the summer and realized their antagonism towards each other was born out of quite the opposite.

Besides, it made sense for next season's co-captains to spend some time getting to know each other better.

Ilya had negotiated with his family to only go home for four weeks, and the rest of the summer was all theirs. Maybe they'd actually tell everyone at hockey camp. Maybe Shane would drop the Spirit Stick again, just for the fun of it.

Ilya's eyes met Shane's, his grin wider than Shane had ever seen it before, wider than it had been when Coach had announced the team's first ever co-captains, maybe even wider than the day Shane had said *I love you* for the first time two days later. That was okay; Shane's was probably the same. This relationship was always going to balance three sets of needs - Shane's, Ilya's, and hockey's, and Shane wouldn't want it any other way.

"We did it!" Shane yelled, his lips pressed against Ilya's ear. "We fucking did it. Together."

Ilya laughed, grabbing a handful of Shane's jersey to drag him into a tight embrace. "Always together," he replied. "I'm stuck to you like glue, Hollander."

End Notes

Check out the Fulfill A Crave-ing event if you want to fill a fellow GC fan's prompt! All forms of fanwork are welcome, no mins, and fills are open until Boxing Day when the final episode of season 1 arrives! Eeee!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!