

Thanks for the Blind Date

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Thanks for the Blind Date

by [GrendelsMother](#)

Summary

“And you’ve done amazing things for the Cen.... You’re thinking Ottawa. You’re thinking the two of us on the Centaurs together.” Shane felt startled.

“You are not?”

“It’s... Oh my god. It could be. We could be amazing together.”

Ilya’s eyebrows both lifted. “Could be? We definitely are. And on the ice, too.”

In which Ilya and Shane announce their relationship on their own timeline, even though it gets a little accelerated by events.

Notes

Some off-canon timeline (Shane does not come out to his team in Oct 2019 before the Irina Foundation announcement, but rather in January 2021, after the airplane incident). I named some characters that were unnamed in the books to ease my giving them a part.

This is my very first fiction ever. But the story wants to tell itself, and so the story will out (nod to Will Shakespeare). More notes - and effusive thank-yous - at bottom

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

Coming out to the Montreal Voyageurs did not go the way Shane had wanted it to go.

Shane and Ilya had decided that it would be the next step in their long plan to come out as a couple on their own terms. A plan they had been slowly enacting ever since Scott Hunter had come out three years before and they'd spent that summer at the cottage planning how to do it.

First Ilya's move to Ottawa, then the announcement of the Irina Foundation. The emergency landing of the Centaurs' plane and Shane's proposal prompted him to be certain it was time to come out to the Voyageurs. Coming out to his team was expected to result in support and acceptance following on from Scott Hunter's experience, and that would be the base for later announcements like Ilya coming out to the Centaurs. It was all in the plan.

But in Montreal, it did not happen the way it had for Hunter at all, and Shane was on edge with the fall out.

Hayden had guessed about Shane's sexuality and even about Ilya, but had kept the secret for several years now, and knew this announcement was only going to be about Shane being gay and not anything more. But Shane still wanted - needed - to tell J.J. in person that he was gay, before telling the team. So Shane invited him over for lunch to talk privately. And that had not gone as well as Shane hoped.

"Look, I know you're surprised and a little blindsided by this," Shane said, when J.J. responded with frustration and, it seemed, anger, "But there has been a lot for me around this and I just wasn't ready, okay?"

"I don't give a shit about you being gay, Shane, I kind of thought you were. I am pissed that you thought I wasn't someone you could tell. You never opened up about it. I'm your friend, I've been your friend since the beginning! You could have told me. This really hurts. What the fuck."

"I was..." Shane started, but J.J. interrupted.

"And you say Hayden already knew."

"He guessed, J.J. And he understood why I wasn't ready to tell anyone."

"I'm just. What the fuck. I'm your friend, Shane. I can't believe you didn't trust me."

"This is not *about* you, J.J. Don't you get that?" Shane's emotions had switched from caring about delivering his message gently, to pure frustration. "This is not about what's in your head. This was never about your feelings. This is about what's in *my* head and how it was always on *my* mind what mistakes - by me or by a confidant - would let it out and what would happen if it did. If you want to be a friend that I can trust - be that friend *now* J.J. Be the friend that understands how precarious this has always been. Be the friend that understands what this felt like *to me* before Scott Hunter came out. Be the friend that *doesn't give me shit* when I come out to you."

Sometime during Shane's tirade J.J.'s mouth dropped open and his face went slack. When Shane finished, J.J.'s head dropped back against the sofa. Shane was tensed up and breathing heavily like he had just gotten off a treadmill. J.J. slumped and groaned, "fuck." He sat forward and repeated, "Fuck. Shane, I am so sorry, man. I am so sorry. I didn't realize. I didn't realize what I was doing. I love you, man. You're right. Hey. I'm glad you told me now."

Shane was still breathing rapidly, though his shoulders had dropped back down and he sat back into the sofa. "I worried about this every day, every trip to a bar, every joke. And I'm still worried about telling the team. I think it will be okay, but I don't *know*. It could blow up in my face."

J.J. reached out and grabbed his shoulder. "I've got you. Hayden's got you. You won't be alone when you do it. Voyageurs don't go around making homophobic comments, not like Toronto, you know? I think the team will be cool. Most of them. All of them. Well, probably all of them. I think."

Shane was not entirely relieved by that. J.J.'s reaction - as one of his best friends - confirmed how much Shane had to worry about from the rest of the team. He carried that worry for days without giving Ilya the details of the conversation. He told himself this was the right move to make, despite his misgivings.

Shane made the announcement to his teammates after practice during a home-game stretch the following week. Telling them that he was gay and hoped for their support. He was buoyed by Hayden and JJ's supportive smiles. But he was still unprepared for the looks of anger from other players, and from Reece Boudreau's question into the uncomfortable silence, "Why do you people always feel the need to make a big announcement and shove that in our faces? 'Hey everyone, look at me, I'm gay'." The defenseman's tone was a reprimand, not a question. Shane was shocked by the lack of push-back from anyone else in the room. These were people he had played with for ten years. He thought they were a team, who would have each other's backs. He had thought at least some of them would be openly supportive.

Even Boudreau's comment would have felt manageable—maybe as an entry for conversations to improve understanding--if it hadn't been for the call into the Manager's office the next morning telling him to essentially get back into the closet or get traded. With the Trade Deadline two months away, and despite his no-trade clause, the threat was more real than Shane could handle casually. His stomach was in knots.

"They deserve to lose you," Ilya said that afternoon, after Shane arrived at his house in Ottawa. "Take them up on it. Call their bluff, Shane. You can sign away your no-trade clause and leave now. You would have been a free agent in June anyway."

"What if they trade me to Vancouver? Or Florida? How does that make anything better for us?"

"You are Shane Hollander. Shane *fucking* Hollander," Ilya emphasized with an intensity that made Shane sit up a little straighter. "The best player in the league. You will call the shots on this, you have the stronger position right now. Tell them which deal you will take, they are not in a position to refuse because they know you would win a lawsuit."

“Except that I wouldn’t win, even if I won.” Shane said. “And we both know it. It would be miserable to stay now, they will make sure of it. We’ve seen that happen to guys. Starting with reducing my minutes and changing my line so I can’t even perform for them the way I can now. It would still be career-ending.”

“So you pick where you would go, and make them do it. Again, you are Shane Hollander.” Ilya stopped at that, knowing that the obvious choice was Ottawa.

“How would I ‘make them’ do it, though?” Shane shook his head. “The salary cap is the salary cap and not many teams have that space.”

“Which teams are you thinking about, exactly?” Ilya asked, though his mouth was set in a grim line.

“I mean, the closest teams with a shot at the cup are Toronto, not that I want to go there after coming out, and maybe Buffalo. Quebec is out this year and New York is too far for us to be together at all.”

Ilya looked sad as he said, quietly, “Montreal was not a contender when you joined them, you remember that. You changed that. You have the ability to help build a team, you have proven it. And so have I. Boston was a basement dweller when I joined them.”

“And you’ve done amazing things for the Cen....” Shane went silent, his mouth still open from the word he didn’t finish, his eyes boring into Ilya’s like he was trying to see into his brain. “You’re thinking Ottawa. You’re thinking the two of us on the Centaurs, together.” Shane felt startled.

“You are not?”

“It’s... Oh my god. It could be. We could be amazing together.”

Ilya’s eyebrows both lifted. “Could be? We definitely are. And on the ice, too.”

“But can they handle me under the cap?” Shane’s hopeful look changed to pinched concentration.

“Shane, look at it, between my salary and whatever the space they have under the cap, you and I are still making plenty as a couple. Do we need more? Do you?”

Shane contemplated this. He assumed he would be paid what he was worth, wherever he went. This was a brand new thought. But did he need it? Did he? Did *they*? He was aware of Ilya watching his face as he pondered scenarios. Finally he said, “But not only is there a salary space issue, everyone already wonders why you went to Ottawa. They will put two and two together if I make a mysterious move there too, and then we would just be outed right now.”

Shane knew without looking at him that Ilya was ready for that regardless. Wanted it. But Shane wasn’t and they both knew that as well.

“So Montreal will need a way to save face, to make the trade seem reasonable to head off bad press, and that will be their leverage against me,” Shane said as if their different wants had been said out loud. “Because trading to a team like the Centaurs won’t make sense unless there’s a story to back it up, and Montreal won’t let themselves look like they are shoving me out. I don’t see how to make it work. The trade deadline is less than two months away. But, actually, they could do it any time.”

“Not without you agreeing to a trade, Shane. You have a no-trade clause. But we will work fast to figure this out. We are going to your parent’s house tonight. We will think about this. We will call Farah tomorrow and see what she recommends. I love you, and this will be good. It will.”

”I love you, too, Ilya. All the way.” Shane fingered the ring hanging from his neck. His raging mind needed it. He fell over onto Ilya’s lap, needing Ilya’s hands on him, sighing when strong fingers ran through his hair.

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David cleared the dishes from the table as Ilya and Shane moved to the living room. Yuna was sitting on the sofa with her leg elevated. She was recovering from hip surgery after a fall. It had been a complicated surgery and her recovery was going to take a while. Ilya knew Shane was stressed with worry about his mother and planned to come to Ottawa as often as he could.

“Tell me,” Yuna said. “Tell me what happened. You don’t look happy.”

“I thought they were going to accept it, Mom. I really did. They’re my team. But when Boudreau said that, no one stopped him. No one but Hayden and J.J. And then the GM told me to get back in the closet.”

”He said it like that?” David was appalled.

“He said I could tell everyone I was joking and let it die, with the clear implication that he would not do anything about any homophobic comments. Or that I could sign away my no-trade clause and take a trade so he’d be rid of the ‘problem’, or I could stay and stay ‘out’ and he would make me wish I hadn’t.” Shane’s body looked deflated. Ilya moved over to sit behind him on the sofa, wrapping his arms around him, his chest pressed to Shane’s back and his legs pressing Shane’s hips. He didn’t know what to say, so he just held Shane.

“Are we brainstorming a plan or do you have one already?” David asked

“Well, we’ve certainly talked about everything bad that could happen,” Shane looked over his shoulder at Ilya. “We tried to imagine a positive trade - to Ottawa rather than another large market team - but Montreal won’t do that unless they have a narrative that makes them look like something other than a bully pushing around a superstar for reasons unspoken. So, no.”

It was clear to Ilya that Shane needed that narrative, too, to be able to live with a trade like that and to take away the comparison to Ilya’s move. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. When he opened his eyes, Yuna was looking at him.

She had been silent so far in the discussion about a trade backstory, but now spoke up with a direct tone. “Shane, do not let this opportunity to follow your dream pass you by. Do not let it be taken from you and held in someone else’s control. Don’t hand it to someone else to decide for you.”

“I don’t know how to control this,” Shane sounded so unsure in this moment, and it hurt Ilya to see him so lost. “Either I stay in Montreal, the way I had always planned my career, but miserable with only Hayden and J.J. as friends, or get traded far away to a team I didn’t ask for and no chances to be together with Ilya. Or I ask for Ottawa and it’s so obvious that I’m doing the same thing Ilya did, that I am basically outing myself - us - immediately to the whole league.”

Ilya wanted to ask, *would that really be so bad, anyway?* But he didn’t say it. David looked at him knowingly, though, and that made Ilya feel so understood, so *wanted* that he had to close his eyes for a minute. He smiled weakly, but gratefully at David.

“They are not going to kick you out,” Yuna says, “you are a star player and they would not win the lawsuits.” Ilya nodded as he had been saying the same thing.

“They don’t actually have to win the lawsuits, Mom. The other players, and the coaches and manager, will just make the rest of the season completely miserable. They already have. I mean other than Hayden and J.J.” Yuna looked like she was planning where to bury dead bodies. Ilya would help her, of course. He would make the dead bodies. “It will make it hard to concentrate and it will tank my negotiating position once I’m a free agent.”

David said, “Then you have to distract them with a different reason. Like the charity.”

Shane shook his head. “Too close to home. It’s with Ilya.”

Ilya physically winced. He didn’t mean to. He knew how anxious Shane was. But he was anxious, too, and he couldn’t stop it.

Shane turned around, “I didn’t mean...”

”I know, moy lyubovnik.” And he did know, even though it hurt.

Yuna looked at Ilya and smiled in compassion, then looked at Shane with laser directness, and spoke with a contrived, slow voice like she was reciting a script for an interview, or trying to get a simple plan into her son’s head, “But son, how can you not consider signing with Ottawa right now while I am facing rehab for my hip and need you more than ever?” She delivered the narrative that would work.

“Mom! I would never, ever, use your injury as a pawn in my love life!”

“I would,” Yuna said, still looking directly in Shane’s eyes. She waited what seemed like a long time but was probably five seconds, “Or should I say, I would want you to. It gets you what you need, Shane. What you both need.” She looked at Ilya, still cuddled behind Shane on the sofa, his chin on Shane’s shoulder. Ilya’s heart nearly burst. She looked back at Shane, “You’d get to be together with Ilya, and you would also actually be closer to me while I’m

going through it. And the two of you together would do amazing - *amazing* - things for the Centaurs.”

Shane looked at his mother with shock, then turned over his shoulder to look at Ilya. Ilya felt a glimpse of hope for the first time. He signaled his optimism with his eyes, hoping Shane would feel it.

“We’ll ask Farah tomorrow.” Shane still looked uncertain, but with a flicker of hope himself.

That night, Ilya took Shane apart with agonizing slowness, wanting to deliver peace and promise that would calm Shane’s tense body. He was tense himself as well, but he knew he wanted this path and he needed Shane to feel that, too.

After they showered and returned to bed, Shane lay on Ilya’s chest and didn’t reach out to turn off the light. He lay there with his eyes open for a long time while Ilya held him.

”This is everything we wanted, isn’t it.” Ilya didn’t reply. Shane didn’t seem done. But Ilya held him tighter.

“I can do this.” Shane said, quietly. He looked up at Ilya, his eyes worried. “It will be worth it. To have you.” Ilya couldn’t stop a noise that came out as a whimper. Shane pushed himself over and kissed Ilya slowly, achingly, before reaching out to turn off the light and relaxing into sleep.

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The conversation with Farah went better than Shane expected. She had apparently been expecting to need to manage a potential trade for some time as one of dozens of contingency plans around Shane and Ilya. She liked the idea of offering Montreal a plausible public reason for the trade that would explain breaking Shane’s no-trade clause in a mutually agreeable decision.

Still, Shane felt like he was on a highwire over a giant canyon, uncertain that even asking for this wouldn’t result in losing it all.

But when Farah told the Voyageurs GM, he was indeed glad to have a public excuse to trade Shane and avoid a lawsuit, and have him gone in a hurry, allowing her to make the terms impossible to resist for the Centaurs. When the trade was announced, no one outside the team could understand why Montreal would let him go. But there was a young Junior they could get in the draft with Ottawa’s higher pick, and they hinted that he would be the next Shane. Combined with a second draft pick and a promising back-sixer, they got a narrative they could speak about.

The social media activity in the first days after the trade announcement was excruciating, with speculations reaching all the way into mainstream media about what could possibly lead to such a trade and overriding Shane’s no-trade clause. Was it behavior issues or drug use? But Shane was seen with his parents, and the images of him helping Yuna with her

wheelchair or walker, depending on her pain level that day, did a lot to quell the rumors and bolster the story of his decision to be there to help care for her. Shane and Ilya had already decided they would not immediately tell the Centaurs players either that Shane was gay or anything about their relationship. Not yet. Though some of them might hear rumors out of Montreal.

Shane was coming out of the bathroom when he suddenly felt a bolt of worry straight through his gut about the prospect of sharing a locker room. This was not something they ever had to talk about before, and suddenly it was taking up a lot of space in Shane's head. He immediately went to find Ilya.

"I mean, we've never had to figure out how to shower together without getting a boner," Shane said, alarmed at the scenarios he couldn't turn off in his imagination.

"Well, we did have that problem to deal with once," Ilya said with a smirk, "but I think we never actually figured it out, did we? That is what got us into this in the first place,"

"You clenching your ass cheeks at me was what got us into this. Fucking show-off."

Ilya wagged his eyebrows, knowing that Shane would never, ever forget that moment.

"But anyway, I, seriously, I am thinking it might be a good idea for us to try to not be in the showers at the same time, because I don't think I will ever forget that moment," he said, unknowingly echoing Ilya's thought. Which caused Ilya to guffaw loudly and for an inappropriate amount of time.

"What," Shane asked, "that wasn't that funny, really."

"Yes, it really was."

"Fuck off."

His first practice with the Centaurs went remarkably well, Shane thought. Well, after the initial moment during Shane's introduction in the locker room when Zane Boodram, the Alternate Captain, challenged him on fitting in.

"Welcome to the Centaurs, Hollander. Just one thing, though, that you need to know. We get along here. So whatever shit you've been throwing at Rozanov for the last ten years, I hope you left it at the door."

Shane looked over at Ilya who was smirking and holding up both hands and both eyebrows in a "I didn't say it, but I'm going to take advantage of it!" look. This was going to be so unfair.

"Don't start anything, Rozanov, and I won't finish it."

Ilya roared with laughter, startling the rest of the team, and breaking the tension. "We are going to be fine, just fine," he beamed.

"We'll be fine," Shane said, through a heavy sigh.

Boodram looked between them a couple of times, then back at Shane. “Good. Good. That’s all. Welcome to the Centaurs.”

After that, the Centaurs welcomed Shane and no one questioned the backstory for the trade. They seemed kind of protective against the absurd behavior and drug rumors, in fact, and Shane figured this might be an artifact of supporting Troy when he joined the team after the Toronto fight with Kent. The Centaurs seemed to rally naturally behind their teammates. It was so very different from the atmosphere in the Voyageurs practice center that Shane kept looking at the other players just a little too long, waiting for the facade to fade, and then caught himself wondering if they thought he was being weird.

“Do you see auras,” Wyatt skated up beside Shane unexpectedly, “like around people?”

“What?” Shane was utterly baffled by this sudden question out of nowhere.

“I’ve been watching. You’ve spent all day looking at us, all of us, like we’re just a little perplexing. So I’m trying to figure out what’s got you confused. Or it could be ghosts. Do you access the parallel universe? Are you The Flash?”

Shane continued to look confused for a moment, then gave a small laugh at himself, giving up on understanding Wyatt. “Everyone is really nice to each other here.”

“And that’s perplexing?”

Shane looked at Wyatt for a long moment. Finally, he said, “I’m glad to be here.”

Wyatt nodded. “We’re glad to have you,” and he skated away, like that was a satisfactory answer to his question about auras or whatever that was.

The coaches put him on the second line with Haas as his right wing and Young on his left. They cycled through a continuous 3:2 drill that emphasized passing several times through the neutral zone and a shot on net by one forward with the other continuing around behind the net and picking up a new puck for a loop back to the other goal, alternating the shooter. Luca whooped with glee on the sixth circuit as they had increased speed on each loop, but had stayed together, despite Haas being clearly challenged on speed and Young barely keeping up when it was Shane’s turn with the puck.

“Hollander, that was epic! You are so fast!” Luca panted as Shane patted him on the back and they slid into the practice line by the bench. Luca’s chest was heaving as he put his hands on his thighs and bent down to catch his breath. Young skated up shortly after and collapsed over the boards in front of the bench.

Shane smiled and tapped Luca’s shin pads with his stick. “Nice passing Haasy, we made the D-men work their asses off.”

“Hollander is only medium fast, Haasy, he was just barely keeping up with you.” Ilya was suddenly *right there* as they regrouped by the boards, Haas just starting to straighten up as he still caught his breath.

“Rozanov. I thought you were going to leave it at the door,” Troy said, leaning over the boards from where he’d been watching the drill from the bench.

”No! Hollander was leaving it at the door! That is what our Alternate Captain said. You heard him!” Ilya was grinning.

”Fuck off, Rozanov,” Shane said

”Siding with Hollander on this one,” Troy mumbled, loud enough to be sure Shane heard him.

“Thank you, Barrett.” Shane huffed, glaring at Ilya, who was looking offended and betrayed by Barrett.

”Wait,” Tanner broke in, “is this what this massive ‘rivalry’ has been for the last ten years? Rozanov acts like a dick and you tell him to fuck off like a normal person would? That’s the whole rivalry?”

”Finally! Someone gets it!” Shane shot out both hands to say *behold the truth* at Tanner.

”No!” Ilya exclaimed, his hand dramatically over his heart. “Is Hollander always envious of me and causing trouble! All this time!”

“Exhibit A, if it pleases the court,” Shane’s open hands now shot out toward Ilya, “and fuck off!” And the whole group exploded in laughter.

”All right Power Play team,” Weibe called out, “let’s see Rozanov and Barrett come on out, and Hollander come and play left. Let’s go with a full ice weave drill, line up!”

They practiced running a breakout weave drill, starting in the defensive zone and passing across the full width of the ice several times before entering the offensive zone and setting up one forward in the crease for a rebound and the other two taking one more pass before shooting on net. They rotated each forward through the shooter position and the rebound position half a dozen times, getting past Hazy on four of them.

They high-fived each other when they got back to the bench for the next team to drill.

”Sick,” Chouinard said from behind the boards.

”No shit,” Dykstra agreed.

“You were just practically punching each other and now you play like you’re inside each other’s heads,” Chouinard was shaking his head.

”Weird. Epic. And weird.” Dykstra shook his head. “That’s going to take some getting used to.”

”I really don’t think the other teams are going to know what hit them. Everyone’s expecting you to clash. Nobody’s expecting this,” Chouinard added.

No one was expecting Shane to integrate so quickly into the Centaurs' playing system, including Shane. Since he had been the star player at Montreal, and also the Captain, as well as the famous antagonism with Ilya, he knew the coaches and the Centaur players expected him to have trouble not being the driver of the play all the time. And Shane himself expected the small market team with a dismal record to be so different from the Voyageurs that it would take weeks to start sensing the moves from his lineys.

But something about the close-knit group with their down-to-earth coach was so - intuitive. The contrast to the effort required in Montreal was palpable. Shane had never felt more in tune. More *embraced*. It gave him some bold feelings.

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Ilya found that it felt strange to take two cars to the rink, and two cars home, maintaining the illusion that they were not together, but he felt so happy seeing Shane pull into his driveway after practice knowing they would be together every night. It was amazing.

"I didn't think about how it would feel to know I'd be coming home to you every night," Shane told Ilya that night. "I mean I did but also I didn't. Every night." He shook his head. "Will this ever feel right?"

"It feels like everything is right, to me," Ilya said, pulling Shane to him. He bypassed a kiss and just held him, his chin next to Shane's temple, his eyes closed as he embraced his future. Shane moved to lean back from the hug for a kiss, but Ilya squeezed tighter.

"I'm not done yet." Ilya felt him relax into the hug.

The first game after Shane's trade was a home game against the Tampa Thunder. The success in getting the lines working together during the first practices carried into the game, and the Centaurs ended with a 3-1 win, with Ilya scoring twice, including on an assist from Shane in a power play, and Luca scoring on a pass from Shane in the third. Ilya felt on top of the world, and he could see it in the locker room mood as well.

The media availability at the end of the game was, of course, intensely interested in responses from both Ilya and Shane on how their career-long rivalry was manifesting in a shared locker room.

"Shane, what changes have you had to make to play on a team with Ilya Rozanov?"

Shane looked serious and thoughtful, making Ilya smile at his earnest media face. "There's a lot of learning to fit in with a new team's system, but we showed today that it's a good fit. We drilled on several key plays this week and brought a good coordination to the game."

"But specifically on playing with Ilya Rozanov, with whom you've had an intense rivalry for so many years?"

Shane's face went blank as he said, "I think we showed today pretty clearly that it is not a problem."

“Ilya, what can you tell us about the difficulties of bringing on a new team member when you’ve had such a contentious rivalry?”

Ilya was about to make a joke about Shane needing a lot of work to be good enough, and had even opened his mouth to speak when he sensed Shane in his peripheral vision looking at him. Instead Ilya closed his mouth and swallowed, giving himself time to adjust.

”There have been no difficulties. You watched us win today.”

He glanced over at Shane whose eyebrows showed his surprise at Ilya’s restraint. Ilya’s smirk came out after all, even though he knew the media would speculate all weekend about what that meant.

February arrived and with it a bombshell when Troy suddenly came out to the team with a brisk and efficient, “I’m dating Harris, we’re together. I’m gay,” followed by what Dykstra immediately started calling “The Hallmark Kiss.”

Ilya couldn’t help but feel both elated for them and also envious. Which he knew Troy knew, and he tried to ignore the looks that Troy gave him, looks that seemed to say, “you can, too.” But it was so much more complicated and Shane had been hit hard by the reaction in Montreal, though Ilya hoped he was starting to feel stronger about it here in Ottawa.

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By the time their third week was over, Shane felt like the team had formed around him, like some organism absorbing a stray cell. He had become completely smitten by the welcome of the team. He was surprised by how much fun he was having playing hockey. The difference from Montreal remained surprising, stark and very, very appreciated. And the surprise of Troy coming out to the team and the celebratory reception he had received stunned Shane, the team still playing just as tightly in practice after such an announcement. Though his competitiveness with Ilya was clearly a new dynamic at the rink.

“You think you can do it better, Hollander? You have short legs, it will be hard for you.” Ilya taunted, laughing, on a breakaway drill as they lined up.

“Fastest skater in the league, Rozanov. Maybe you should consider what it means about you that even with long legs you can’t beat me.”

“That’s gonna leave a mark,” Tanner laughed.

”Stop!” Dykstra shouted, “I don’t need you guys dragging us all into another speed skating competition for the next half hour. I’m dying over here on D!”

”No shit,” Chouinard added, “Weibe’s having way too much fun with this and we’re just innocent bystanders.”

“Fuck,” Tanner groaned, “*This* is what that rivalry has been about all this time. Bullying the bystanders.”

Shane laughed to himself at the heady feeling of playing with Ilya instead of against him. And how in addition to the elevation of plays that came from skating together with Ilya's incredible skill, Shane had discovered that the career-long competitiveness between him and Ilya was impossible to resist in practice, and he loved the way they pushed each other. It added to the thrill as they tried to best each other at every turn. His body felt like it was almost at play-offs level of work, but it was exhilarating. It made him feel invincible.

After practice that night, Shane waited for Ilya to come out on their way to their separate cars. He was filled with hope after such a short time and the almost effortless acceptance the Centaurs had given him. What a contrast to the tension in the Montreal locker room and the disruption of the Voyageurs' teamwork on the ice. The thought was bittersweet, and Shane still had feelings about leaving the team he thought he'd retire from, but as he saw Ilya exit the building he knew there was nowhere he'd rather be.

When he saw Ilya, he picked up his bag and walked alongside him. "Hey, your team—" he started.

"Our team," Ilya corrected.

"Yeah our team - I'm still getting used to that - is a pretty good bunch. I thought they'd be more closed off to me. And the way they accept Harris and Troy. It's, wow."

"They're good people. Is kind of special, actually."

"So," Shane said, hesitantly, "Anyway, it got me thinking. What do you think about... coming out to them? As a couple. As our first step? We're planning on it this year anyway." He gave a questioning hmmff and took a playful handful of Ilya's ass.

Ilya stopped in his tracks, dropping his bag and turning to face Shane. His face was full of surprise. Ridiculously happy surprise. "You are serious?" His smile was like a spring that had been tightly bound for years and was suddenly cut free. It weakened Shane's knees.

"Yeah. I was thinking about it today. Watching how they practice together."

"WE practice together."

"Yeah, we," Shane nodded, smiling. "That's what I mean. How they talk to you, how they've accepted me, even though I'm supposed to be your rival and also rumored to be gay."

"You'd really be okay with that?" Ilya stepped closer, almost touching Shane. His voice was husky and cracked on the word "okay".

Shane paused, looking up into Ilya's eyes "Yeah. We should. I think it would feel good. I think it would be good."

Ilya's hands went to Shane's face, tilted his face up gently and he leaned to press a slow and tender kiss that spoke of all the relief, love and excitement he was feeling. It was a long kiss, Ilya had a lot to say.

"Wow. We, uh, should finish this at home. Feels like a celebration is in order," Shane said.

“Moy lyubovnik.”

Shane smirked and took off running to his car. Ilya picked up his bag and ran to his.

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From the inside of the building, this encounter had looked a little different, at least at the beginning. Zane Boodram was the last one to leave the locker room after practice, but he was hurrying to catch up to Evan Dykstra.

“Hey, wait up D, I wanted to hear about that new club you were talking about,” Zane called out to Evan as he headed down the hall to the exit. Everyone else was already gone; Rozanov leaving just before them, and Hollander before that. Dykstra stopped and put his bag down in front of the window, waiting for Bood to catch up. He leaned on the window frame and idly looked out at the sidewalk, watching Rozanov and Hollander walking together.

When Zane caught up he followed Evan’s eyes out the window as he asked, “what was the name of that new place way out of town with the rockabilly band again? Cassie was interested, and we want to check it out.” Just as Evan took a breath to answer, they saw Shane grab Ilya’s ass. They both turned to fully face the view out the window, with their jaws hanging open.

“Holy shit, did I just see Hollander make a move on Rozanov? What the hell, New Guy, that’s not cool.” Boodram’s voice came out as a stage whisper. They watched, with mouths wide open, as Ilya dropped his bag to the ground and turned to Shane

Evan’s eyes were wide “I heard Hollander was gay, but, fuuuck, I didn’t think he was reckless gay. Rozanov’s not amused.”

“Shit, think we should go rescue Hollander?” Boodram asked, as Rozanov stepped right up to Hollander’s chest and loomed over him.

“Yeah, maybe. He’s right in his face. I didn’t think he’d react like that, but...”

But their feet didn’t move soon enough as they saw Rozanov reach out to Hollander’s face with both hands and tilt his head up, leaning down for a slow, unmistakably tender kiss that Shane melted into like forever had just said hello.

“What. the. fuck?” Zane exclaimed, “I didn’t see *that* coming. Like, ever.”

“Okay.” Evan inhaled and paused, and then said, as his breath whooshed out, “*That* was not a first kiss.”

Evan and Zane looked at each other with their eyes startled wide, mouths agape.

Boodram exhaled loudly. “No. It was not. Holy shit. Well we know what we gotta do.”

Evan said, “Yeah, keep fucking quiet, not our story to tell. That’s what we gotta do.”

“No we gotta tell...”

“We do not tell!” The warning in Evan’s voice was unmistakable.

Boodram spoke louder, “...them that we have their backs. We tell them that we have their backs. Shit like that, they are going to be outed any day. They’re gonna need their boys.”

They both turned back to the window to see Shane sprinting to his car, and Ilya running after him. Then they turned back to each other and said, at the same time, “holy shit.”

“Am I supposed to just walk around the world knowing that now?” Bood lamented.

“I do not understand what I just saw.” Dykstra blinked and shook his head as if to clear a hallucination.

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After practice the next day, Boodram and Dykstra were once again the only ones left when Hollander and Rozanov were shouldering their bags to leave.

Bood called out, “Hey we’re going out for drinks at Monk’s.”

Evan said, “Come with us.”

Ilya shook his head, “Not tonight, I am going to...”

“You’re going to come out for drinks with us,” Evan said, “You both are.”

“It’s important,” Zane added.

Evan hurriedly added, “It’s not bad, but it’s important.”

Ilya and Shane shared a worried-not-worried look. “Okaaaay,” Shane said.

When they were seated at a table at Monks, Boodrom looked around and then leaned in, “So I’ll just cut right to the chase. We wanted to tell you we have your backs - Just putting that on the table right up front. Relax, this is a good kind of intervention.”

Ilya raised eyebrows and tilted his head in appreciation, but was genuinely curious if he knew, or what he knew.

Dystra said, “But we needed to tell you right away because that kind of shit is going to get you outed, like, within the week.”

Ilya and Shane had been talking quite a bit with their eyes tonight, and this one said, what shit?

Bood and Dykstra clammed up when the server came and took their order for drinks, but as soon as she was gone, Bood dove back in, “Imagine our surprise when we looked out the window and saw... The new guy, who we hear is gay, mind you,” Shane’s head immediately

swiveled to face Ilya, swiveled back to look at Bood, “making a move on our Captain, a notoriously straight guy, mind you, who then drops his bag like a pair of gloves on the ice and bulldozes very far into the new guy’s personal space, ... and just when we’re getting ready to come and save your ass, Hollander, Cap gives you a kiss so fucking romantic it belongs in a fucking Hallmark movie with the credits rolling.”

Evan nodded, “You don’t expect to see long-time rivals making out, even if they are supposedly friends after all this time. That was not on my bingo card.”

Shane and Ilya exchanged a “whoops” look, and then Ilya slammed his hand on the table, endangering all of their beers, and exclaimed, “Hallmark, though! Hollander, we are movie stars now!”

Shane looked a lot more serious than Ilya, and let out a stifled laugh, and a decade-long sigh of relief at talking openly. “Well, to tell the truth, it was never on my bingo card either, we...”

Zane interrupted him, “Yah, no, buddy. It was on yours. Because you wrote that bingo card. You own what you put on your bingo card. We,” he pointed to himself and Evan, “had the normal bingo cards and your,” he pointed vigorously between Shane and Ilya “fucking Hallmark kiss was not on the normal bingo cards, but you’re out there writing stuff into yours. Nobody just handed you THAT bingo card. Making out with your rival in public was nowhere in the random bingo card stack. You two wrote that one your own selves. I’m just saying.”

Evan leaned forward, looking to get the conversation back on track, “And that’s why we’re here tonight telling you that we have your backs. Because if you’re going to be doing that in the fucking front walk of the practice rink, then you’re obviously about to come out and we want you to know we have your backs. We do not understand a single part of this, just to be clear, but we have your backs.”

“Yah, not a single part of this. But maybe Montreal letting *The Shane Hollander* go and you,” he stabbed a finger at Shane, then waved his hand from head to toe in a you’re-all-that gesture, “taking a pay cut to come here makes a whole lot of sense now,” Bood said, staring at Shane.

“And we are *not* Montreal,” Evan quickly added.

“Damn Straight,” Zane agreed, vehemently. “Well, not straight but damn, um, damn... we’re not like Montreal.”

The table fell silent and then Boodram’s voice became plaintive, “And I am not ever going to be able to erase that kiss from my brain, by the way, so fuck you for making me all fucking teary-eyed about Ilya finding True Fucking Love fucking finally. You owe me a beer. Or six. For therapy.” He pouted as Shane and Ilya burst into laughter.

“I will buy you a case, so you can remember this Hallmark forever, Bood.” Ilya said.

The table was silent for a long moment, then Shane said, “Well, ironically,” he paused, then took in a rapid breath, “the whole reason that kiss happened is because we decided to come

out to the team, and we were, um, celebrating that. Not out to the public, but to you guys.”

Bood looked visibly relieved. “Well, that’s good, actually,” he shook out his shoulders with a sigh, “because that was gonna be really hard to pretend to not know, if I’m being honest. The guys are good. You know that. They’ll have your back. Backs. Cause there’s two backs to have here.”

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They decided it would be the next night, after practice, and they’d let the team know that Ilya was bisexual, confirm that Shane was gay, and reveal that they’d been dating.

Practice was intense. Since Shane’s arrival on the team, he and Ilya had been turning every drill into a competition against each other that dialed up to eleven for everyone else. The on-ice drills were particularly brutal this night as both escalated their energy from the anticipation of their plan. Weibe finally set up a Power Play drill and just let the two of them get their obsessions out at mach speed and chilling accuracy. The defensive team didn’t have a chance, only Wyatt managed to break up a percentage of the plays by stopping shots on net. A small percentage. It was an eye-opening practice. The team left the ice talking about how well the two anticipated each others’ moves. “That is one hell of a special team,” Chouinard said to Dykstra. “I’m thinking we have a whole new target of power play performance now.”

After practice ended, and as soon as Ilya saw the last player enter the locker room, and before anyone had disappeared into the shower, he stood up on the bench and called out, “Hello everyone! We have announcement: Hollander and Rozanov are getting married!”

Everyone laughed like it was a typical Rozanov joke about the power play drills, except Dykstra and Boodram who looked stunned; they were ready for an announcement about dating, not marriage. Wyatt’s eyes went to the ring on Ilya’s chain, then Shane’s chest. His eyes widened as he saw Shane’s ring and an enormous smile grew as he looked back at Ilya, confirming to himself that it was no joke, and when their eyes met, Ilya winked at him and mouthed, “goalie eyes?”. Troy just looked triumphant, pulling a fist back into his ribs in silent celebration and not saying “I told you so,” out loud.

“Jesus, Ilya, we had a plan,” Shane said, into the chaos. Only the closest players heard him, but it stopped their laughter.

Tanner said, “wait... for real?” And then, much louder, “Wait, shut up everybody - for real??” The whole room quieted and stared at Tanner, then Ilya.

Ilya pulled Shane up to stand on the bench, looked at him and said, “You think I should have started with telling them we are dating?”

Shane rolled his eyes in exasperation. “You were *supposed* to start with coming out to the team as bi. *Then* tell them we’ve been *dating*. Fuck.” He looked at the team apologetically. “Sorry.”

Their teammate’s smiles faded into dropped jaws as they processed the three revelations and how the second two meant the first one about getting married was actually serious. Their

shock showed on their faces as the escalating facts led from surprise to vertigo. Dykstra and Boodram were still processing the “married” part. Only Wyatt and Troy were smiling and nodding like they’d already made all of the connections.

Ilya grinned mischievously as he looked around, then back at Shane. “And miss all of these faces they are making? No, this is beautiful! This is just right. Look at these faces, Shane, are they not perfect?”

Ilya pulled Shane into his side, and Shane battled briefly, reflexively, against the PDA, but then melted into Ilya’s embrace in a way that was so natural, so *intimate*, that the faces around the room took on a whole new level of astonishment.

Shane, his face flushing red, looked out at their team and couldn’t stop a laugh, “you’re not wrong. You are... not wrong. So, yeah, okay, Ilya and I are engaged to be married.”

“Fuckin’ A,” Tanner shouted, standing up, “do you two always completely skip the foreplay like this? Fuck. This morning you’re career rivals and this afternoon you’re buying a china pattern? Buy us a drink first before you jump in bed with us! Holy shit, zero to sixty in half a second! I’m dizzy.” He sat down again with a thump.

Wiebe spoke up from the end of the room near the rink door, “is this public or, are you only telling us?”

Ilya nodded in acknowledgement, sobering from the exuberant smile of earlier to an uncharacteristically protective one, as he glanced down at Shane wrapped in his arm. “We are not out to the league, or the public, yet. But we are out to our team. To you. We are planning to make it public at the end of the season. But until then, just here.”

“Is this why you left Montreal, Shane?” Luca asked. All eyes returned to Shane.

“Montreal does not know this. About Ilya. At all.” Shane was stone serious. “But, yeah, me being gay was a big part of this trade. Yeah.” His face took on a look of half regret, half anger.

“We’re not Montreal,” Wiebe said.

“I keep hearing that,” Shane chuckled. “You guys have been great. I can’t tell you.”

“Gonna need one of those Hallmark kisses if you’re announcing a wedding, dudes,” Dykstra smirked. “Troy and Harris gave theirs, you know. The Hallmark kiss.”

Shane turned to Ilya with his face turned up, and deeply flushed, looking at Ilya’s lips. The public openness of that made Ilya melt as Shane reached for his face and pulled him down for a Hallmark kiss in front of their team.

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The next day they arrived early to go to the Centaurs General Manager’s office to make sure Austin Burnett would not be surprised if someone mentioned something.

Farah had advised them on how to approach this, but Ilya had said he expected a reasonable response. Or at least that it would not be a raging disaster, based on the Centaur organization's usual attitudes from the owners on down.

"Come on in, Ilya, Shane. What brings you into my office today?" Burnett stood and waved them to the chairs in front of his desk.

They seated themselves and Ilya spoke, as they had agreed in advance, since he had been in the organization for several years already while Shane was brand new.

"Well, we wanted to keep you informed of some personal information, in case it gets out and you are asked about it."

Burnett did not look like he was surprised about this conversation at all. He looked like he already knew what they were here to say. Which Shane was not expecting. But Burnett didn't say anything, he waved Ilya to continue.

"Sir, I'm gay," Shane blurted out.

"Montreal told me that. It's okay, Shane. That will not be a problem here. You already know that we supported Troy coming out, and we are with you as well. However you want that support, whether it's public information or not, it's yours. You decide, we'll back you up. I appreciate you giving me a heads up for media questions." He nodded as if that cleared up everything and made for a quick meeting.

"Uh, that's not the main reason we came, sir. We thought you might know that already. But, thank you. That's really good to know. What you might not know," Shane paused and looked at Ilya.

"What you do not know yet," Ilya said, "is that I am bisexual." Burnett's eyebrows lifted in surprise. Ilya continued, "and that we are together."

Shane had heard the expression "his eyes widened in surprise" before, but this was the first time he had seen it. He was momentarily distracted from his anxiety by it. It was like a cartoon.

Burnett lifted his hand in a "hold that thought right there" gesture and just paused, closing his eyes for a minute. When he opened his eyes, his did not look angry, but he did look serious.

"This adds a risk," he finally said. "Relationships in an office can create some serious conflict when parties break up. On a team, this could be a major problem. Think about what a break up could do to a locker room."

"Mr. Burnett. We are not going to be breaking up," Ilya sat up tall in his chair. "We have been together a while, this is not something that just started. This is a committed relationship. We know how to do this, how to keep our personal and professional lives separate."

"Clearly," Shane interjected, "since no one in the league knows, except the locker room full of guys downstairs who we told yesterday."

“You say you know how to stay professional.” Burnett looked long at each of them, “but this is a big deal, the potential to disrupt. Tell me how you think you know that. How long have you successfully demonstrated this personal and professional separation?” Burnett asked.

Shane looked at Ilya, whose eyes and posture agreed to keep this part to themselves. “It’s been several years. We’re planning the wedding for this summer.”

Austin Burnett looked from one to the other of them, then back again. “And you don’t plan to announce this relationship publicly right now?”

“Not until we are married, this summer,” Ilya replied.

“Well.” He took a deep breath. Exhaled. Laughed a little uneasily. “Alrighty then. I am very glad you let me know this,” Burnett paused. “I am expecting you to maintain professionalism on the team, and it sounds like you have a lot of practice at keeping the personal out of detection at games and in the locker room. As long as that’s not showing up, then the message remains the same. We support you.” He paused again. “Wow, though. Gonna be an exciting summer in the NHL. Don’t surprise me with anything, please.” He shook his head, smiling, waving them out of the office.

The next two weeks were straight-up hockey. The early April end-of-season push saw the Centaurs with a solid standing for the playoffs.

Playing and practicing together created a sense of happiness neither of them had even dared to expect, and despite the body-eating physical push of the weeks leading up to the playoffs, Shane could not have been happier.

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They played Columbus during a three-game home stand, battling for points in playoff seeding. It was a critical game to determine standings and both teams would be bringing extra to take the W. The Centaurs would be missing Luca, who was out for an injury and watching from the box, while the Federals were down one of their stronger defensemen. This was the first time they would meet since Shane had joined the team and Ilya hoped to deliver some surprises to the Federals.

The first period had the two teams even on shots, but only the Centaurs had scored - a slapshot from the blue line by Chouinard. The one-two punch of Ilya and Shane on consecutive lines was wearing out the Columbus D. They went to the locker rooms at the end of the period with the home crowd cheering loudly, psyched to clinch a spot in the playoffs and optimistic about their one goal lead. The Centaurs knew to not rest on their laurels yet and spent the time talking about grinding down the Federal’s defense the rest of the way in the forecheck, making space for shots on net that would be up to their goalie to save.

Back on the ice the Federals must have had a similar discussion because Ilya saw the checking start to drift further from the legal side hits toward the illegal backs of the Ottawa players, and from a legal two strides lead to two and a half or three, and the elbows coming up just a little further, all of these making the hits harder and maintaining the puck more difficult. Ilya took his share of increasingly hard hits while keeping the pressure on.

The puck was staying in the Federals' zone though; every time a pass was blocked the Centaurs recovered it while still inside the blue line and passing for another shot on the net. The second line was out and LaPointe sent the puck behind the net for Shane to pick up on the boards.

The entire Centaurs bench was leaning over the boards, anticipating Shane making a quick pass to put the puck back in front of the net and avoid the Federals' defenseman from having an opportunity to make a hit on him. It was kind of his trademark, Ilya knew. But the puck bounced slow toward the blue line and just when Shane was getting his stick on it, the defender came in with a hip-to-shoulder hit that lifted Shane up against the glass and flattened him between the rock and the hard place.

"Ooof!" Ilya and fifteen other players on the bench said, holding their breath in the split second they waited for Shane to come back down, which he did, on his feet, and lightly kicked the puck forward onto his stick but it had been tapped just over the blue line and the rest of the Centaurs needed to clear the zone.

Shane started to push up the ice to give the team time when his stick connected with the boards and the blade snapped off, likely damaged during the check. Ilya saw him drop his broken stick and kick the puck again, keeping it in his control near the boards. Ilya was already leaning over the boards with his own stick out for Shane, hoping Shane would see it and grab. Shane didn't even look up, as he skate-handled the puck an additional two strides to where Ilya held out his stick, grabbed the stick like he'd just known it would be there, spun backwards off the puck, cutting off a defender from poking it away and *took off* back into the Federals' defensive zone, LaPointe hot on his heels and Young already at the Blue line, ready to go in the second the puck did.

"Fucking *right!*" Ilya shouted as Shane deked around two forwards, drove into the slot then passed between a defenseman's legs to Young who settled it, swung back for a slapshot, then gently tapped it right back to Shane who lifted it over the goalie's right shoulder for the sweetest one-touch goal Ilya could want to see.

"Hollander! That's what I'm talking about!" Dykstra shouted.

Hollander and Young skated past the bench high-fiving the team. Ilya was so *fucking proud* of Shane that he shouted again as Shane approached him and saw Shane's huge grin match his own. He grabbed Shane's high-five in an exuberant two-handed slap.

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The lines changed up and the third went out for the face-off, bringing Shane's line back to the bench and Shane sitting one winger away from Ilya. He reached out to hand Ilya's stick back to him but Ilya was still celebrating and instead of grabbing the stick he grabbed Shane by the helmet, dragging him across Boodram and knocking their helmets together, repeating "fucking right!" again still grinning from ear to ear. He sat back down and finally took his stick from Shane, who took a new one from the coach behind him. They continued to grin at each other even after the puck dropped for the face-off and the play headed off down the ice. Bood just looked from one to the other of them and shook his head.

Late in the third, with the Centaurs still up by two with only 40 seconds left on the clock, Ilya's line was on the ice and Nick Chouinard nudged Shane.

"I feel like I'm on a constant sugar high around you two," Chouinard mused to Shane who had been watching Ilya keep control of the puck to use up the clock. "I mean, it's nice to see him so happy - and you, too - but no one's going to be surprised to see comments about this on social, you know. Just in case you didn't know how you look."

Shane looked up at Nick in alarm. "Is it that obvious?" He asked, his heart pounding in a way that was not from the game.

"You love him," Nick smiled. "You're so happy to be here. He loves you. He's so happy you're here. I guess, yeah, you might want to think about your plan for keeping things secret, because your face is not on board any more."

The final buzzer rang, and Shane hustled to the tunnel without looking at Ilya.

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Ilya noticed that Shane was subdued post game, despite a win that ensured their spot in the playoffs. He didn't say anything in the car on the way home, waiting to see if Shane wanted to talk about it. When they got inside, they gave happy hugs with Anya and Ilya took her for a quick walk while Shane got out a post game meal to replace the calories they'd used. But there was no discussion and Ilya kept wondering what was behind Shane's mood.

When they were finally sitting down he needed to know. "Shane. What is the matter? You are quiet."

Shane looked up. He looked thoughtful. Not worried, exactly, but intense. "I don't think we can wait until summer to make an announcement about us, Ilya."

Ilya's fork stopped half way to his mouth. He carefully put it back down on his plate, and looked at Shane, waiting.

"Chouinard said something during the game tonight. About how we both looked so happy that he thought people would probably be thinking we're together. Already." Shane looked up at Ilya and chuffed a laugh. "He said my face wasn't on board with keeping secrets."

Ilya didn't say anything. But he smiled at the picture of Shane processing that.

"I haven't been able to stop thinking about scenarios. And I keep coming back to wondering if we should announce ourselves now. Before the playoffs start, so it has time to settle."

Ilya thought that it would not settle in the next week, and that was all the time they had before playoffs. But he didn't say that.

"You think it will become talk before the end of the season? Is that what you are worried about?"

“I think,” Shane’s eyes looked around in the air like he was seeing things happen in this hypothetical future, “I’m starting to think it’s more likely than not. But even more, I’m just feeling less and less willing to hide how incredibly happy I am. But I’m also terrified that Montreal will happen again. But it doesn’t matter if people figure it out anyway. So here we are. You know?” At this, he looked right at Ilya, like he really wanted an answer.

Ilya’s smile was incandescent. “Yes. I do know. Do we call Farah tomorrow?”

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“Well, you two sure know how to make an agent go where no agent has gone before. I’ll say that,” Farah said, when they got her on the phone.

“We can’t just change our relationship statuses?” Ilya asked. Shane looked horrified.

Farah let out a squeak of alarm, “please don’t do that, Ilya. Drive the narrative yourself; don’t let it go feral and expect to be okay with what happens when you’re a spectator to it.”

“I’ve been working on a couple of angles for you already,” she went on, “depending on scenarios I’ve anticipated. I’m sending the email now with something I think is appropriate for making an announcement without some external triggering event. Take a minute to read it and tell me how you feel about saying that. I left out the wedding, since you said you wanted to protect that from the media.”

Shane and Ilya opened their emails and read the short statement she had sent.

“It’s perfect,” Ilya said, “we will add some pictures.” Shane’s head shot up, and he stared at Ilya. He was clearly thinking “pictures on the internet” as a bad thing, not a good thing.

“Nice pictures, Shane,” he said, “very demure.” Shane punched his arm.

Farah laughed, “God yes, nice ones only, please.”

Farah was also ready with her preparations for the inevitable press questions which would surely occur not long after they posted the announcement. “They’re going to ask something like, ‘when did you first get together,’ or ‘when did this attraction start?’ And you need to have firmly in your heads before you open your mouths that you do not owe them your intimacy. No timeline unless you want to. They are not entitled to that part of you, so don’t feel like you are required to provide information for every question. Here’s what you need to remember.”

She outlined the framework of what they should and shouldn’t say and a list of boundaries to keep in mind as the questions came in. Then she showed Shane and Ilya her suggested script on several potential questions, and reminded them that if it got sticky, to just stop digging and change the subject. “You don’t even owe them a smooth transition. Just stop talking and bring up a new topic or end the questions.” At the bottom of the document were a few replies their teammates could use, if they wanted to.

”And I’ll call the GM right now, if that’s okay with you both.”

"Oh, yeah, please. Burnett said he didn't want any surprises. Glad you thought of that." Shane shuddered to think how he'd feel if they'd forgotten to give him a heads up.

"That's why you pay me the big bucks, Shane."

When they hung up, they just sat and looked at each other as they took several unconscious deep breaths. Then Ilya started scrolling through pictures with his teeth biting at his bottom lip while smiling wide enough to split his face.

"No pictures that include a bed, Ilya." Shane warned. Ilya rolled his eyes and started scrolling again.

"And no tongues." This time Ilya dramatically put his hand to his chest in mock shock.

They finally settled on three photos that satisfied Shane's desire for some privacy, or at least modesty, and Ilya's desire to shout his happiness from the rooftops in the most dramatic way possible.

Before they hit send, though, Shane shouted, "wait!" And Ilya, worried, put down his phone, sure that Shane was having second thoughts now.

"We need to text the team first. They should know we're announcing this before their friends find out."

"Good call," Ilya nodded, and pasted their announcement and pictures into the team group chat with the message - *FYI, this is going out on insta*. "Ready for me to send this?"

Shane swallowed. "Yup," he paused, blew out a breath in a whistle, "yup," and Ilya pressed send on the text to the Centaurs group chat. Then they each switched to their Instagrams, and pasted in the same message and the same photos. They looked at each other, smiled and Shane said, "post."

"Our journeys in the NHL have included many proud moments with our teams, and a consistent effort to be the best hockey players we both could be. Today we would like to share with our fans another proud moment in being the best people we can be, as we announce that we are together in a committed romantic relationship and have been for several years. We look forward to many more years of outstanding hockey and now, on the same team as a couple. We have received unwavering support from our teammates and the Centaurs organization, they are the best. We can't wait to bring our team's energy to the playoffs, together."

Immediately after pressing "post," they closed instagram, not wanting to feel the turmoil, not yet. They'd let the public comments in to their lives later. But the team group chat was already generating replies and they were happy to read those.

Bood: What! Today!??? Congrats guys.

Harris: This is THE BEST!!!!!! Thx for heads-up. We'll have our reply right on there!

Troy: You're gonna like how this feels.

Wyatt: First you two, then Superbat. Then I can die happy.

Dykstra: Seriously, we're behind you 100%, on and off the ice, buds.

Haas: I guess I have to put up another Ilya Rozanov poster. You are my hero again.

The media circus turned out to be the next day after practice. Remy was on-duty in security and he stepped into the locker room and warned, "Hey, Ilya, Shane. Just wanted to warn you that you have a lobby full of reporters out there. I've kept them there. But. Yeah. Heads up."

Ilya looked over at Shane to see him looking back at him. They both smiled with the confidence of Farah's words; *you don't owe them your intimacy - you can get away with a general story - and you don't owe them a timeline. They don't get to peep into your feelings. Just give them the outcome; here's where things stand now, and then stop talking.*

They showered and changed at their regular pace, at peace on their own timeline, moving steadily, but not rushing it. The rest of the team followed the normal pace, too, but their tense alertness was clear. When they were dressed, Shane and Ilya stood and shared a nod of readiness. Ilya said, "Good?" And Shane replied, "Yup. I am," and they headed out together.

As the door shut behind Ilya and Shane, Wyatt addressed the silent room. "Well, guys? We're going out to support our boys, right? I know I'm going to be standing behind them, with my hand on the shoulder of whoever else is coming. It'd be good to have our clear support behind them." He looked around the room to see every head nodding. "I'm going out there." They all stood up, the atmosphere was electric, and they followed Shane and Ilya out into the lobby.

Ilya and Shane stopped in front of the group of reporters, and noticed that the reporters weren't looking at them, but behind them. They turned in unison to look behind at what had the reporters' attention, and saw the entire Centaurs team standing there, each with a hand on another's shoulder like a wall of defence. Ilya swelled with pride in the team. He wondered if he'd be able to talk. He looked at Shane and saw that he was feeling the same, probably comparing this to the reactions in the Voyageurs locker room.

A reporter in the thick of the scrum shouted, and they turned back to face the reporters. "Shane, you've only been with the Centaurs for two months, did you just start dating? How long has this been going on? How long have you been together?"

Shane and Ilya exchanged amused looks, they laid it right on the tape didn't they? Might as well knock it in the goal. Shane took a breath and began with Farah's lead-in.

"For years, the league, and you, the media, have asked us to notice each other. You've asked us for comments on each other's talents, for critiques of each other's games, for pictures

together. You've put us together for interviews and events and endorsements. You thought it was interesting to see two talented players who had a lot of differences in personality, and also a lot in common, interact while you learned about who we are as people. You asked us to watch each other and react to what we saw - pretty much every week."

Shane paused while he took in a breath,

Ilya started speaking, unexpectedly. They had planned for Shane to deliver the comments. But Ilya spoke strongly, through an amused, and somehow also radiant smile that took Shane's breath away. His Russian accent made the words both more poignant and funnier.

"And it turns out NHL was right. Shane is a talented guy who is interesting and fun and inspiring and giving," he leaned forward toward the mic, and said, in a villain voice, "Who I will always outscore."

Shane laughed as he slid his eyes off Ilya and looked out at the reporters. "And they were right about Ilya. He is a fierce competitor with talent to spare, and, a caring philanthropist who is fabulous with kids, a guy with a sense of humor that always brings a smile. It turns out he's even a great cook," and Shane smiled as he leaned into the mic, "Who I will continue to outscore."

"You will try, of course. I will win." Ilya smiled his crooked smile at Shane. The reporters laughed, glad to see the rivalry they had loved.

Shane rolled his eyes, but then looked at Ilya and said, "but now we're both skating toward the same goal, right? We'll both beat everyone else to the goal."

One reporter shouted, "You said we kept putting you two in the spotlight. Are you saying you're together because of us?!"

Ilya turned back to the crowded room of microphones and cell phones, still smiling mischievously, "So, I think," he paused, "thank you, all of you, for making sure we noticed each other. And... thanks to the NHL for the blind date. That is the word, yes?" He asked, looking back at Shane, who dissolved into silent wheezing laughter as he thought about telling Ilya later, *this is the you that I have always wanted to show the world!*

Ilya wasn't done yet; he held up a finger. "But I am afraid we will disappoint Roger Crowell that he is not getting an invitation to our wedding," he shrugged with a lopsided grin, and said apologetically, "Will be small."

The burst of laughter from the reporters was cut off when they realized what Ilya had just said, and that he was serious. A heartbeat of silence was shattered by a cacophony of, "You are getting married!?" "You're serious!" "When is the date?" "Is the NHL behind you on this?"

Shane leaned into the microphone, pausing for a chance to speak and the reporter's voices went silent. You could hear a pen click. But again Ilya spoke first.

“We will give you some time to work through your feelings in private. Is nice thing to have, privacy, to work through your feelings, yes? That is all today.”

Shane closed his mouth and did not add any more. It was time to stop talking. He took Ilya’s outstretched hand and Ilya leaned in to him like Shane was a magnet that Ilya’s physical body could not ignore. Together they walked past the reporters and out of the building.

The rest of the Centaurs left after them, with huge smiles, and no answers, past the reporters shouting additional questions about their teammates.

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Epilogue - It’s three years later, and Centaurs have won the Cup. As their captain, Ilya Rozanov is being interviewed by Soterios Johnson on Sports Canada and Shane is watching in the studio

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The interview covered the mundane and the expected as these interviews do, while trying to sound different and insightful. But Shane knew Ilya didn’t mind. As captain, he took the first post-cup sit down interview for the team and he knew the fans were just as happy as he was, as the whole team was. And they didn’t need a critique today, but an affirmation. They would just want to bask in the glow, as Ilya did. And Ilya was happy to give them that. The interview was nearly over when it changed tone.

“I’d like to go to the way-back machine for my next question, and explore your legacy in the NHL,” Soterios Johnson, the interviewer, mused, and Shane watched Ilya brace himself, like the fun was now over, for yet another relationship question.

“When you first started with Boston in your rookie season,” Ilya’s face hardened as he steeled himself for *this again*. But he was clearly caught off-guard by what came next.

“Boston was in a multi-year slump. No cups, no playoff spot even, in some years. You played there for eight years and brought them regular playoff seasons and even a Stanley Cup win.” Ilya’s face actually went slack from his usual media smile as he listened to the question with curiosity.

“Then you moved to Ottawa. And they were in terrible shape. But now they have been in the playoffs three times, and you’ve just won the cup.” Ilya was now leaning forward and watching Johnson closely as the long set-up played out; this was not where he expected this to go.

“So here’s my question, is your legacy here a view of how your hockey-playing skills can turn around any team, or,” and Johnson paused, maybe a little too smug about this long-winded question, “is your player skill actually eclipsed by your skill as a team captain? What’s your real legacy here? Is it goals scored or teams transformed?”

Ilya's face morphed from intent concentration to a glowing joy that was impossible to miss. "I love when you talk to me about hockey!" He practically sang.

Shane visibly melted, hand clutched to his heart, tears in his eyes. He knew his answer; Ilya's heart was even larger than his skill. He didn't think Ilya had ever really given himself credit for that, and he adored Johnson for asking about it. For seeing it.

Still glowing, Ilya replied, "the entire team is relied on for that kind of change. It has been my honor as captain to have a chance to lead two amazing groups of players. When I left Boston I knew it would be a challenge to start again with a team that was struggling. And when I started with the Centaurs it was with me as a player, mostly, joining the team that already had a captain. But as I met the team, and as we learned to play together it became clear that this was a team that could win. And they worked with me, and when I became the captain they all gave as much as they got. I could not be more proud. This team."

He sighed, his smile conveying how much they meant to him. "My legacy? I think you are right that I value what these teams did more than I celebrate what I could do alone. I was always the best that I could be, and pushed myself hard every year. But no one wins at hockey alone." Ilya's glance slid over to Shane, and he seemed to forget about the camera for a moment and his affection was all over his face. Shane smiled back, a sappy, damp smile. Ilya glowed, and turned back to Johnson. "It would be the honor of my career to think that my role as captain brought two teams to the Cup."

End Notes

There are so many ways a life can go. So many potential endings. They are fun to explore, so this fic fought to get out of my head and onto the screen.

This is my first fiction writing ever. It's been loads of fun, and a huge thank you to my muse and beta reader - Illiteration. You listened to all the ideas and embraced them. I would not have written this without your encouragement. Plus you introduced me to AO3. You make good things happen. I adore you, even though you made me remove the double spaces.

Also a huge thank you to Broccolicheddarchicken for beta reading, encouraging and trading stories with me! It has been fun having you on this journey.

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New character names or roles added to make the story roll:

Torrance Cole - GM (named by Broccolicheddarchicken in a previous fic)

Reece Boudreau a homophobe Voyageur teammate (original character name)

LaPoint, another Centaur - I made him a winger

Young, another Centaur - I made him a winger

Austin Burnett, Centaurs GM (original character name)

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