

Fanning the Flames

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Fanning the Flames

by [cjr2](#)

Summary

The Voyageurs ask Shane to join FanMail in order to foster a better connection with fans. Internet sleuths start to notice some interesting details in the background of Shane's videos, and then the internet does...what the internet does.

Or Shane and Ilya are granted an opportunity to come out on their own terms. Sort of. And in they do it in a very Ilya way. (Surprisingly, it is Shane's idea)

Notes

So here's how this fic came to be. I originally read *Heated Rivalry* in the terrible year 2020, when I had a great deal of unexpected reading time on my hands. I decided to reread the book before the TV series aired and remembered how much I liked these characters. Then, days later, I realized there was a sequel?!?!?!?

And while reading that sequel, I saw the repeated mentions of FanMail (lol) and Instagram and I had a different idea of where that plot was going. After checking in and seeing that people do actually write fanfiction for this couple (yay!), I figured...why not develop my idea into a real fanfiction? And here we are.

Canon-divergent partway through *The Long Game*. An alternate path the FanMail plot line could have taken. Also briefly references the short story on Rachel Reid's website, Halloween with Ilya.

Chapter 1

“We want you to create a FanMail account,” said the new PR manager for the Voyageurs. “It’s part of our new fan engagement initiative.”

The silence stretched between them as Shane stared at her, part of him hoping this was a joke. But her expression remained perfectly serious.

Shane had never gotten into social media even in the early days when a lot of his peers had been sharing every intimate detail of their lives online. Part of it had probably been that the idea just inherently didn’t appeal to him, but part of it had been that by the time social media had become a thing, he’d known he was headed for the NHL. And he’d known that the last thing he needed was some scandal in his personal life to affect his career. Which had become doubly true when he’d realized that he was absolutely, definitely gay.

Triply true when he’d accepted that he was absolutely, definitely gay for Ilya Rozanov.

His Instagram was mostly him sharing official posts from the team or the foundation, but even if he’d wanted to start posting about his personal life, he wasn’t sure where he’d start. His life was mostly hockey and Ilya. He couldn’t post about the latter, and as to the former, he presumed fans would get bored if he just posted about the results of every game. There were dozens of websites for that kind of thing. He could share photos of his meals, he guessed, but he was fairly certain that trend had died years ago, and besides, Ilya already gave him enough shit about his diet even when he hadn’t made it his whole personality.

So Shane didn’t really post on Instagram or Twitter or anywhere else for that matter. He sometimes talked to fans in person when he ran into them in the street or after a game, and he was... awkward, he knew that. He appreciated that fans were passionate about hockey and the team, but it was always weird to get ambushed when he was just trying to buy his groceries. He made an effort to be polite, of course, but he’d never been naturally outgoing or comfortable with that kind of attention. Small talk with strangers had never been his strong suit.

Shane had never asked Ilya what he did when he ran into a fan in public. He was probably delightfully charming and gregarious and took selfies with them. Shane was abruptly certain that if he searched, he’d find thousands of selfies fans had taken with Ilya, the other man grinning widely or winking at the camera.

Thinking about Ilya smiling made something go gooey in Shane’s chest, so he determined he had to stop before the PR manager thought that he had positive feelings about joining FanMail.

“May I ask the reason why?” Shane asked delicately. A very diplomatic response, he thought, when what he wanted to do was scream and run from the room. He kept his expression neutral, though his fingers twitched against his thigh.

“Hayden Pike’s videos have generated significant positive engagement,” she explained, her tone all business. “It makes fans feel more invested in the team when they get a personalized message from one of its players.”

When she said *invested*, Shane suspected she meant in the monetary and not the emotional sense, but his first thought was whether it was actually wise to blur the lines between players and fans like that. Shane appreciated the fans, but he also appreciated some distance between them and his personal life, and he was sure he’d have felt that way even if Ilya hadn’t been in the picture.

“Why me?” Shane asked, though he already knew the answer. She gave him a look that suggested she thought he was being deliberately obtuse.

“You’re the captain,” she said with the patience of a teacher talking to a particularly stupid child. Which Shane maybe deserved because he certainly wanted to whine like one.

“I could post more on Instagram,” he suggested instead. He didn’t love it, but it was better than having to awkwardly figure out how to tell individual fans happy birthday over and over again. The beauty of social media was supposed to be reaching everyone at once, wasn’t it?

She shook her head. “It’s the personal touch we’re looking for,” she said. “Fans can’t get that from an Instagram post.” She paused and looked him straight in the eye. “It will be good for the team.”

Shane suppressed a groan. This wasn’t his absolute worst nightmare—that honor was reserved for far more catastrophic scenarios—but it ranked uncomfortably high on the list. At least they weren’t live videos, so Shane could watch them back and rerecord them if he sounded like an idiot on the first take.

“Okay,” Shane agreed at last. “If it’s good for the team.”

Ilya’s laughter rang through the phone when Shane told him the news.

“You will be *so* terrible at this,” Ilya told Shane, ever the supportive boyfriend. “Fans will ask for a birthday message, and you will record five takes because you think the first one sounds too weird, and the second one you will stumble over your words, and the third one—”

“Okay, all right,” Shane interrupted, not terribly keen to know what horribly embarrassing things Ilya imagined he could do while trying to record a simple birthday message. Unfortunately for his flimsy veneer of anger, he was laughing even as he protested, because Ilya’s mirth was contagious and despite himself, Shane’s chest felt warm at how well his boyfriend knew him, even the high-strung, obsessive part of him. Maybe especially that part, because Ilya knew all the worst things about him and loved him anyway. “Anyway, I don’t have to answer every request. I can skip it if it’s something embarrassing.”

Ilya dissolved into laughter again. “Then you will skip *every* request!” he protested, and even on the relatively small screen of his phone, Shane could see the way Ilya’s eyes sparkled. Shane knew that people sometimes posted the private videos they received on FanMail; he

could suddenly imagine Ilya finding and watching every one and sending him a critique of his performance. Weirdly enough, that thought actually eased some of his anxiety.

“I’m glad my shame is so enjoyable for you,” Shane said dryly, sure he was blushing.

“No, no, sweetheart,” Ilya started to backtrack, maybe afraid that he was actually upsetting Shane. It was sometimes difficult to tell these things over the phone, even now that they had the advantage of video. “Let me help. Let’s see...you can pretend you are playing that children’s game, what is it called? Truth or...action?” Ilya repeated the word in Russian, but it wasn’t one Shane had managed to commit to memory yet. Still, it was clear enough from context.

“Truth or dare?” Shane suggested.

“Yes, that one. If someone asks you to sing—”

Suddenly, Shane imagined that scenario. “Oh god,” he said, burying his face in his hand.

“—just pretend you are a child, and it is a game of truth or dare.”

Shane wasn’t sure if it was annoying or funny that Ilya had been more helpful before he’d actually tried to make supportive suggestions.

“I always chose ‘truth’ when I played truth or dare,” Shane confessed. “Dares...they were way too embarrassing. Even watching *other people’s dares*...the secondhand embarrassment was almost too much.”

Ilya’s expression turned sympathetic, though Shane could see that he was holding in laughter at the same time. “Oh, moy pomidor...how do you survive in a locker room if you are so easily embarrassed?”

Shane rolled his eyes, but...fair question, honestly. “Why tomato?” he asked instead of attempting to answer Ilya’s question.

“Because you are so red right now,” Ilya told him, giving in to his laughter.

As it turned out, joining FanMail wasn’t nearly as terrible as Shane had anticipated. He had indeed had to turn down some singing requests (and those people should thank him, honestly, for saving their ears). But it was, as expected, mostly birthday and anniversary messages, which were easy enough, if a bit repetitive. He’d also been asked to record a gender reveal and a short message for the annual meeting at a local Montreal company. One woman had asked him to tell her boyfriend that he was going to do a great job on a test, and giving a thirty-second pep-talk actually came second nature to Shane after years of captaining a hockey team. (Shane wondered if the guy had passed his test, but he had resigned himself to not getting closure on that one).

So it was actually...fine. Better than posting more on Instagram, actually, because Shane didn’t have to share anything else about his personal life. It was always a little embarrassing

when people posted the videos publicly, and Shane always cringed when one of his teammates pulled one up in the locker room. He wasn't sure how recording a short video was different than giving an interview or a speech, both of which he'd always been more than comfortable with. He did occasionally watch one of his interviews and wish he'd articulated himself a bit better, but he didn't feel the sort of visceral embarrassment he felt when watching back one of the FanMail videos.

Perhaps it was because most of his interviews were entirely impersonal, about the results of a hockey game or an event for the Irina Foundation, something that involved him but wasn't entirely *about* him. Even the documentary that had ostensibly been about his rivalry with Ilya had been about their careers and not about them personally.

These videos, though, were supposed to be personal and sincere, or at least give the appearance of being so. Maybe it was just an unspoken agreement where both parties understood he wasn't genuinely invested in a stranger's birthday, but they all played along and mutually agreed to pretend. Shane should be good at that, considering he'd spent so many years of his life pretending about several very pivotal things, but he absolutely was not.

It was impossible to relax when he knew he had to be very careful about everything he did when he filmed these videos. It was easy enough when he was home, but when he was at Ilya's, he tried to find a plain white wall to stand in front of—except sometimes, a very excitable dog was in the same room as the only unadorned white wall, and Shane felt awful locking Anya in another room just so he could film a video.

And anyway, he one time he'd tried shutting Anya in the bedroom with Ilya, hoping to film before Ilya woke up and spare himself the mortification of being perceived while doing so, it had backfired spectacularly. The dog had woken Ilya up, and Ilya had been a little shit that morning, making increasingly ridiculous faces to make Shane laugh, which had been...well, it had been charming, but it had also been very annoying, because it had taken Shane nearly an hour to film three very simple one minute videos.

Of course, Ilya had spent the next twenty minutes very diligently sucking Shane's cock, and by the end of it, Shane had forgotten why he'd been angry at Ilya, if he'd ever been angry at Ilya in the first place.

So from then on, Shane had taken to filming his videos in the gym in Ilya's basement, because he had the same weight rack and bench as Ilya did, and if he angled the camera just so, almost nothing else was in frame. It wasn't quite a blank wall, but it served its purpose well enough.

So yeah, FanMail was...not his favorite thing, but there were quite a lot of small inconveniences—and much bigger inconveniences—that came with playing professional hockey, and most of them he'd come to accept a long time before. Most of it was a relatively minor trade-off for getting paid extremely well to play what was, at its core, an entertaining (if admittedly dangerous) game. Shane was acutely aware of how many people would give anything to have the career he had, the life he'd built through hockey.

Shane hated the position he and Ilya had been put in due to their careers, hated that he couldn't scream from the rooftops that Ilya Rozanov was the man that he loved. That was the one thing, the one trade-off that all but flayed him of his skin. But FanMail...he didn't hate that quite so much. It was a mild annoyance at best, and maybe it actually was a little nice to think that a few minutes of his time might brighten someone's day.

It was an absolutely ordinary day. That was what Shane had been thinking, at least, right up until he walked into the locker room and heard, "So, Captain, are you fucking Ilya Rozanov?"

Shane stopped in his tracks. His blood froze in his veins. His heart somehow both stopped and pounded so loudly that he could hear it thundering in his ears. He forgot to breathe. He felt hot, then cold, then hot again.

"...what?" he managed at last, the single word coming out a desperate squeak. The whole locker room was laughing uproariously, Drapeau legitimately rolling on the floor. Hayden wasn't laughing, but his eyes were huge, staring at Shane with an intensity that suggested he was desperately trying to convey something to Shane telepathically. The problem was that Shane had no idea what it was Hayden was trying to communicate.

"He's joking!" Hayden said quickly, his gaze not turning any less intense. "It's just some weirdos online. It's literally just conspiracy theories."

Shane's heart slowed a little bit, and he could finally breathe. Okay, whatever this was, it wasn't a disaster, then. His relationship with Ilya hadn't been exposed to the world against his will. But he didn't know *what* it was then.

"I don't know..." J.J. began, barely able to speak through his laughter. "**hollanovtruther** on Tumblr does have some...compelling evidence..."

It was then that Shane noticed that everyone in the locker room had their phones out. "Tumblr?" Shane echoed stupidly.

"We have a thirty-year-old grandpa right here!" Drapeau exclaimed, still on the floor in near-hysterics. "He doesn't know what Tumblr is!"

"I know what Tumblr is," Shane protested, and he did...mostly. Everyone ignored him.

"If you look in the background of this FanMail video recorded by Shane, you can see this blue exercise ball. It's the same exercise ball Ilya posted on his Instagram," Comeau read aloud.

"Reblog: **hollandersgirl1989**: 'Or...newsflash...maybe two *professional hockey players* who both live in Canada bought exercise balls from the same chain store?'" J.J. read out in an exaggerated falsetto.

"Re:reblog: **hollanovtruther**," Comeau continued, like they were a two-man comedy act, "No, you can see here that they have the same black scuff on them. I've circled it in both

images for your reference. It's definitely the same ball.'"

Shane was getting sweaty again, clammy and uncomfortable, and he stared back at Hayden with what he assumed were even wider eyes than Hayden had attempted to stare at him with earlier. Hayden seemed to understand what Shane was trying to communicate, because he handed over his phone, and...yep, there was a screenshot of a video he had taken, and in the very corner, there was the blue exercise ball, visible in the reflection in the mirror. Fuck.

How had they even *noticed* this? Shane literally had no idea. He had been trying to be so careful, and even *he* hadn't noticed anything was visible in the frame except for the weight bench. Except there it was, with a little black scuffmark circled in red, and beside it was a screencap of Ilya's Instagram with the same tiny imperfection circled.

Jesus, maybe Shane and Ilya's relationship *had* been outed. By an exercise ball.

Drapeau had finally recovered enough from his fit of giggles to prop himself up and read from his own phone. "**Voyagegrrrrrrl** says: 'So what? They're friends. They created a foundation together. Why can't two men be friends anymore? Why do you RPF weirdos always have to make everything *gay*?'"

Drapeau wailed the word *gay* in the most exaggerated way, and it was then that Shane realized...his team didn't take this seriously *at all*. Not a single one of them thought it was true. Shane forced himself to relax, in increments.

"Hilarious," Shane deadpanned, as if he hadn't been exactly one breath away from having a panic attack just seconds before.

"They probably sensed the gay vibes from you, captain, because...you know," Comeau said, waving his hand in the direction of Shane's person as if it required no further explanation. Which...Shane *was* gay, and he had disclosed that to his team, but there was something about the way Comeau said it that rubbed him the wrong way. "A guy like Rozanov, though...no way. Where do they get these ideas? Delusional."

Hayden swallowed thickly, looking nearly as on-edge as Shane felt. "What, uh...what is RPF anyway?" he asked tentatively, as if he was worried the others would notice he wasn't adequately participating in the conversation. Or maybe he didn't want Shane to have to sit through his whole team waxing on about how impossible it was that Ilya Rozanov might want to fuck him. Shane appreciated Hayden more than ever.

"It's 'real person fiction,' man, it's...never mind, it's probably best you don't know. You'll want to stay away from it anyway."

"Nah, I love it," J.J. argued. "So funny to read sometimes. They think I have a big dick."

Comeau rolled his eyes. "That's why it's called 'fiction'!"

J.J. glared at him, "Hey!"

“Did you see it?” Shane asked frantically on the phone to Ilya later that evening. Shane would have gotten in his car and driven immediately to Ottawa as soon as he’d left the Voyageurs’ facility, except Ilya was on the road and wouldn’t have been there even if Shane had. Some part of Shane wanted to get in his car anyway and drive and drive and drive until he was exactly where Ilya was right now.

“I did see it,” Ilya remarked calmly. “Someone from your team texted someone who texted someone who texted Hazy.”

“And?” Shane asked impatiently. The silence stretched between them, and Shane’s frustration mounted. Ilya still hadn’t offered any indication of how he actually felt about all this. Shane loved Ilya, but sometimes talking to him could be like pulling teeth.

“No one takes it seriously,” Ilya assured Shane. “Everyone is laughing about it. Is no big deal.”

Funny, because to Shane it felt like a very fucking big deal. “But what if someone *does* take it seriously?” he pressed, tugging at a loose thread on his shirt. “What if we both get kicked off our teams and our careers are over?”

Ilya sighed. “We will not be kicked off our teams,” he said with gentle certainty. Shane was not calmed.

“Crowell made it very clear to me that he doesn’t want *distractions*,” Shane reminded Ilya, unable to keep from rolling his eyes at the memory of their conversation. “This could be a *big* distraction.”

“No one will listen to speculation from strange Tumblr blog,” Ilya said. “No real news will cover it. Best thing is to ignore.”

Shane worried his lip with his teeth, unable to stop himself from thinking of worst-case scenarios. “But if it *does*, and something happens...Ilya, what about your visa? And if you have to go back to Russia and they *know*—”

Shane had nightmares about it, sometimes, vivid, terrible visions where Ilya was expelled from the league, his visa revoked, sent back to Russia where Shane couldn’t protect him. Shane had deliberately avoided researching how plausible any of this actually was, caught between the fear that knowing might ease his anxiety or that it might confirm his worst fears and ensure he never slept soundly again.

“Then we get married and I will get spousal visa and stay with you,” Ilya reassured him with absurd confidence. “I will not leave you, sweetheart. I will not go back to Russia.”

Shane doubted that Ilya was quite as sanguine about it as he seemed. For one thing, when Ilya was worried, he tended to start losing his grip on the finer points of English grammar, and he’d been dropping an awful lot of articles.

Ilya’s instinct was always to shield Shane, to shoulder everything himself, and while Shane loved him fiercely for it, it could also drive him absolutely crazy. It was the same reason Ilya

had waited so long to tell Shane that he was depressed, that he was seeing a therapist. Ilya never wanted to burden Shane, but sometimes Shane wished Ilya would burden him with everything. He wished Ilya would pour out his every fear and worry until Shane was completely buried by them.

And Ilya never said it, but one of the reasons that Ilya never dumped his worries onto Shane was that Shane was the high-strung one, the one who panicked about things big and small, and Ilya had to be the calm one. Shane was working on it in his own therapy, though he hadn't admitted as much to Ilya. He knew it annoyed Ilya, how he found ways to overthink everything, though Ilya wouldn't say that to his face. Or if he did, he'd say it in the sweetest, most romantic way, because implausibly, that was who Ilya Rozanov was.

Shane took a deep breath, determined to calm himself down. If he stayed calm, then maybe he'd leave enough room for Ilya to freak out, if he needed to. Whatever Ilya said, the blowback from this could be much worse for Ilya than it could for Shane. Shane had spent so many years fearing what would happen to *him* if this got out, but after all Ilya had sacrificed for their relationship, it was certainly well past time to allow Ilya his own breakdown, if he needed one.

"Okay," Shane said, blowing a breath out slowly. "You know I love you, right? I wish I could scream at the top of my lungs that I love you."

The line went quiet for a long moment, and Shane could hear his own pulse in the silence, wondering if he'd said the right thing or if somehow he'd made it worse.

"I know," Ilya said, his voice absurdly gentle, although part of Shane couldn't help but worry that maybe Ilya *hadn't* known. That Shane had spent so long worrying aloud what might happen if the truth came to light that some part of Ilya might have thought that Shane was ashamed of Ilya, and of his love for him. He'd never have thought so before, but apparently Shane had missed a lot over the years, and he'd spent too much time taking Ilya's love for granted. "This will be okay. Will blow over."

It did not blow over.

"What the fuck is a geo guesser?" Ilya asked, squinting at his phone. Shane was starting to wonder if maybe Ilya was the one who needed glasses, but the squinting was probably more confusion than blindness. Probably.

"I think it's someone who tries to guess where in the world a photo was taken," Shane explained, doing his best to tamp down his instinct to panic. Shane had been pacing back and forth in Ilya's house while waiting for Ilya to get back from picking up Anya on the return trip from the airport. Shane had wanted to pick up Anya himself, but...well, considering the circumstances, it seemed like a bad idea if Shane Hollander was seen picking up Ilya Rozanov's dog from the dog hotel. But now that Ilya and Anya were back home, Shane was trying his very best *not* to pace, because he was learning to leave space for Ilya to have big panicky feelings too.

“And this geo guesser...” Ilya paused, squinting again at the text and images on his phone “...knows I took this picture of geese at your cottage.”

“They don’t *know* anything,” Shane said slowly. Ilya raised an eyebrow at him, and Shane sagged. “They *think* they matched the little bit of the ridge you can see here,” Shane pointed, “to a location about two hours from Ottawa. Where they know I have a cottage. Because of that interview I gave years ago.”

“Exact location redacted for their privacy,” Ilya read out, very carefully enunciating every word. “So that means we will not expect photographers with long lenses to shoot photos through our bedroom window.”

Shane bit his bottom lip, because that had been pretty much his precise reaction. Ilya shook his head at the photo in annoyance.

“Ridge, what ridge?” he demanded to no one in particular. “Photo is mostly sky, and geese. You can barely see the ridge.”

That had been Shane’s reaction as well. It was unnerving, honestly, the level of scrutiny people were capable of. “The internet is full of very determined people.”

Ilya sighed, scrubbing his hand over his face. He looked worn down in a way Shane didn’t see often, shoulders slightly slumped, exhaustion etched into the lines around his eyes. “I’m sorry, Shane. I should not have posted that picture.”

Shane caught Ilya by the arm then pulled the other man’s phone from between his fingers. He set it face down on the table.

“It was a picture of geese,” Shane reassured him softly. “You had no reason to think it was anything other than a perfectly harmless photo.”

Ilya’s arm was tense in his gentle grip, but through what seemed like sheer force of will, the other man slowly relaxed. His exhale was long and shaky.

“Is disaster,” Ilya said softly, and Shane could not have been more grateful to hear his boyfriend catastrophizing, because at least if he was catastrophizing, he probably wasn’t holding anything inside. Or maybe he was. Ilya Rozanov, Shane had learned, contained multitudes. Ilya felt things deeply, sometimes too deeply, and kept most of it locked away where no one could see.

But this made Shane feel paradoxically very calm, perhaps more settled than he ever had in his life. Ilya had been strong for Shane enough times, had soothed him through a thousand different kinds of worry and anxiety. It always felt nice when Ilya let him in and allowed him to return the favor.

“It’s not a disaster,” Shane reassured him. “But we’ll schedule a call with Farah to see what our best move will be going forward, okay?”

Ilya sighed softly, the last of the tension melting from him. He leaned down and rested his forehead against Shane's, letting their breathing sync until they were one singular being.

"Da, yes. Okay," Ilya breathed against Shane's lips. "We will ask Farah for our best move."

"Your best move going forward will be to ignore this entirely," Farah said, and it was precisely what Shane had expected her to say, and yet some part of him still somehow wished she had said something else, though he wasn't quite ready to acknowledge what. "It's unsubstantiated speculation from fan blogs and Twitter. Any denial we issue will only bring them more attention."

"So we say...nothing? Do nothing?" Ilya asked, clearly annoyed. Shane was not surprised. Ilya was the sort of man who wanted to take action, to fix things, and there was no way for him to do that here.

"I know it's frustrating," Farah said. "But engaging with these theories only legitimizes them. Silence is actually your strongest position right now."

Ilya exhaled roughly.

"They are matching dog hair on Shane's jacket to my dog!" Ilya huffed. "Does Shane have to avoid my dog now so no one suspects?"

"Most people would acknowledge that Shane could have more than one friend or acquaintance with a pet," Farah said patiently. "The majority of people will not take posts like this seriously. The majority of people won't even see these posts."

Ilya rolled his eyes toward the ceiling, as if the prospect of keeping Anya and Shane separate was one of the worst things that could possibly happen to him. The idea definitely was pretty terrible, and for Shane, too. Shane loved that dog, but Ilya somehow loved her more. When Ilya loved, he did it deeply, unwaveringly.

Farah hesitated, her expression shifting. Shane had a feeling he wasn't going to like what she would say next.

"The other option is to come out and face it head on," Farah suggested tentatively. "Acknowledge your relationship openly."

"No," Shane replied immediately, in the same moment Ilya said, "Well—"

Ilya stopped speaking so quickly it was as though he had never opened his mouth at all. The air in the room was suddenly heavy, and Shane wished he could take the word back. He knew Ilya wouldn't begrudge him this, but he could see the hurt in his boyfriend's eyes, and he hated it. And he hated himself for the fact that shooting the idea down was always his knee-jerk reaction.

Shane cursed himself internally. This was not how he'd intended this call to go. He was better than this.

“What about a third possibility?” he ventured tentatively. It felt like every inch of his skin was tingling, and it was very, very difficult to breathe. He hadn’t brought this up with Ilya because...well, because maybe he was a coward, but also because part of him wanted Farah to shoot him down and part of him wanted Farah to cheer him on, and it was anyone’s guess which part of him would win that battle. And he hadn’t wanted to get Ilya’s hopes up too early.

“I’m listening,” Farah said, sounding intrigued. Shane could feel Ilya’s eyes boring into him from the side, but he couldn’t look at Ilya, not yet. Not until he got out what he wanted to say.

“What if we didn’t deny it,” Shane began, “but we didn’t confirm it either? What if we just...fanned the flames a bit?”

Ilya was staring at Shane in shock, and Shane wasn’t surprised. This was a very Ilya suggestion, and not a very Shane suggestion. The sort of suggestion that Ilya would make half-jokingly, in a deadpan drawl that made it impossible to tell whether there was an edge of seriousness beneath it.

“Tell me more,” Farah pressed. Shane finally glanced toward Ilya, and the other man’s eyes were wide and filled with so many things, and Shane could only identify a handful of them. Confusion and awe and love and amusement and a thousand other things Ilya probably couldn’t put into words in English. Shane really needed to dedicate more time to learning Russian, but Russian was impossible, and every time Shane read words like *genitive case*, his brain started to turn itself off. French had been so much easier to wrap his head around. Not that Shane would give up; he would keep reading Russian grammar books until he died if that was what it took.

“Well, it gives us time to feel out everyone around us before we eventually confirm it,” Shane said. His palms were sweating, but he wasn’t going to stop there. He’d made this decision, and he was going to stick with it—at least with proposing it, because if Ilya shot it down, Shane would drop it in a second. But Ilya wasn’t going to shoot it down. “See who would be on our side, hypothetically, and who is an asshole about it. And yeah, you’re right—most people will never see a random Tumblr post, but if they keep getting more and more ammunition, eventually it will start to reach critical mass. People will talk about it. It will create buzz.”

Farah’s face had turned thoughtful. “The ‘all publicity is good publicity’ approach,” she mused aloud. “I can’t say that I expected that from you, Shane, but if that’s how you want to play it, I can write you up a game plan.”

Shane shrugged, and he would probably have a heart attack before this was all over, but he wasn’t changing his mind now. “If anything, this has proven that we’re living on borrowed time,” Shane said. His ears were ringing. His voice sounded confident, but it also felt like the words were coming out of someone else’s mouth, some alien that had replaced Shane Hollander with someone braver. “We should be able to do this on our own terms, as much as possible.”

Farah nodded her understanding. She turned her gaze to Ilya. “Ilya?” she prodded. It had been a long time since Ilya had last spoken. His face hadn’t moved from that strange amalgamation of awe-confusion. He blinked as if he’d just woken from a dream.

“I...yes. I support Shane’s idea. We will fan the flames.”

Ilya was on Shane the moment they got off the call with Farah, mouth attached so firmly to Shane’s that it was almost like he needed Shane more than he needed oxygen, or like Shane *was* his oxygen. He pushed Shane back until he was pressed firmly to the sofa, and it was like Ilya was some vicious animal, and somehow at the same time, he was tender and soft and gentle. When he pulled away, his pupils were blown and he had that same loopy, drunk on love (probably actually serotonin) expression he had when Shane made a dedicated attempt to suck Ilya’s soul out through his dick.

Ilya’s lips were swollen and red and Shane doubted that he looked any better. “I love you,” Ilya said, first in Russian, then in English for good measure. He peppered kisses across Shane’s cheeks, his eyelids, his jaw. Shane understood that just then *I love you* also meant *thank you*, because although Ilya had always been the one with more to lose, Shane had always been the one who had been more scared. Of everything, really. Ilya understood what a big step Shane had just made.

Ilya’s fingers were fumbling with Shane’s belt, and it was always heady, having Ilya Rozanov’s full attention focused on him. So heady that Shane almost forgot how fucking dangerous this was. Despite every instinct in his body, and especially his dick, telling him not to, he caught Ilya’s hand and stopped him.

“Wait,” Shane said, fighting through the fog to remember what was so important. Ilya pulled back, blinking owlishly at him. “Ilya, I don’t know if you were serious when you talked about marriage, but if we’re going to do this...we need to get married. Like now. At least have the first steps in place just in case—”

Shane didn’t say what the ‘just in case’ was, but they both knew. Ilya probably knew better than he did, because Shane had only barely heard the details of the gay propaganda law in Russia, but if there was anything that was gay propaganda, it was teasing the public with your gay relationship on social media. Ilya definitely knew and understood the possible consequences in a way Shane couldn’t.

Ilya didn’t say anything, and suddenly Shane was panicking, because Ilya had been the one to broach the topic of marriage multiple times, but several of those had been jokes about visas and citizenship. And Shane knew that Ilya wanted to marry him for more than that—or at least he thought he did, but now Ilya was silent and Shane wasn’t certain of anything anymore.

“We could...I mean, we could have a real ceremony later, after everything is out.” Shane was babbling, and he knew he was, but he couldn’t make himself stop. “I’m sorry if this wasn’t more romantic, but Ilya...I can’t lose you. I *can’t*.”

A huge grin split across Ilya's face. "Would be more romantic if you proposed when my mouth is on your dick," he said cheekily. Shane released a strangled laugh, and in the same moment, he almost started crying in relief. Not that he'd really believed that he could have read the signals quite so wrong, but still.

"You do *not* know what romance is," Shane huffed, which was a complete lie, because Ilya was somehow the most romantic person Shane had ever met or even heard of. Maybe not in the traditional sense, but Ilya could absolutely bowl him over with the most romantic shit Shane had ever heard, and in his second language.

"Is fitting you propose to me when my hand is on your dick," Ilya mused aloud, beginning to massage Shane through his pants. And yep, sometimes Ilya said the most romantic shit that Shane had ever heard, and sometimes he said...that. Shane released a noise that was halfway between a snort and a groan. "No, is true. Sex is our love language."

That time, Shane did snort, though he didn't protest when Ilya unfastened his pants. "Sex isn't one of the love languages," Shane protested, if half-heartedly.

"Is so," Ilya argued. "One is, what? 'Physical touch.'" Ilya wrapped his hand around Shane's dick as if to punctuate his point. Shane groaned, unable to stop himself from bucking up into Ilya's grasp.

"I think they mean like...handholding, cuddling."

Ilya rolled his eyes. "And sex," he said confidently, and Shane had nothing left in him to argue about it. He wasn't sure why he had started arguing with Ilya in the first place. "I have changed my mind. Propose to me again when I am inside you. Is more romantic."

Shane laughed, then rolled his eyes too, then began tearing off his clothes when Ilya stood up to give him the space to do so. Somehow, Ilya was quicker at getting undressed, and by the time Shane had removed all his clothes, Ilya had already produced a bottle of lube and a condom from between the couch cushions. Shane grabbed the condom from Ilya's hand and tossed it aside.

Ilya raised an eyebrow. "No?" he confirmed.

"It's more romantic if you come inside me while I propose," Shane declared, and his face felt like it was on fire as soon as the words were out of his mouth. God, Ilya made him crazy.

He seemed to make Ilya crazy too, because Ilya cursed beneath his breath in Russian and pushed him back onto the sofa. They'd had sex on this sofa probably a hundred times. It was not the ideal space for fucking in quite this configuration, but neither of them cared. Ilya's fingers were impatient as they pressed inside him, but it was exactly what Shane wanted; he didn't want soft or slow or gentle. He wanted to know that Ilya was burning alive the way he was.

"Fuck me," Shane pleaded before Ilya managed to press a third finger into him. Shane wanted it, wanted to feel the burn of the stretch as his body accommodated Ilya's girth. Ilya groaned and slicked himself up.

“You will propose to me again, yes?” Ilya confirmed. “While I fuck you.”

Shane was about ready to do anything that Ilya asked of him. It should have been embarrassing, the way that night in Vegas had been embarrassing, at least to start. He should have balked at it, even though he’d been the one to egg Ilya on. But he liked when Ilya challenged him, and Ilya liked when he pushed Shane out of his comfort zone and Shane loved it. Maybe sex *was* their love language.

“Yes,” Shane promised. “Fuck me. Please.”

Begging nearly always got to Ilya, and this time was no different; Ilya pressed inside of him in one swift, smooth motion, folding Shane nearly in half, his legs pressed against his chest. Even with all the lube Ilya had used, it burned, and Shane welcomed it. He hoped he’d feel it tomorrow, that very physical reminder of what they’d done together, while he signed their marriage certificate.

Ilya didn’t need Shane to tell him when he was ready; they’d been together long enough that Ilya sometimes seemed to know Shane better than he knew himself, at least here, with Ilya buried inside him. Ilya started moving *just* before Shane was really ready for him to, and that was exactly what Shane had been craving, even if he wouldn’t have been able to articulate it in quite so many words. The first few thrusts were painful, and Shane could not suppress his whimpers or his squirms, and then Ilya angled himself just right, and the pain transformed into an intoxicating combination of *painpleasure* that was better than either one ever could be alone. Shane cried out helplessly.

“Ask me again,” Ilya ordered, already speeding his thrusts, like he couldn’t quite help himself. Shane loved that, too, to take a man who was usually so controlled and break that control into tiny pieces. Shane met Ilya’s eyes, and they were hooded and piercing straight into his soul.

“Marry me,” Shane begged, and there were tears pricking his eyes from the intensity of everything, Ilya’s expression and the press of Ilya inside of him. “Marry me. Be my husband.”

Something in that shattered whatever was left of Ilya’s control. He buried his face in Shane’s neck and thrust impatiently. “Touch yourself,” he demanded, and the words were gruff, throaty and barely in control. Shane was helpless to resist, not that he wanted to; he circled his fingers around his straining cock and wrapped his legs around Ilya’s back, and Ilya was whining in his ear, feral and desperate and *that* was what pushed Shane over the edge, the sound of Ilya’s unrestrained pleasure. It was only a minute later that Ilya collapsed on top of him, breathless and sated.

It took a few minutes for Shane to regain his bearings. When he did, he could barely breathe, a behemoth of a man pressing him down onto the sofa cushions, his skin uncomfortably clammy where it stuck to the leather. The slick mess of his release was smeared between their bodies, and when Ilya pulled out, Shane knew he’d have to deal with the slick mess of Ilya’s release, too.

It was perfect. Shane had no desire to move, possibly ever again. Eventually, Ilya began peppering small kisses along the side of Shane's head and neck, beside his ear. "Yes," Ilya said quietly. "My answer is yes."

Shane shivered at the whispered words. He hadn't doubted it, not really, except Ilya hadn't actually said the words until then, so there had remained some tiny part of Shane that had worried. Because there was always some tiny part of Shane that would worry. He carded his fingers through Ilya's sweat-slicked hair and took a long, slow breath. After a long pause, Ilya pulled back and looked Shane in the eye.

"Was it more romantic that I came inside you when you proposed?" he asked with a wild, carefree grin. All Shane could do was laugh.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

You guyyyyyyss writing this had been my whole *life* for days because I am going out of town tomorrow and I won't have my computer. But I made it!!! And Ilya's chapter is even longer than Shane's. I thought this story would be short, y'all.

Ilya pulled up the **#hollanov** page on Tumblr and hit refresh. When that yielded nothing, he clicked on the second open browser window and refreshed the tag on Twitter, too. Fucking nothing.

Well, not *nothing*, but nothing particularly new. A small subset of fans were dissecting his and Shane's every public interaction, every glance, building elaborate theories about when things might have started between them. Some people argued that it had started the first time they'd ever met, which was true in its own way. Some people argued that it was impossible it had started before Ilya had moved to Ottawa, that they could never have found the time to be together before that. Some people argued that it wasn't happening at all, that fans who thought so were all delusional and looking for something that wasn't there.

The **hollanovtruth** blog had posted a full timeline of their careers and where they had intersected, and everyone had debated how they might possibly have managed to carry on a relationship with so much time apart. Ilya had spent some amount of time wondering that himself, especially when he'd still been in Boston, so he understood their skepticism.

There were fewer horrible comments than Ilya would have expected. But then, some bigots probably were probably disgusted at the idea of posting using the internet's designated couple hashtag for them, like even typing it might make them spontaneously gay. So that had probably shielded Ilya from some of it.

Stills from the commercial they'd shot near the very beginning were being reposted while everyone debated whether they could detect lust in Shane or Ilya's eyes (they could). Someone posted slow-mo of when they'd presented at the NHL awards and insisted they could see that Ilya's hand was lingering on Shane's back (it was). People posted photos of Shane with Rose Landry and debated whether they had any chemistry (they didn't). Fans proposed that Ilya had moved to Canada to be closer to Shane (he had).

And they posted, over and over again, footage of Shane's injury. Lip readers tried to guess what they were saying to each other from broadcast footage when their lips were visible and grainy cell phone footage when they were not. Ilya always clicked away from those, so he had no idea if they'd guessed correctly.

Shane might not know much about the internet, but he'd understood enough to see where this was all heading. He had been right that they were living on borrowed time. That even if this had remained nothing more than an internet rumor, it would not have gone away. It would have followed them endlessly, not in reputable news stories but in whispers, and that was just as bad, or maybe even worse.

Ilya could still barely believe that Shane had been the one to suggest their current PR strategy. He could barely believe that even after Shane had suggested it, he hadn't tried to backtrack even once. Sure, he was being twitchy and weird and so very *Shane* about it, but even that was cute.

Yes, Ilya Rozanov was so hopelessly in love with his husband.

His *husband*. Only a small group of people knew so far, but it wouldn't be long until quite a lot people knew, or at least suspected. The internet speculating that Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov might be secretly married was almost—*almost*—as good as actually announcing it. It was more fun, anyway, the mischief of it, the childlike glee Ilya felt every time he spoke to someone and they couldn't tell if he was being serious or sarcastic, if he was fucking with them or telling the truth.

Maybe Ilya had rubbed off on Shane, finally. Well, Ilya had definitely rubbed off on Shane quite a number of times, but maybe Shane had finally learned to find a little joy in keeping people on their toes.

Ilya refreshed the webpage again, though it hadn't been even five minutes. What fear he'd had had dissolved almost entirely into anticipation after his meeting with Wiebe and the owner. Farah had insisted as part of the strategy she'd drawn up for them that they go to their respective teams' management and disclose their marriage, and Ilya had been surprised when his own side had been supportive. Wiebe had been, in fact, supportive beyond Ilya's wildest imaginings. Ilya hadn't told the team yet, and he didn't intend to for some time, but he felt oddly confident that they would be supportive, too, when the time came. It had been Shane's idea, anyway, to let the rumors of their relationship work as an asshole detector, to see what comments other players might make when they still thought it might be a joke.

Plus, Ilya wanted to fuck with them. Obviously. All in good fun, nothing malicious.

The only reason Ilya wasn't able to set aside his apprehension entirely was that Shane's experience with Coach Theriault had been...less positive. It was ironic, maybe, that Shane had wanted this wedding ring as a shield for Ilya, but Shane had been the one who had needed it. No one had suggested benching Ilya, let alone removing him from the Centaurs roster, but Shane's coach had implied that their marriage was the only thing that had saved Shane from being sat down. A married couple, apparently, would garner more sympathy than a couple who was seen as just fucking—especially when they were two men, and too many people acted like gay and bisexual men were degenerates who were at war with family values. Ilya knew this rhetoric well enough, and Shane's ring was, apparently, his shield.

Ilya wanted to be Shane's shield, but at least it was Ilya's ring. That was something.

He refreshed the page again, impatient. After years of worrying about their relationship being outed, it was nice to be excited for a change. A qualified excitement, of course, because Shane's coach was an asshole, but Shane wasn't losing his job, not this season at least. Ilya had started having some ideas about that, too, ideas that he'd never have spoken aloud before because of how impossible it had seemed, except now the Centaurs were winning, and Shane's coach was a dick, and suddenly so very many things seemed possible.

Nothing. Well, the post on the top of the feed was Ilya and Shane in face-off position, a heart drawn around their heads. It was precious, and Ilya saved it to send to Shane later. But it was not what he was waiting for. Because Shane had deliberately filmed every single FanMail video this week in his bedroom, and in every one, one of the two plastic heart rings sat innocuously on the bedside table—the twin to the one Ilya had posted on Instagram months ago.

Shane was getting twice as many FanMail requests as he had before all of this had started, and Ilya was very sure at least half of them were from people reading the **#hollanov** tag and searching for more evidence. *Someone* had to notice the ring and post their video. Right?

Unless Shane chickened out, a voice in the back of Ilya's head murmured, and he hated that voice. He told that voice to shut up. Shane could be oblivious sometimes, but he was not malicious. He would not lie to Ilya, not about something like this.

Someone settled heavily on the seat next to him, and Ilya looked up to see Zane Boodram. He'd almost forgotten he was not alone. And Bood looked over Ilya's shoulder to see him browsing the **#hollanov** tag. Embarrassing.

"What'cha looking at?" he asked, though he'd plainly already seen. Giving up on whatever dignity he might still have, Ilya angled his phone more obviously toward Bood. "That's cute," Bood cooed, gesturing at what had appeared on Ilya's phone screen with his latest refresh.

Ilya hadn't looked at this one yet, and so he turned his phone back toward himself so he could. This time, someone had photoshopped an image of him and Shane standing next to each other in front of some generic house with Anya standing in front of them. The person's image manipulation skills were horrible. It was clear that the photo was a composite of three separate pictures stuck onto a stock photo background. None of the lighting matched. Ilya could see some of the edges where one image ended and the next began.

They looked like a family. Ilya's stupid little heart melted.

"The internet is crazy," Ilya said, keeping his tone carefully neutral. It could mean anything. He watched Bood, waiting for him to make some comment, to say something awful. Except Ilya didn't really expect him to.

"They could be doing worse things." Bood shrugged. He squinted at the image in front of him. "That's your actual dog, right?"

Ilya nodded. "Anya," he confirmed. It was the photo he'd uploaded onto his Instagram in response to the speculation about dog hair on Shane's jacket. There hadn't been any good,

clear pictures of her online before that, so he'd thought it best to give the fans one. For...science.

Bood's nose scrunched up, and Ilya tensed. Maybe this was the moment he realized he'd misjudged Zane Boodram. Maybe this was the moment he said some kind of slur and dashed Ilya's optimism against the rocks. Except what Bood said was, "Isn't Anya a diminutive of Anna?"

Ilya laughed, his relief bright in his chest. "Yes," Ilya drawled. "Her full name is Anna Ilyinichna Rozanova-Hollander." He held up his phone to showcase the Frankensteined family photo of the three of them, grinning.

Bood blinked and stared, uncertain whether or not to take Ilya seriously. That was his favorite look to put on someone else's face, except for the look of bliss Shane got when Ilya fucked him.

"Wait, seriously?" Bood asked after a beat.

"No," Ilya deadpanned. Except, he belatedly realized...maybe yes.

Bood snorted, clapping Ilya on the back. "You're crazy, Roz," he said, though there was only affection in his tone. "Some guys would lose their shit about this, but not you."

"Some guys are not secure with themselves," Ilya said with a shrug. *And some guys are not fucking the man the internet thinks they are fucking.* Bood smiled.

"Truer words, man," he said, shaking his head as he wandered away. Ilya wasn't sure what he meant, but he wasn't going to ask, either. Sometimes, it was less effort to stew in a little bit of confusion. And with hockey players, it was always difficult to know whether Ilya had simply failed to understand English or the man in question had been concussed too many times to make sense anymore.

Ilya refreshed Tumblr and—

—and there it was, a still of Shane standing in his bedroom, the plastic ring circled in red where it sat on his bedside table. Next to it was a screencap of Ilya's Instagram photo showing the other ring.

The post just said:

Guys?!?!?!?!?

#hollanov #omg it's real #someone bring me my fainting couch #what is happening #they're MARRIED aren't they

Ilya could not fight his grin, even if he'd wanted to.

Operation fan the flames, part two was...their real wedding rings. Ilya was quite proud of that plan, actually, and the strategic way he planned to deploy it. It would be too much, far too

much, for both of them to suddenly begin wearing rings, though Ilya had considered it briefly. Mostly because he and Shane had not been able to agree which hand was the wedding hand, and wearing their rings on opposite hands might create an adequate enough amount of confusion to slake Ilya's trickster impulses. But he'd opted for something subtler in the end.

This part had come later by necessity, because they hadn't had rings yet when they'd gotten married in that tiny ceremony—if it even deserved to be called a ceremony—with only Shane's parents and Hayden Pike in attendance. Shane had dragged Ilya to the local municipal office to get their marriage license the morning after he'd proposed, just as he'd promised. Not that there had been much dragging, really, but Ilya had wandered through the whole day in a fog, wondering when he might wake up from the very strange dream he was having. Shane, though, had been on a mission, and nothing could be more formidable than Shane Hollander with a goal in front of him.

It was a good thing, anyway, because Shane had been on the road just after that, and by the time he had returned, Ilya had been on the road, and it did seem to be necessary for both of them to be present in order to finalize their marriage. They would have waited weeks otherwise, and neither one of them wanted to wait weeks once they had decided.

Ilya had claimed the right to deploy this particular bomb, because, really, it was Ilya's *turn*. Shane could not conceive of this whole Rozanov-esque scheme and then not allow Ilya to do any of the work. And Ilya didn't think Shane would have enjoyed this part, anyway, because Shane was slowly realizing that the only teammates he got along with were Hayden Pike and occasionally J.J. Boiziau, because Shane was so antisocial that it had taken him ten years to realize his team was full of assholes.

Ilya had asked, of course, if Shane had wanted to call the whole thing off. He wasn't sure how they could, at this point, but if Shane had asked him, Ilya would have moved mountains to find a way. But Shane had been firm in his commitment to continue, and so when Ilya went to talk to the press after his game, he made certain to pull his necklace out from beneath his shirt, where it was perfectly visible to every camera that would be on him.

On his necklace, nestled beside Ilya's mother's cross, was Ilya's wedding ring.

He'd been wearing it there for days now, ever since the rings had finally arrived. He'd kept the chain tucked into his shirt mostly, though he figured the team might have caught a glimpse of it in the locker room. No one had said anything, but they just might not be observant. Not compared to fans on the internet, at least. Ilya had more faith in the internet.

Flashbulbs went off before Ilya's eyes, and the Centaurs staff gave the go-ahead to the first reporter. "What did you think of your performance today, Ilya?" the reporter asked, pen poised over a notebook. Generic, repetitive, expected question. Ilya had answered it a thousand times after a thousand games.

"Very proud," Ilya said. He chose his words carefully, wanting to get the English exactly how he meant it. "I did a good job. But I have a very good team surrounding me. It is easy to do well when I have support both on and off the ice."

Ilya was, in fact, quite proud of that response. It was true while also managing to be very suggestive to a certain audience. He felt good about his English right now; the answer was sharp and clever and said just what he had intended. Shane would kill him, and then he would kiss him.

“You’ve seemed unusually relaxed out there recently. What’s your secret?” called another reporter. Oh, this was easy. Too easy.

“I am feeling very settled now, I think,” Ilya replied. “My life in Canada is wonderful. I have more there than I did in Boston. Maybe I have won no Cup yet with the Centaurs, but I think that will change soon.”

That one earned them a mandatory emergency meeting with the commissioner. Ilya felt a little guilty for that. He supposed maybe he’d pushed things a bit far, but he hadn’t thought such innocent comments would bring the commissioner down on them. Apparently, though, when you added it all together, it was enough to make the man very angry.

Ilya was already in New York, but the league threatened to put Shane on the next available plane to join him for the meeting. Ilya knew this was meant to be a punishment, but it felt very much like a reward, the prospect of seeing Shane six days earlier than he’d thought he would. He could kiss Crowell on the mouth for that, and he mostly wanted to because he knew Crowell would be disgusted by it.

Farah advised that they refuse the mandatory meeting and scheduled her own call with Crowell instead. Ilya wasn’t entirely sure he understood what “mandatory” meant if you could just refuse it, but apparently it was possible. The disappointment of not seeing Shane was offset by the relief of not having to deal with Crowell, and Ilya flew back to Ottawa with his team as planned.

Not long into the flight, Ilya’s phone pinged with a message from Instagram. He smiled when he saw who it was from. Shane, forced to use Instagram messages because he knew Ilya was on a flight. Shane, who would become a social media expert any minute, kicking and screaming all the way.

You are a menace, the message said, and then there was a link, from *IceBreakers Daily*, which was an absolutely awful website no one read. Ilya looked up the word ‘menace,’ grinned, then looked at the headline.

Rozanov ‘feeling very settled’: Behind the #Hollanov Marriage Rumors

His phone pinged again.

FrozenFame.com: Sharp Eyes Spot Wedding Band—Are Hollander and Rozanov Married or Just Messing With Us?

And again.

Puck&Tell.com: Ten Clues Hollander and Rozanov Have Been Married for Months (and We All Missed It)

And again.

RinkWatch.com: NHL Refuses to Comment on #Hollanov Marriage Rumors; Fans Say That's Basically a Confirmation

Ilya clicked on the last one and skimmed through it.

When pressed for comment about the alleged Hollanov wedding, an NHL spokesperson simply said, "We don't discuss players' personal lives." The internet, naturally, took that as a yes.

"That's PR-speak for 'they're totally married,'" wrote one fan on Reddit.

"If it's a lie, they would definitely deny it," wrote another.

The silence has only added fuel to the fire, as neither player's team has released a statement. Meanwhile, search traffic for "Hollanov marriage license" has quadrupled in the past 24 hours.

Ilya laughed under his breath. They were all essentially fan blogs pretending to be real news sites. It wasn't like *ESPN* or *The Athletic* were running the story. Not yet, anyway. It was a crazy thing for Crowell to be getting so upset about. Ilya typed out his response.

It is okay to admit I am better at this than you are.

Shane sent back an eye rolling emoji and then a middle finger emoji.

Farah scheduled a Zoom call with both of them the next afternoon. Shane was already waiting when Ilya joined the call, but that was no surprise. Very Shane Hollander of him to be so early, and Ilya knew he was worried, which always amplified all of Shane's particular *Shane-ness*. Ilya hoped they had nothing to worry about, but despite the confidence he projected to Shane, he wasn't quite so sure. He knew that whatever happened, they would still have each other, but he did not know if they would still have hockey.

Ilya could live without hockey, though, or at least without the NHL. But he didn't know if *Shane* could live without hockey, and that scared him a little.

Shane looked very studious with his glasses on, his hair pulled back into a ponytail. Ilya loved Shane's glasses. He loved Shane's hair. He loved Shane's *everything*.

"My team is a shitshow," Shane said by way of greeting. "They think you're trolling them."

Ilya blinked. "*I am* trolling them," he pointed out, hoping to make Shane laugh. It also had the benefit of being the truth.

Shane looked at the sky as if asking God for patience. “I can’t believe this was my idea,” he murmured. “Jesus.”

Farah’s video popped onto the screen, and whatever small amount of tension had left Shane’s shoulders came flooding back immediately. He looked like he was about to pop. Thankfully, Farah didn’t waste any time on pleasantries. That was one of the things Ilya liked about her. She knew how to read a situation, and she’d been Shane’s agent for a long time. She knew what he was like.

“I’m sure you’re eager to know about my call with Commissioner Crowell,” Farah said, and Ilya almost motioned with his hand to urge her to get on with it. Shane would call him rude if he did that—Shane, who sat politely straight-backed and tightly-wound.

“Yes,” Ilya affirmed simply. Shane should be proud of him for his restraint, really. And Farah deserved better than to have to deal with Ilya being a little shit. She was the one dealing with Crowell so they didn’t have to.

“Well, the first thing I told him was that it was completely inappropriate for him to reprimand a player for wearing the same sort of inoffensive jewelry many other players wear, or for saying he likes his team and enjoys living in the city they represent,” Farah said evenly.

Shane’s eyes widened cartoonishly behind his glasses. Ilya barked out a short, strained laugh.

“You really told him that?” asked Shane incredulously.

“I did,” Farah affirmed, calm and matter-of-fact. “I also pointed out that both of your jersey sales are up three to five percent compared to a few months ago.”

Shane blinked owlishly. “Are they really?” Shane asked. Ilya hadn’t known about that either.

“Yes,” she confirmed. Ilya idly wondered if he drove into the city and walked into the nearest gay bar if he’d stumble into an unexpected sea of Rozanov jerseys. The thought was deeply amusing.

“Which one of us is three percent and which one is five?” Ilya asked with a grin. Farah just raised her eyebrows at him and ignored the question, which was probably for the best. Or maybe not. Competition always turned Shane on.

“I also reminded him that nothing either of you have said or posted online violates any team or league policies,” she continued instead. “And that unless they intend to also reprimand every male hockey player who is married to a woman, any action taken against either if you is clear grounds for a discrimination lawsuit.”

Ilya smiled. Whatever they were paying Farah, it was not enough. They should be paying her more.

“And that was it?” Shane pressed, and Ilya could see he was practically twitching. It did seem a little too easy, Ilya had to admit. “Crowell didn’t push back?”

Farah shrugged. “He pushed back, but ultimately there’s nothing he can do,” she assured them. “You can consider the matter settled for now. But if anything else comes up...”

“We will call you immediately,” Ilya replied, before Shane could find another thing to worry about. Several rounds of effusive thank-yous later, Farah excused herself for another client meeting she’d already pushed back in order to meet with them first, so they let her go. When they were alone on the call again, Shane shook out his arms as if that would relieve his tension. Ilya could clearly see it hadn’t.

“Are you okay?” Ilya probed. Shane took another long breath.

“Just...too keyed up, I guess,” Shane admitted. “My body hasn’t quite realized it can calm down yet.”

Ilya wiggled his eyebrows. “I can think of something that will calm you down,” he suggested. He watched Shane’s expression shift as understanding dawned. It was very satisfying how scandalized Shane looked.

“Farah *organized* this meeting!” Shane whisper-yelled, as if somehow she would hear them if he spoke too loudly. “She could...come back! And see us!”

“Why would she come back? Our meeting is finished.”

Shane threw up his hands. “I don’t know! But she *could*!”

Ilya rolled his eyes theatrically, trying to hide how endearing he found Shane just then.

“Yes, okay, she could come back to what she thinks is an empty video meeting room so she can stare at her own face,” Ilya said, very plausibly. “Maybe she has no mirror and the camera is all she has to look at herself. So we will not have phone sex in Farah’s Zoom meeting room, in case she pops up and sees us.”

“I don’t have time anyway,” Shane said. “I’m going to be late for practice if I don’t leave soon.”

Ilya sighed. “Fine. Maybe hit someone in practice, then. Release some tension. I vote for Comeau.”

“Oh my *God*,” Shane groaned, but he was smiling. Which meant that even though he had not convinced Shane to have weirdly risky phone sex, Ilya still felt like he had won something.

Ilya hated going to Detroit. He didn’t have a good reason for it, really. Some people talked about Detroit like it was the world’s biggest shithole, but it didn’t actually seem too bad to Ilya. The downtown area had some decent architecture, and the waterfront wasn’t terrible. There were worse cities to visit. But Ilya was Russian, so what did he know about what made a good American city?

Still, he didn’t like going to Detroit. He liked when he got to fly somewhere that was still warm in winter, like Tampa. Plus, Detroit fans were annoying. Their players were fucking

annoying, too. Or maybe Ilya was just in a bad mood because he'd thought he would get to see Shane six days early and instead they hadn't even been able to jerk off together in Farah's Zoom room. Jerking off alone did not hold the same appeal.

At least after this game, he would finally be able to see Shane in person again. And neither of them had been kicked out of the NHL. Things could be worse. Much worse. He should focus more on the positive.

Wyatt Hayes plopped down onto the bench next to Ilya. He was already mostly in his hockey gear, and Ilya was not. "Hey Roz," he greeted, and there was something weird about his voice. Maybe he felt weird because he was about to tell his captain he was running late gearing up for the game. Except when Ilya looked up, he realized the room had gone strangely silent, and everyone was staring at Ilya and Wyatt. Uh-oh.

Wyatt clasped a hand around Ilya's shoulder. "We all just wanted to say that..." he trailed off. That was unusual. Wyatt Hayes was not a man who became lost for words. Ilya felt himself tense instinctively. "Well...if it's true that the only reason you came to Ottawa is to be closer to Hollander...then we're really glad you two are together."

Ilya blinked. He looked around at his team, and they were all staring at him with identical stupid faces, wide-eyed and earnest. Ilya had the urge to rub his eyes to see if the image wouldn't dissolve like smoke. He'd spent weeks carefully planning little hints and breadcrumbs for fans on the internet to find, but somehow he hadn't actually prepared himself for his own team confronting him about it with such sincerity.

"You believe gossip rags that say I am married to Shane Hollander," Ilya stated, far more flustered than he should be. It wasn't an admission. It was, in fact, the opposite of an admission. When he and Shane had agreed to go down this path, he had known there would be a day when he would have to tell the truth. He *wanted* to tell the truth. Except apparently he was hesitant to.

"Well that ring," Hayes said, gesturing toward Ilya's chain, "it's new. You never used to wear it."

Ilya wondered if one of them had noticed it immediately when he'd begun to wear it or if they had only paid attention after a dozen sports gossip sites had started reposting Tumblr and Reddit speculation like it was real news.

"It is new ring, yes," Ilya confirmed. He didn't elaborate, letting the silence stretch out. Let them work for it a little. Hazy had said a nice thing, but nice words were not enough to grant Ilya an entirely new personality.

"Roz, come on!" Boob yelled from a few feet away. "We support you in whatever. Give us *something*!"

Ilya's eyes were not stinging. Well, they weren't after he'd blinked a few times to steady himself, anyway.

“You really think I am in love with Shane Hollander,” he intoned slowly. Even Ilya could not believe this had escalated quite so quickly. Clearly, he was far too good at hints and innuendo. It had gotten him a husband, and it had convinced the internet and his team with so very little hard evidence.

“Well...are you?” It was Haas who asked, his voice cautious but not mocking. Not like he thought it was a joke. Luca Haas, who had always looked up to Ilya, and there was nothing in his expression now that suggested that had changed just because they thought Ilya was in love with a man. It was...funny. Ilya’s heart did something strange in his chest, and he felt like himself again.

“I think Shane Hollander is very annoying,” Ilya said seriously. It wasn’t even a lie. Shane was very, very annoying sometimes. He was stubborn and uptight and far too concerned with following rules that didn’t matter. He was also the most wonderful person Ilya had ever known.

Several of his teammates’ faces fell. Dykstra looked more disappointed than he did whenever they lost a game. Tanner Dillon’s face was scrunched up in confusion. Bood looked like Ilya had just told him Christmas had been canceled forever.

Even after their supportive words, the devastated reaction surprised Ilya somehow. Ilya knew that some portion of the internet had become obsessed with finding clues to this little mystery, but part of Ilya hadn’t expected anyone to genuinely care this much about his happiness. Maybe they had all just hoped that he had someone, that he wasn’t alone when so many of them had wives and children to go home to. Or maybe they’d all been obsessively refreshing the **#hollanov** tag until they had become its biggest fans and greatest defenders.

The whole point of this, Ilya knew, of not coming out immediately and not ignoring it, of taking this middle path that Shane had suggested, was to see who would be assholes about the rumors. Ilya’s teammates were not assholes. They were, maybe, the opposite of assholes. Ilya took pity on them.

“Also, I am married to Shane Hollander,” he admitted.

The room erupted into cheers.

They were on fire. It was maybe, possibly, the best game they had played since Ilya had joined the Centaurs. Everyone was in sync and working together like they had been a winning team for a decade. The passes were crisp, the positioning was flawless, and every line change felt effortless. Ilya had never felt better, or freer, on the ice, not even when he’d won the Stanley Cup.

Roger Crowell was an idiot. Anyone who accused Ilya and Shane of being a distraction had never been on a team like the Ottawa Centaurs. Only shitty teams were distracted by two men in a relationship. It said something about them, something that they should probably dig deeper into in therapy. It should not be Ilya and Shane’s problem.

Ottawa was up 2-0 after the end of the first period. Ilya skated to center ice to take the face-off against Detroit's center Brayden Lawson when play resumed. Lawson was one of those assholes with a bad reputation, but as a fellow asshole with a bad reputation, Ilya tried not to judge.

"What the fuck is all this shit about you and Hollander?" Lawson demanded as they waited for the puck to drop. "You never seemed like a faggot to me."

Okay, now Ilya was going to judge. It was clear that Lawson was trying to rile Ilya, but Ilya was a master at this, and he'd heard the word a thousand times before—in Russian, in English, in French. He was immune to it.

"What does a faggot look like?" Ilya countered with a cheeky grin. Lawson's brow furrowed in confusion.

"Like—"

The puck dropped. Ilya won the face-off.

Ottawa was up 3-0.

"Seriously, Rozanov," Lawson pressed as they bent down for the face-off, like he was still burned at not having gotten closure before, or at not having successfully flustered Ilya. "Everyone said you've had sex with a thousand women."

Ilya shrugged. He didn't know why Lawson was acting as though Ilya potentially liking dick was an insult to his own masculinity.

"A thousand is very generous," Ilya answered, which he knew was not an answer at all. Lawson looked even more annoyed, which had been Ilya's intention. Ilya knew he was very good at being annoying.

"So why are you letting people say this shit about you?" Lawson demanded. His voice had taken on an edge of genuine bewilderment, clearly unable to fathom why Ilya wasn't furious.

Ilya tilted his head. "You have never heard of a bisexual before?"

A red flush was creeping up Lawson's neck. A vein actually bulged.

Ilya won the face-off.

Ottawa was up 4-0.

Lawson's face was red now, and his jaw was set in a tight line. Ilya stopped silently across from him, wondering what it would be this time. He was almost looking forward to whatever bullshit was about to come out of Lawson's mouth. And he wasn't disappointed, either.

“You know, everyone who reads that shit thinks Hollander is the one who takes it,” he hissed out sharply, “but I bet it’s *you*, Rozanov. I bet you’re his little bitch.”

It was difficult for Ilya not to laugh at that. It was so...juvenile. So boring, to equate being fucked with a lack of strength. Ilya had really been hoping for something more creative. He raised an eyebrow.

“Ah, so you are not man enough to take a dick,” Ilya accused archly. A look of absolute confusion passed over Lawson’s face. It was clear that he was not quite certain what he was being accused of or whether he should be insulted. Before he had decided, the puck dropped.

Ilya won the face-off.

He raced down the ice with the puck, keeping Troy and Bood both in his peripheral vision. Troy was streaking down the right wing, Bood trailing slightly behind on the left. Ilya kept his head up, reading the defensive coverage as it shifted. Detroit’s defensemen were backing up, giving him space—too much space. Idiots.

He crossed the blue line and saw Troy break toward the net, his stick ready. There was a slight gap to his right, and when he ducked into it, a perfect passing lane opened up. Ilya shifted his weight, preparing to feed Troy the puck for what should be an easy one-timer.

He lifted his stick to make the pass—

A body slammed into him from behind and to his left, the hit coming in at an ugly angle. The force drove all the air from Ilya’s lungs in one violent rush. His body careened sideways, too dazed to brace himself as he fell.

“What the fuck,” Shane said the moment he walked through the door to Ilya’s house. Ilya couldn’t blame him; he knew he looked like shit. He held an ice pack to his face, and another was wrapped around his left side. A cut on his lip pulled every time he moved his mouth. He hadn’t looked in the mirror for a while, but the last time he had checked, his face had already shown the beginnings of a mottled purple bruise. The plane ride back to Ottawa had been excruciating.

Anya, who very much did not understand why her papa was boring and would not move from his spot on the couch, danced excitedly around Shane’s feet. Shane instinctively reached down to pet her, but his eyes remained on Ilya. Ilya hated to see Shane so worried, but he also felt warm, inside at least. On the outside, he was cold from the ice packs, though they weren’t as frozen as they had been, either. Ilya hadn’t been motivated enough to get up to get new ones.

“What *happened*?” Shane demanded, and Ilya knew the sharpness in his tone was worry and not anger. Shane only got that edge in his voice when he was trying not to panic.

“You did not see?” Ilya asked. Shane had had his own game to play, but...well, Ilya’s game had turned out more exciting.

“I saw a clip of the fight, but...” Shane trailed off, having satisfied Anya enough to reach Ilya at last. He reached out and curled his fingers around Ilya’s, and Ilya let Shane pull the ice pack far enough away to uncover his face. Shane winced at whatever he saw there. “Jesus.”

“Mm, no. It was Brayden Lawson,” Ilya corrected. “Not Jesus. Jesus is against violence, I think.”

Shane snorted, shaking his head in exasperation. “I can’t believe—I mean, he’s an asshole, but what the fuck led to...?” Shane waved expansively in the direction of Ilya’s person.

“Oh, Lawson said I did not look like a faggot,” Ilya began. Shane rolled his eyes. “Then I taught him what a bisexual was. He said I probably was the one who gets fucked, and I told him he was not man enough to take a dick up his ass.”

Shane released a shocked guffaw of laughter, then reigned himself in with an almost guilty look on his face. “Of course you did,” Shane said fondly. He crouched down in front of Ilya and gingerly removed the half-melted ice pack, lifting Ilya’s shirt to survey the damage. “Jesus,” he said again, and this time Ilya didn’t make a quip. “Are they just bruised or...?”

Ilya didn’t want to tell Shane that two of his ribs were broken. His silence must have been incriminating enough, though, because Shane’s expression sagged and he pressed his forehead gently against Ilya’s knee. Ilya reached down and carded his hands through Shane’s hair, dislodging the elastic tying it back.

“So much for not being a distraction,” Shane said into Ilya’s shin.

“Hm,” intoned Ilya noncommittally. “Is hockey. Fights happen. Even when nobody on the ice is gay married to a hot hockey player husband.”

Shane laughed darkly, running his hand up and down the back of Ilya’s calf. Which was nice, considering that was one part of his body that was not bruised.

There was a lot more that Ilya didn’t say. He was not happy about it, of course, because he would miss too many games because of this, and Ottawa had looked like they might even be playoff-bound, and now Ilya was not so sure. Ilya and Shane had both been lucky, relatively speaking; Shane had only had one major injury that had taken him off the ice, and Ilya had been able to play through most of his. Ilya was glad that this time, it had been him and not Shane. Ilya sometimes still had nightmares about Shane lying prone on the ice, so he hoped any future injuries, if they happened, would be his too.

“But my team is very supportive of us,” Ilya said brightly. “Is not all bad.”

Shane’s head snapped up, his dark eyes bright with a panic he barely suppressed. “You told them?”

The air between them went tight and still. Ilya could practically hear the anxious thoughts racing through Shane’s head.

“They already were very sure,” Ilya told him delicately. “They know me too well and see through my jokes, I think. I only...confirmed.” Ilya watched Shane swallow convulsively once, twice, and Ilya was not upset at that. It was one thing to know that they had been on the road to outing themselves, but it was another thing to *understand*. Ilya cupped Shane’s cheek, brushed his finger along Shane’s eyebrow. “They all cheered.”

Shane’s smile was only a little forced. “That’s something positive, at least,” he agreed.

They both remained there, just breathing together for a minute. It was nice to feel Shane’s hand on him again, finally, and Ilya’s hand on Shane, even the places they were touching were not the sexy ones. Ilya looked down at Shane’s dark hair, at his husband crouched as he was between Ilya’s legs. Ilya was a little hazy from the painkillers, but apparently his dick was stronger than the drugs, because the sight of Shane between his legs was doing certain things to him. Shane pressed a kiss against the side of Ilya’s knee, which didn’t do anything to discourage Ilya’s dick.

“What can I do?” Shane asked softly. “Can I get you new ice packs?”

Shane started to rise without even waiting for Ilya’s answer. Ilya caught him by the shoulder, preventing him from rising.

“You could suck my dick,” Ilya suggested. Shane stared at him in disbelief.

“You have broken ribs!” he guessed, unfortunately correctly. “Your face is all smashed up!”

Ilya raised an eyebrow, then fought a wince because that would just prove Shane’s point.

“My dick is not broken,” Ilya pointed out. He reached for the band of his sweatpants, pulling it out to glance at the appendage in question. “Yes, he is very interested in you in that position, Hollander.”

Shane shook his head, though he was smiling. “You are impossible,” he said, but he might well have been saying *I love you* for all the emotion in his voice. He raised himself onto his knees enough to place a soft kiss at the uninjured corner of Ilya’s mouth. Then Shane settled himself between Ilya’s knees. “You are not allowed to move. Seriously. You are not allowed to hurt yourself worse for a blowjob.”

“Oooh, bossy,” Ilya crooned, and Shane leveled him with unamused look. Ilya sighed. “Yes, dear husband, I swear I will let you do all the work if you will suck my dick right now.”

Some mixture of the invocation of the word *husband* and the obedience seemed to convince Shane. In truth, Ilya really liked being able to say the word husband, too, and he didn’t exactly want to move much either. Because despite what he said, everything hurt, and he didn’t want to take more painkillers even though he was nearly due for them. Probably an orgasm would help.

Ilya’s sweats were loose enough that Shane was able to free Ilya’s cock without Ilya lifting his hips. He looked a little surprised to see that Ilya really was semi-erect, as if he’d thought Ilya was lying about what seeing Shane on his knees did to Ilya. Proof of Ilya’s arousal

seemed to be enough to halt any of Shane's objections, because he wrapped his fingers around the base of Ilya's cock and lowered his head to dart his tongue out, tasting the tip.

Ilya unconsciously bucked his hips the tiniest bit, then hissed in pain as his ribs protested the movement. Shane pulled back.

"I'm not kidding," Shane warned. "I *will* stop."

Ilya had no trouble believing that, but it had always been difficult to control himself where Shane Hollander was concerned. So many times, Ilya's brain had told him he should do one thing, and his body had done the opposite. Ilya tangled his fingers in Shane's long hair.

"Let me?"

Ilya tightened his fingers in Shane's hair just enough to show what he meant. Shane's gaze darkened.

"Yes," he breathed.

Ilya guided Shane's mouth back to his dick, and Shane took the direction easily, opening his lips and taking just the head of Ilya's cock in his mouth, warm and wet and perfect. It had been too long since Ilya had felt this, and he had expected to have marathon sex with Shane today to make up for the weeks apart. This would not be marathon sex, but Ilya would never complain about having Shane's mouth on him.

Ilya cupped the back of Shane's head, gently guiding him to move, to take more. Ilya didn't do this often; it had been many, many years since Shane had needed any direction on how to give a blowjob in general, and a blowjob to Ilya in particular. But Ilya didn't trust himself not to thrust if Shane was too tentative, and it at least didn't hurt when Ilya moved his right arm.

Shane took Ilya's direction like it was what he was born to do, let Ilya guide his head up and down. The sight of Shane's lips wrapped around Ilya's dick and the slight flush on his freckled cheeks was breathtaking—which might be good, because it hurt a little when Ilya breathed. He didn't care. He reveled in it, the easy way Shane took him, slow at first, and then faster, his tongue working expertly in tandem with the suction of his mouth. Pain and drugs were no match for the power of Shane Hollander's mouth.

Ilya rarely warned Shane when he was about to come, not anymore. Shane could read him well enough now without words, and anyway, Shane had decided a long time before that he usually hated mess more than he hated swallowing. Shane moaned around Ilya's length when Ilya held him firm, breathing shallowly against his broken ribs as he came.

After a few seconds, Ilya released Shane's head. Shane pulled back, releasing a pleased little sigh. He tucked Ilya's softening length back into his sweats, because of course he did.

"Come here," Ilya urged softly, and he had been right; an orgasm had done quite a lot to temper the niggling feeling of pain as the drugs started to wear off. He would need more soon, he knew. But he could put it off for a little while.

Shane stood slowly, looking around the sofa and Ilya's body, clearly trying to find some way to follow the direction without hurting Ilya. But the open spot on the couch was on the same side as Ilya's broken ribs. Shane awkwardly settled himself on the arm of the sofa and leaned down to press a kiss to Ilya's brow, shunning his injured mouth. Ilya was only a little annoyed by that.

He reached for the fastenings of Shane's pants. In consideration for Shane's general desire for easy cleanup, Ilya would usually have taken off his shirt before jerking Shane off, but that sounded too painful and he doubted the blue and purple canvas of his abs would turn Shane on anyway. So Shane would have to deal with semen on Ilya's shirt today.

Shane's hand stopped him when Ilya had him half-unzipped. There was a regretful look on his face, and Ilya could see why. Shane was not all that close to being hard, which was surprising, because sucking Ilya's dick tended to have a fairly predictable effect on Shane.

"Ah, you do not find me attractive when my face is purple," Ilya guessed. He tried not to be offended. Shane shook his head.

"I *always* find you attractive," Shane assured him earnestly. "It's just...it's difficult to get in the mood, knowing how hurt you are."

Ah, so this was a problem of motivation. Ilya was always in the mood for sex, but it was sometimes a little more difficult for Shane. If Shane said no, Ilya would certainly stop. But this was not a no. Ilya ran his finger along the seam of Shane's underwear very slowly, giving him adequate time to object.

Shane did not object. He even helped Ilya pull his pants and underwear down so Ilya didn't have to try to accomplish the task one-handed. Ilya wrapped his fingers around Shane's semi-hard dick, pleased to feel it firm a little in his hand.

"I'm not sure I can," Shane confessed with a small grimace. Ilya smiled.

"I think you can," Ilya said confidently, and then proceeded to prove it.

Ilya was *bored*. It turned out that having broken ribs and being unable to play hockey while watching his team lose without him was both boring and very annoying.

Ilya was proud of his team, though. Despite what he and the media tried to pretend sometimes, Ilya was not the whole team, and they did not fall apart without him. They still played well, better than they had the previous year. But some of the teams they had come up against had been excellent, and without Ilya, the Centaurs were not excellent. Ilya spent a couple of weeks grinding his teeth as he waited for his ribs to heal and watched Ottawa fall out of playoff contention.

It was okay, though, and he made sure to tell them so. It was not a failure. A year ago, no one would have even talked about the Ottawa Centaurs as a potential playoff team. This season had showed everyone their potential, and next season would be even better.

Especially if Ilya could convince Shane that he didn't need to put up with the asshole culture in the Montreal locker room once he became a free agent at the end of the year. If he could convince Shane that there was a team who would appreciate him *and* would mean he could come home with Ilya every night. That he didn't have to sacrifice to remain close to Ilya just because Ilya had once sacrificed for him. Well, except for the money, of course. It would mean a pay cut, but they had enough money. And Ilya would sell the few expensive cars he had left if that would make Shane feel better. He would even sell the Ducati.

He didn't tell anyone this, of course. It wasn't the sort of thing to talk about before the season ended, and Ilya would be the last one to start speculation that Shane was not dedicated to his team.

But the Montreal Voyageurs were not winning the Stanley Cup this year. Anyone who watched them could see it. Shane was still playing well, but the team was a disorganized mess. That was what happened when the locker room was a back-and-forth between bickering and silence. Montreal might make the playoffs, unlike Ottawa, but if Ilya could bet on it, he'd bet they wouldn't make it past the first round. Not that he'd ever want to bet against Shane, but Ilya did have eyes.

Things got a little better once Ilya's ribs had healed a little, when every movement didn't cause pain and he could almost take a deep breath again without wanting to scream. When he could stop taking the awful prescription pain meds and switch to the weaker over-the-counter shit. When he could work out sort of, a little bit, as long as there wasn't too much twisting and lifting involved.

Ribs were fucking annoying. At least if he'd broken his arm, they could have put it in a cast, but there wasn't anything to do for broken ribs but wait, and Ilya was not patient when it came to this. It would have helped if Shane had been there to give Ilya a hundred blowjobs to make him feel better, but Shane could still play hockey, which unfortunately meant travel.

But Shane was back in Montreal now. Ilya had wanted to drive there the same day Shane had gotten back, but Shane had made worried little noises about Ilya being in a car for two hours until Ilya had gotten it okayed by Terry, the Centaurs' team doctor. Terry had even written him a little note, grinning the whole time as he'd written it, clearly knowing why Ilya had asked. Being out to his team and open about his relationship with Shane was strange, but it was also nice.

Ilya took a photo of the note and sent it to Shane. He could not believe his husband required a doctor's note from him, but his husband was Shane Hollander, so maybe he did believe it.

Ilya: Get a ride to practice today. I will pick you up afterward, and then we can go home and have lots of sex.

Shane: It's an OPEN PRACTICE. There will be fans there!

Ilya: Exactly.

Three dots appeared on Ilya's screen, then disappeared. Then appeared again.

Shane: You're right. Pick me up at 3.

Ilya smiled. He always liked when Shane admitted he was right.

Ilya took the Porsche 718 Cayman. It was one of his stupider ideas, considering it could still snow, and considering Ilya's ribs. He should have taken the SUV instead of folding himself into his tiny sports car, but this was just so much funnier.

When Ilya arrived at the Voyageurs' facility, there were fans milling about outside, hoping to catch the players as they left, maybe angling for an autograph or two. It didn't take them long to spot who was driving the car as Ilya pulled up, and Ilya was met with a familiar chorus of boos, curses, and middle fingers. Ilya grinned at them and gave a little wave, which only made them angrier.

The fans could only keep it up for so long, of course. Ilya texted Shane to let him know he was there, and while he waited, the fans lost most of their steam fell back mostly into glares. Ilya's ribs hurt, and so he leaned his seat back to try to get more comfortable, daydreaming of blowjobs. Maybe even mutual ones, if he could possibly convince Shane that it would not be too taxing on Ilya's ribs if Shane simply fucked his face. Ilya idly imagined how flustered Shane might get when Ilya suggested that.

Some of the fans were taking pictures with their phones, which was admittedly what Ilya had intended, so Ilya tried not to visibly wince or get an inappropriately-timed erection, though they probably wouldn't be able to see. Better to be sure than regret later.

The door opened and a few players stepped out, including Shane. Ilya saw the exact moment Shane spotted him, and he could almost hear Shane's groan, even at a distance, even with all his windows rolled up. Ilya pulled up closer so Shane didn't have to cross the parking lot—and honestly, so they could hopefully get to the blowjobs sooner if Shane did not get accosted by fans—and rolled his window down. Hayden Pike gave him a tentative wave, so Ilya rewarded him with a compliment.

"Nice goal last week, Pike," he said by way of greeting. Hayden's face scrunched up in that way it did when trying to find the secret insult beneath Ilya's compliment, which was most of the reason Ilya did it. Pike was too easy to mess with.

"Fuck you, Rozanov," Gilbert Comeau said, which really was a very rude response to Ilya sincerely complimenting his teammate. Maybe Comeau was upset he hadn't scored himself.

"Sorry," Ilya returned lightly. "You're too ugly for me. I only fuck hot people."

Hayden released a sharp laugh that he plainly tried to suppress too late. Comeau's eyes hardened. His jaw clenched, and for a second Ilya thought he might actually try to start something in the parking lot. Shane quickly jogged around to the passenger side of the car and got in, giving Ilya a very pointed look, a look that said, *Please stop antagonizing my teammates. We have to leave now.*

Ilya rolled up his window and drove away without another word to his husband's teammates. He wasn't there to make things harder for Shane.

Ilya stayed focused on the road, because he was a responsible driver now, especially with Shane in the car. But out of the corner of his eye, he could see Shane looking at him with a very familiar mixture of fondness and exasperation.

"Of course you would," Shane mumbled, maybe to himself. "God, this car is so...*orange*."

Ilya grinned. "Not more orange than the last time you saw it."

Shane sighed. "My memory didn't do it justice," he said, though he plainly was not actually angry. Ilya knew what an angry Shane Hollander sounded like.

They rode in silence for a minute. Ilya could feel Shane working up to something, so he didn't interrupt the silence with chatter.

"I don't think my team is even making the playoffs at this rate," Shane said finally. "And Coach keeps making thinly-veiled comments about 'distractions.'"

Ilya was not surprised to hear that. Theriault and Commissioner Crowell were the same in that way. Both of them were stuck in some imaginary past where hockey was only for straight white men who never talked about feelings. They were dinosaurs, and eventually they'd go extinct, but in the meantime, they made everyone else miserable.

"You are not distracted," Ilya pointed out. "And I do not say that only because I am your husband. You have played great. Is your teammates' problem if they are so distracted by gay guys. Maybe means something deeper about them."

Shane snorted out a laugh. "I don't need that mental image," he replied, but it was good-natured. "You aren't being very subtle anymore, you know."

"What?" Ilya demanded, mock-offended. "Is it gay for one man to pick up another man from hockey practice?"

Shane laughed again, the last of his tension dissolving as he relaxed against his seat. "They way you do it, maybe," Shane teased. He paused again for a long time, and Ilya allowed him to gather himself. "Maybe it's time to...make us official? Announce it for real?"

Ilya's heart leapt in his chest. He almost pulled over so he didn't crash the car.

"Maybe when Montreal is eliminated from the playoffs," Ilya suggested. "So no one can call it 'distracting.'"

"Hey, fuck you," Shane said, even though he'd just said himself he wasn't sure his team would make the playoffs. "What if we win the Stanley Cup?"

Ilya shook his head. "Then you can pretend to be Scott Hunter and kiss me on the mouth on live TV," Ilya suggested, not entirely joking. Ilya glanced over and saw the soft, sappy look

on Shane's face. Ilya felt soft and gooey inside, too, remembering how everything had changed for them that day.

The car felt smaller suddenly, in a good way. Like the space between them had compressed into something intimate and safe.

"Okay," Shane agreed at last. "We'll ask Farah to draft a statement." He paused, then added reluctantly, "And if Montreal wins the cup, I will kiss you on the mouth on live TV."

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

By popular demand, a third chapter! It's still not exactly what most people were asking for, but it's what felt authentic for them as I've written them. So I hope y'all enjoy it anyway!

The Voyageurs just barely limped into the playoffs as a Wild Card team. For the Centaurs, that kind of result would have been cause for celebration, but for the Voyageurs, it was nothing short of a disaster. Shane could feel it at every team meeting, in the dressing room, in all the press coverage. Barely making the playoffs was unforgivable for the Montreal press, so much so that it almost felt like they hadn't made the playoffs at all.

Shane was sure that he wasn't actually being petulant when he thought to himself that it wasn't his own performance that was the problem. He was a captain, so maybe it was his responsibility to make sure the team didn't go as far off the rails as it had, but Shane was tired. Shane was tired of his teammates who thought it was perfectly fine that he was gay but it was also perfectly acceptable to say anyone they hated was a *fif*, and that especially meant Ilya Rozanov. He was tired of the word distraction.

And even if he couldn't trust himself, he tended to believe Ilya when Ilya said that Shane was playing well. Because Ilya was a lot of things, but he wasn't the type of person who would lie to Shane to spare his ego, at least not about hockey. If Shane's hockey performance had suffered, Shane's team, the fans, and all the press would have to get in line behind Ilya to tell Shane how shitty his performance had been. Ilya would not hold back, no matter how much he loved Shane. Or maybe it was because he loved Shane that he wouldn't lie about something like that.

They split the first two games of the series in New York, and returning to Montreal with the series tied was better than Shane had expected. He was almost in good spirits by the time they were gearing up for game 3 in Montreal, and in even better spirits because for the first time, Ilya would be there to watch him live. Ilya would be sitting next to Shane's parents, a fact that had Ilya as excited as Shane had seen him about almost anything. Shane was already exhausted by his teammates' reactions to everything, but Ilya's absolute glee at realizing he'd be filmed in the crowd sitting next to Shane's parents came pretty close to completely erasing any of Shane's annoyance about that.

Shane had created a monster, really, giving Ilya this many opportunities to troll the entire hockey world. But he thought it with the kind of helpless affection that he now realized came with loving someone who delighted in chaos. Shane would do quite a lot to put that smile on Ilya's face, and since his team was already being unbearable, it wasn't likely to make things worse.

Still, Shane was not prepared for the gooey feeling in his chest when he first took to the ice to see the three of them seated side-by-side, Ilya enthusiastically cheering him on. This might actually be enough to show up on *ESPN*—the picture if not the intense internet speculation about their relationship. Shane wasn't even afraid of it anymore, not really. It was like being eased very slowly into icy water, giving his body time to get used to it. It took much longer than the quick plunge, but Ilya hadn't complained. Much.

Shane scored a goal five minutes into the game, and the first thing he did was look up to the stands where Ilya and his parents were seated. Ilya and his mom were yelling and hugging in absolute, unselfconscious celebration. And it struck Shane hard that this was what all his teammates were able to have, and had been able to have their whole careers. Their partners supporting them without worrying about what people would think, standing in the audience with everyone knowing exactly why they were there. A bit more complicated with Ilya, of course, since even in an ideal world, they'd rarely have been able to sit in the crowd and watch each other play, but it was the principle of the thing.

Shane turned back toward center ice, still riding the high of the goal, and stopped. There was a replay on the Jumbotron of Ilya and Shane's parents screaming and clapping, and then Ilya and Yuna Hollander embracing, both of them beaming. Right there, blown up for the entire arena to see.

"Jesus Christ," Shane murmured under his breath, and when he looked over, Drapeau was glaring at Shane like Shane had punched his best friend in the face. Shane fought the urge to roll his eyes. If his team believed he was somehow compromised because he happened to suck Ilya Rozanov's cock, he'd just have to prove them wrong by scoring more goals.

Shane was not excited for game 4. A few years before, he would have thought it would be impossible for him not to be hyped up for the playoffs, but a lot had changed since then. He had been to the playoffs enough times, had even won it all. He'd never thought he'd lose his love for hockey—and he hadn't, not really. The game itself had never been the problem. The love he had for the game was just buried under so much other shit right now that it was hard to find that pure, uncomplicated joy he used to feel stepping onto playoff ice.

Also, Ilya was right—Shane's team was full of assholes.

Shane had scored the Voyageurs' only two goals, and everyone on the team except Hayden had glared at him in the locker room after the loss. J.J. had at least looked torn. Shane had given them what he hoped was a rallying speech afterward, something about how they were still in this, how one game didn't define a series. But he could see in their faces that they weren't buying it. They weren't motivated. They were looking for someone to blame, and Shane's personal life was the easiest target. They were only down one game but somehow the series felt like it was lost already.

Shane tried to shake it off as he headed into the arena. He needed to focus. Needed to find that part of himself that still believed in this team, believed they could turn this around.

Shane entered the arena and stopped dead. "Jesus fucking Christ," he said aloud. Gathered around Ilya and Shane's parents were a great deal more people he recognized, people who

had no business being in the audience of a playoff game in Montreal. And worse, they were all holding absolutely horrible signs.

Zane Boodram's said: IN HOLLANDER WE TRUST

Luca Haas's said: TEAM HOLLANDER

Evan Dykstra's said: HOLLANDER MODE: ON

Troy Barrett's said: MAKE 'EM HOLLANDER!

And Wyatt Hayes stood directly next to Ilya with a sign that just said: SHANE♡

Shane caught Ilya's eye. *What the fuck*, he mouthed. Ilya shrugged, his own expression bemused. Hayden materialized beside Shane, following his gaze up into the stands.

"Is that the *entire* Centaurs team?" he asked, clearly startled. Shane blinked hard, half-expecting the vision to disappear, but when he opened his eyes, Ilya's entire team was still there, scattered through the stands. He wondered how they'd managed to get that many tickets for a sold out playoff game. He wondered if the people they'd bought the tickets from had known who they were selling them to. "What are they doing here?"

"I have no idea what's going on," Shane answered honestly.

Shane scored a hat trick. The Voyageurs lost. It was incredibly predictable considering the current state of the team, but Ilya's teammates at least were happy with the outcome. Which was a positive considering they'd all paid for tickets and driven two hours from Ottawa.

"You'd better ask him quick, before someone else snatches him up," Wyatt said as they filed out of the arena, the crowd still buzzing around them. He nudged Ilya with his elbow, grinning like he'd just delivered the world's cleverest piece of advice. It took Ilya a very long time to understand Hazy's meaning.

"We are already married," Ilya reminded him, playing dumb. Wyatt slapped Ilya on the back.

"You know that's not what I meant."

Ilya sighed, but inwardly he agreed. Keeping his mouth shut was beginning to kill him.

"It would not be good for the gay married hockey players to be accused of tampering, I think," Ilya said, shaking his head in amusement. He tried to keep his tone light, but it was something that genuinely concerned him about the idea of Shane joining the Centaurs. Ilya didn't want to fuck things up by mentioning it to Shane at the wrong time.

"You're bisexual," Wyatt remarked unnecessarily. Ilya rolled his eyes. Hazy's expression turned thoughtful, which was always a bad sign. "Anyway, does it count as tampering if both your dicks are out at the time?"

Ilya barely suppressed a laugh. “I do not think there is a clause in the tampering rules about dicks,” he said. Also, Ilya loved his team and he desperately wanted Shane to experience the same feeling. “Go home,” Ilya said, smiling. “I must go congratulate and console my husband.”

“Good luck!” Hazy said with the brightness only possible from a hockey player whose divisional rival had just lost a significant game. Even if the Centaurs’ season was over, there was nothing greater than when a rival team had a bad day.

Shane was disheveled, freshly showered, and delightfully confused when Ilya next saw him. His hair was still damp and sticking up in odd directions, and he had that post-game exhaustion written across his features that somehow made him even more beautiful. Ilya’s heart did that same stupidly adoring flip it always did when he looked at Shane.

“How the fuck did you convince your entire team to cheer for their divisional rival?” Shane asked, though he looked more dazed than angry. And adorable, like a hissing kitten.

Ilya held up his hands in surrender. “Was not me,” he said truthfully. “When they get an idea, I cannot stop them. They are an irresistible force. And they were not cheering for Montreal. They were cheering for you.”

A beautiful flush appeared across Shane’s freckled cheeks, and Ilya wanted to say everything just then. *They love you because I love you. They want you on their team. They want to support you and they want you to be happy, all because I love you.*

But he couldn’t say that, because Shane still needed to be focused on the playoffs his team was certainly going to lose. Also because it would be tampering, not that he thought Shane would run straight to the commissioner to report him. Still, it was better to wait.

“My teammates were not pleased,” Shane said, with the kind of understatement that suggested they’d been absolutely furious. But he didn’t sound particularly upset about it. If anything, there was a hint of satisfaction in his voice. He rubbed the back of his neck, looking simultaneously exhausted and oddly lighter than he had in weeks.

“Your teammates are assholes,” Ilya said, not for the first time. He meant it more than ever. They didn’t deserve Shane, didn’t appreciate what they had in him. It made Ilya want to bundle Shane up and take him home to Ottawa immediately.

Shane sighed. “Yeah,” he agreed softly.

The Voyageurs were knocked out of the playoffs one game later. Shane was disappointed. Shane was annoyed. Shane was reading the message Farah had drafted for them over and over, and it made him anxious, and he hated that it made him anxious.

It also made him angry, and that was his more relevant emotion. Shane had a lifetime of practice dealing with anxiety, although he was still bad at it. His therapist had helped a little.

She'd helped a lot with this, which was good, because Shane was sure he'd never have sorted through his feelings otherwise.

Being at the cabin helped. Waking up with his ass pleasantly sore every morning with Ilya curled around him helped. Being away from his passive-aggressive teammates who seemed to hate Ilya for reasons that had nothing to do with sport rivalry helped a lot. But Shane was still angry.

Shane sat outside with his morning coffee, one hand absently stroking Anya where she lay sprawled beside him, his gaze fixed on the dock. The same dock Ilya had once threatened to cover in candles to propose to Shane. It had been a joke, Shane was pretty sure, but for a moment, Shane imagined a world where that had happened. Where they could have just posted a photo of Ilya on one knee and Shane flushed with surprise and happiness, and no explanation would be necessary, the way every straight NHL player was able to. He imagined a world in which he didn't need to release a statement to explain how and why he was in love with Ilya Rozanov. A world where loving someone didn't require a press release and a PR strategy.

Part of him wanted to release that statement so badly. Part of him wanted to scream to the world that Ilya Rozanov was the sweetest, most wonderful man in the entire universe and the asshole persona was largely an act. That he liked to rile people up because it was funny but he was almost never malicious. That he was soft and sweet with children and animals and sometimes he burst out with the most devastatingly romantic utterances anyone in the world could say, without access to most of the fussiest descriptive words in the English language.

And part of him wanted to hoard all those pieces of Ilya like treasure, keeping them safe and secret and just for Shane.

An arm slid around Shane's neck, and Shane tensed in surprise, then relaxed. Ilya kissed Shane's temple sweetly, then blew into his ear. Shane jerked away.

"What the fuck!" he yelled, laughing. "Asshole."

Ilya settled down in the seat beside Shane, resettling Anya so her head was on his lap. He still looked bleary with sleep, one half of his curls plastered flat to his head. This was the Ilya Rozanov Shane wanted to tell the whole world about. This was the Ilya Rozanov Shane wanted to guard jealousy like his own little secret.

"You were thinking very hard," Ilya said by way of explanation. "Is not thinking time now. Is relaxing time. And fucking time." Ilya wiggled his eyebrows suggestively, except he did seem more interested in scratching Anya's head than fucking at that very moment. *Soft and sweet with children and animals*, Shane thought again, and he loved Ilya fiercely. He hated that he might be about to ruin that contentment.

"I don't want to post Farah's statement," Shane said without preamble. Better to rip the bandaid off all at once.

Ilya's expression did a lot of very complicated things. Shane saw the disappointment flash across his face before he seemed to force it away until he was carefully blank.

“Okay,” he said neutrally, so instantly the Ilya of the early years, who would never make himself vulnerable to Shane. Shane hated that he’d put that expression on Ilya’s face, even for a second.

“I don’t mean that I don’t want us to official,” Shane insisted quickly. “I’m not backing out.”

“Okay,” Ilya said again, tentatively. The fact that Ilya wasn’t saying anything made it suddenly impossible for Shane to shut up.

“I just hate that we have to explain ourselves. Every straight NHL player gets to just show up to events with his wife, gets to wear his wedding ring and post a wedding photo, and nobody demands an explanation. I don’t want to have to justify how we fell in love or defend our relationship to strangers. There are parts of you that are just mine, and I don’t want to share all of that with the entire world just to prove we’re legitimate. I just want to be married to you the way everyone else gets to be married to their spouse. Without a fucking press release.”

Ilya’s expression changed to something soft, and within seconds to something utterly wicked.

“So I am supposed to just start wearing my ring on my finger and calling you my husband?” Ilya asked, glee in his eyes. “No explanation at all?”

Shane was suddenly a tiny bit terrified of what he’d unleashed. “I mean, we should probably —”

“Is the greatest gift you could give me!” Ilya exclaimed, so utterly transformed from his blankness of seconds ago. “Well, besides your ass. And your love!” he added belatedly. “Of course your love.”

Shane rolled his eyes, fighting a smile. Ilya could be such a little shit sometimes, and Shane really should not encourage this behavior by finding it endearing. He couldn’t help it, though.

Ilya started reaching for the clasp of his chain, where his wedding ring still rested, like he wanted to get his ring on his finger as quickly as possible now that he had permission. His fingers fumbled with the clasp in his eagerness, so Shane gently batted Ilya’s hands away and helped him undo it. He took Ilya’s ring into his hand, feeling almost reverent about it.

“The right hand,” Ilya said holding it out. His voice had gone quiet in a way that made Shane’s chest tight.

Shane gently slid Ilya’s ring onto his finger. Both their eyes were a little misty when Shane finished, and Ilya stared down at the ring on his hand like he couldn’t quite believe it was real, like he was afraid it might disappear if he looked away. Shane reached for the clasp of his own newly-acquired chain.

“Should I wear mine on the right, too?” Shane asked. They’d had this conversation before, but they’d never quite resolved it. It hadn’t been relevant yet. But if it was important to Ilya, Shane would do it in a heartbeat.

Ilya took Shane's ring between his fingers, shaking his head. "You are not Russian Orthodox," he said simply.

"Are you?" he asked, feeling strange asking the question. They were already married, and somehow Shane didn't know. Ilya wore his mother's cross, but this was the first time Shane had heard Ilya express any thought or preference on religion.

Ilya's lips pursed as he thought. At last he shook his head. "Not really," he said. "Was important to my mother, though."

Shane understood. He hated that he'd never met Irina Rozanova. Hated that Ilya had no family left to love and support him—no blood family, at least. But he had Shane, and Shane's family. And, implausibly, the Ottawa Centaurs. Shane hoped that would be enough.

Shane held out his left hand and let Ilya slide the ring onto it. The act sent a shiver down Shane's spine. Ilya was grinning wildly.

"This will confuse *everyone*," he declared gleefully. Shane felt a rush of affection mixed with mild trepidation. He'd definitely created a monster. But god, he loved this monster, loved to be the one to put that smile on Ilya's face.

Something was on Ilya's mind. Shane was pretty sure it wasn't something bad. It wasn't like it had been before, when Ilya hadn't been sleeping, when Shane had noticed him coming back to bed in the middle of the night smelling of cigarette smoke. But it was something.

"Is everything okay?" Shane asked the first week at the cabin. Ilya nodded.

"Is not anything bad," Ilya assured him. "I just cannot talk about it yet. I will tell you in about a month."

A week later, when Shane asked, Ilya said, "I will tell you in three weeks."

The next week, Ilya said, "I will tell you in two weeks."

The next week, Ilya said, "I will tell you in one week."

And finally, finally, Ilya said, "You know how your team is filled with assholes? Except Hayden Pike, who is I guess okay, and has a very nice wife and beautiful children."

"Yes," Shane acknowledged tentatively, slightly terrified about what would come out of Ilya's mouth next.

"And you know how my team is wonderful and supportive?" Ilya continued, grinning. He looked far too pleased with himself, like a cat who had just presented its owner with a dead lizard or mouse.

"Thanks for rubbing it in," Shane replied dryly. Ilya ignored him.

“Well you are free agent now,” Ilya said wickedly. “And I have an idea. Is a great idea. One of my best ideas.”

Shane offered to go sign the contract alone. It was a nice thing to do, and also it was very stupid. Ilya dragged him to Wiebe and let his coach say all the things Ilya had already said but Shane did not believe coming from him.

“The press will be mostly all about you two either way,” Wiebe told Shane. “It’s better for everyone involved if we just embrace it.”

“Just embrace it, honey,” Ilya said in a saccharine sweet voice. Ilya never called Shane “honey.” He could see Shane fighting not to make a face at him in front of his new coach. Ilya didn’t care, because *he* wasn’t trying to make a good first impression.

“We would prefer to do a press conference with both of you after you’ve signed your contract, Shane,” Wiebe said, entirely ignoring Ilya’s antics. Wiebe was a good coach and very used to Ilya’s shit. “But only if you’re okay with it.”

“We are okay with it,” Ilya said, because he and Shane had already discussed it. Also because Ilya had so many things he wanted to say to the press, for probably the first time ever.

“Great,” Wiebe said. “We’ll get everything scheduled.”

The Centaurs’ group chat exploded. There were emoji, gifs, and a lot of slang Ilya did not understand, though the enthusiasm was clear enough. Shane was pacing and worrying that the Centaurs players would be upset with him taking so much attention for himself, so Ilya added him to the group chat and left Shane to answer the thousand messages that resulted while he took Anya for a walk. By the time Ilya got back, Shane looked slightly dazed, which Ilya considered a success. Then Ilya sucked his cock and fucked him until the combined power of two orgasms meant that Shane absolutely passed out and could not find a new thing to worry about.

Ilya seated himself to Shane’s left at the press conference. He made sure both their hands were on the table, his right and Shane’s left, just next to each other. Shane had given him an indulgent, exasperated look when Ilya had explained his careful staging, but he hadn’t objected.

The first few questions were normal. Nobody asked about Shane and Ilya’s marriage, because it existed only in the realm of internet speculation, and legitimate news outlets couldn’t be seen chasing unconfirmed gossip. Shane’s answers were bland and boring and so very perfectly Shane. Ilya was practically vibrating in his chair, waiting for a question to come his way. It seemed to take an eternity.

“And Ilya,” someone finally said, “how does it feel to be playing on the same team as someone who was your rival for so many years?”

Shane looked at Ilya out of the corner of his eye. Ilya could see the responsible part of Shane urging him to give his own bland answer. The part of Shane that had been trained to never make waves, to always say the right thing. But there was another part of Shane, too, the part that had given Ilya permission to do this, that wanted it even if he was too anxious to say so himself.

“Of course I loved competing against Shane all these years,” Ilya said, blandly. Shane relaxed a little next to him, clearly relieved that Ilya seemed to be behaving himself, even though Shane had been the one who’d explicitly given Ilya permission to say much, much more than this. “One of the biggest joys of my career has been playing against Shane Hollander, and especially beating Shane Hollander.”

Shane gave him a look. The assembled press laughed. Cameras clicked.

“But,” Ilya added, and Shane was already flushing so beautifully pink, clearly expecting what was coming. Ilya was feeling very, very pleased with this outcome. He had been upset when Shane had not wanted to release Farah’s statement, but this was so much better. “I am also happy to be on the same team as my husband.”

It was pandemonium. Reporters shouted questions over each other. Cameras clicked at a more rapid pace. Ilya turned to Shane and took his hand, grinning, quite very pleased with himself. Shane was staring back at him with an expression that was equal parts mortified and delighted, like he couldn’t decide whether to kiss Ilya or strangle him.

The photo, when it appeared on the sports news sites not long after, showed Shane looking back at him—fond, exasperated, and so clearly in love. And in the photo, clear as day, were both their wedding rings, Ilya’s on his right hand, Shane’s on his left, their fingers intertwined on the table for the entire world to see.

Ilya framed it.

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