salt in the wound

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by abbadonfxth

Summary

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Cliff watched as he slid uncontrolled, his momentum carrying him into the boards ahead of them at full speed. His shoulder hit first, but then Cliff heard his helmet hit the boards with a deafening *crack*.

For a moment, the arena was deathly silent, as though the whole crowd was holding its breath. Cliff dropped to a crouch above Hollander's body, still splayed out on the ice. There was blood streaming out of his nose. He wasn't moving.

Notes

Translation into Русский available: Соль на рану by MrsSpooky1981

I've never posted one of my fics on here before but these boys have been consuming my every thought for two weeks straight so here we are.

The details in this are a mix between the TV and book canons, since this scene hasn't happened yet in the show. Also, I just realized that in the book it's "Marlow" but in the show it's "Marleau," so my sincere apologies to any French Canadian readers for writing this whole thing with the anglo version lol.

Anyways, did my best to make edits but didn't spend a ton of time on it so there will probably be some goofs. Hope everyone enjoys!!

See the end of the work for more notes

There was something wrong with Rozanov. Cliff couldn't quite put his finger on it. His Captain just seemed… quieter than usual.

Nearly every day for the last six years, Cliff had played at Ilya Rozanov's side. In that time, he figured he'd seen more sides of the Russian's infamous personality than anyone.

Rozanov was electric, on and off the ice. Cliff had backed him up in fights; he'd consoled him after losses; he'd carried him on his shoulders after winning the Stanley Cup.

Sure, every once in a while, the guy might have an off day. Get a little too angry, or a little too drunk. But even at his worst, the Captain of the Boston Raiders was rarely quiet.

Ilya Rozanov loved hockey, and he always brought that energy into his locker room. Especially on game days, and *always* when those games were against Montreal.

More than any other team in the league, Ilya Rozanov *loved* beating the Montreal Metropolitans. Everyone on the Raiders did. The rivalry between their clubs went back a hundred years. There wasn't a single guy who ever put on the sweater for Boston who didn't get up to play against the Metros.

As Captain of the Raiders, Rozanov might have been expected to take those games a little more seriously than the rest, even without all the media noise. But this rivalry was personal for Ilya, and it had been long before he'd earned the C on his chest.

In Cliff's humble opinion, the animosity had been pretty much inevitable from the start. Honestly, if he'd been pitted against another player as often as his Captain was compared to Montreal's Shane Hollander, he'd probably hate the guy's guts, too.

Rozanov and Hollander were drafted together, first and second overall, to the two most storied franchises in hockey, and from that point on, the media took every chance they got to turn them against one another. It was great entertainment. Every game, every point, every fucking faceoff for the last six years – it was Hollander and Rozanov all the way down.

And Cliff had to give them credit. They'd both lived up to insanely high expectations since then. Exceeded them, even. Any way you measured it, they were two of the best players to ever play the game.

But even now, six years into their careers, neither had quite managed to get out ahead. They traded Hart's every other year, but they were both always in contention. Rozanov had the edge in goals so far, but Hollander had more points. Both were young Captains, and both had won Cups. Hollander had the Calder, and an Olympic silver medal, but no man was in a league of his own. Not yet anyways.

Cliff knew that by the time their twin careers were over, that debate would be firmly settled, so long as Ilya Rozanov had anything to say about it.

So, *something* was definitely off. Because no one had more energy on Montreal game days than his Captain. No one ever had a bigger smile on their face. He liked beating Montreal

more than he liked sex, maybe (and for Ilya Rozanov, that was saying something). But today, it was an hour 'til puck drop, with the whole team in the locker room gearing up, and Rozanov hadn't said a word to anyone.

The rest of the team paid him no mind, busy with their pre-game rituals or chatting amongst themselves, but Cliff's stall was right next to Rozanov's, and he felt the silence like an uncomfortable weight. Cliff risked a glance at his Captain, seated on the bench next to him, idly tying up his skates.

The young Russian looked completely lost in thought. And whatever he was thinking about, Cliff could tell it was eating at him. He almost looked… heartbroken.

Huh. Cliff wondered if he'd finally broken up with the girl he always saw when they were in Montreal. It wasn't unlike Rozanov to hook up with people while they were in different cities. Ilya had lots of girlfriends, but none of them were ever serious.

The Montreal girl, at least, had kept Ilya's interest for a while. He'd seen her most trips they'd taken up north over the years, all the way back to his rookie season. Once or twice, Cliff had caught Rozanov texting her, smiling like an idiot down at his phone while they made their plans to meet up. Ilya always swore that Russians didn't blush, but Cliff could only call it like he saw it.

Cliff tried to remember the girl's name, spied from over Rozanov's shoulder at some point in the last several seasons. He thought maybe it was June… Jan? Something like that. She must have been a great lay, for Rozanov to be this bummed out about not seeing her.

Tired of the silent treatment, Cliff tried to comfort his buddy in the only way he knew how: talking shit. "What's wrong, man? Plans to get laid fall through?" Cliff joked, nudging his Captain's shoulder with his own.

Ilya glanced over at him with a wry smile that didn't meet his eyes. "Mm. Is something like that."

"Aw," Cliff crooned, trying to cheer him up. "I'm sorry you can't get your dick wet tonight, Roz. But hey, look on the bright side! At least you can take it out on Hollander!"

For a second, the spark of humor that Cliff was so used to seeing in his eyes returned, but it faded quickly. Damn. This guy was really not feeling it tonight.

Rozanov seemed to consider his linemate again, expression far too serious. Cliff fought the urge to twitch. "I will ask you something?" His Captain said, at last.

"Uh… sure, man. What's up?"

Ilya cocked his head, probably thinking through the English words he was looking for. "If you must choose," he started, eventually, "between Catlyn and hockey. For some reason – not important – but this is what you must do. You would choose her, *da*?"

Cliff blinked. That was maybe the last question he was expecting to hear. What was going on with this guy today? “Uh. Yeah, man. Of course. She’s my wife, you know? I love her. I love hockey, too, don’t get me wrong, it’s just…”

“Not as much, you think. As her.” Rozanov finished for him.

“Right.” Cliff nodded.

“Do you think,” Ilya continued, “if roles are reversed. If she is the All-Star, and she loves this. It is maybe her favorite thing. She maybe does not know who she is without it, you know? Would not… like her life so much, if she could not do this. You think she would choose you, too?”

Cliff thought about it, tried to imagine what that might be like. One of the things he loved most about Catlyn was her passion for her work, but they’d gotten lucky with their schedules, and when Cliff wasn’t traveling, they rarely had to choose between their careers and their family. But if it *had* come down to it, if it was between him and her patients, would she still choose him? Damn. He hoped so. He’d be lost without her.

“I don’t know, dude. I mean, I’d like to think so, but if it was really tearing her up, maybe I’d just tell her to take the job, you know? I wouldn’t want her to be with me and still feel…”

“Missing?” Rozanov guessed.

Cliff nodded again. “Yeah, like she was incomplete, somehow. I’d hate for her to have to choose. I know she loves me, but she’d go crazy, you know? If she couldn’t practice. She loves being a doctor, too. I wouldn’t want her to give that up for me.”

Ilya just tilted his head, considering that response with a grim expression. At last, he said, “You are good man, Cliff Marlow.”

Cliff barked out a laugh. “I don’t think so, buddy. I’d probably go two days without her and kidnap her right out of the OR, careers be damned. Let’s hope it doesn’t ever come to that.”

Ilya smiled, but there still wasn’t any humor in it.

“Where is all this coming from, anyways?” Cliff asked him. “Already thinking about retirement? Gonna finally find a nice girl and settle down to raise the next generation of goalie terrorizers?”

Rozanov scoffed, finally turning back to his skates. “Please. And let Hollander win all my Cups? *Nyet.* I don’t think so.”

Cliff ran through his drills during warmups, dodging in and out of imaginary defensemen, and doing his best to get his goalies moving. At some point, he looked around for his Captain, and found him at center ice, on their half of the red line, keeping a distracted eye on his team.

As Cliff watched, a Metros player skated up to him, stopping just short of the invisible wall between the two halves of the rink. Cliff recognized the number, and the C on his chest. Shane Hollander.

Cliff scowled, and started making his way over to them. Hollander wasn't going to piss off Roz before the game, not while his Captain was already in a shitty mood. Not on Cliff's watch.

The two men exchanged words. Rozanov didn't look angry, which was good. He barely acknowledged Hollander at all. Cliff smiled, impressed as usual with how well Ilya knew to get under his rival's skin.

Undettered by the lack of response, Hollander said something else, not quite loud enough to overhear. Then, over Rozanov's shoulder, he made eye contact with Cliff, who approached the pair with a taunting smile. The Metros' Captain narrowed his eyes, unamused at the disturbance.

"Later," Hollander concluded, just as Cliff came up beside them. His tone was emotionless in the unsociable way he was known for. Ilya just nodded, still not bothering to look over at him. At last, Shane scowled and skated away. Cliff gave a sarcastic wave to his retreating back.

"What did that asshole want?" Cliff asked. Roz shot him a look, and Cliff was surprised to find a spark of anger in it – maybe Hollander had gotten to him, after all – before it shuddered into casual indifference.

"Is Hollander," Ilya shrugged, unmoved. "Wanted what he always wants. Shake my hand. Say 'Good Luck.' Invite me to book club after the game."

Cliff laughed. Yeah, that sounded like Hollander, alright.

Together, they watched from across the red line as the Captain of the Montreal Metros went through his turn in their drills, dekeing through his imagined opponents with lightning speed and unparalleled control, finishing off with a snipe over his goalie's left shoulder. Blocker side, top shelf.

"Damn," Cliff heard himself mutter. "Hate to say this, Roz. But your boy's got nasty hands." From beside him, Ilya just hummed in agreement.

The game started off alright, all things considered. Whatever was bothering Rozanov seemed to clear up a bit once he stepped on the ice for the first faceoff, nose to nose with Hollander.

He was his usual loud, emotional self on the bench, calling out mistakes and complimenting good plays. He fought like a demon on every shift, dogging Hollander into the corner boards after pucks, tearing after him to shut down breakaways, and just generally making the guy's life a living hell.

Once or twice, things got chippy after the whistle, when Roz got up in Hollander's face to chirp at him, or Hayden Pike tried to get in an extra cross-check after a board battle. But considering the way games between these two teams had a history of going, everyone made it to the second period relatively unscathed.

Ilya had scored once for the Raiders, and Hollander twice for Montreal. They needed an equalizer. Before the first line's next shift of the period, Coach came up behind Cliff and clapped him on the shoulders, leaning in close. "Go get 'em, Marley. Get this crowd into it."

Cliff nodded, smiling around his mouthguard. Hit somebody. Message received, Coach. He followed his Captain over the boards.

Rozanov took off, racing down the ice after Hollander and lifting his stick from behind, doing his best to separate the other man from the puck. Hollander was a strong skater, but Ilya had a few inches and maybe ten or fifteen pounds on him, so eventually he gave way under the Russian's hip checks.

He turned the puck over, and Rozanov tried to take advantage, whipping a breakout pass through the neutral zone to Cliff. Cliff crossed the blue line and set up their offense, dropping a pass back to his Captain once he made it onsides.

Rozanov went for a shot, but Hollander – who was one of the better two-hundred-foot players in the league – caught him on the backcheck, disrupting the play. The two men went barreling into the corner boards after a rebound, and Hollander came out with it. Cliff could see the grin on the Metros' Captain's face from the opposite wall.

A second later, Hollander was on a breakaway back towards the Raiders' zone. Ilya was after him, but the other man already had a stride on him, and no one – not even Ilya Rozanov – could catch Shane Hollander in a straight-away skate. No one had his speed, but Cliff had a better angle.

He raced like hell to cut Hollander off, laying a heavy shoulder through his side just before he reached the shooting lane he was looking for. Cliff was only aiming to push the guy off the puck, maybe disrupt his stride long enough to give Rozanov time to catch up, but Hollander wasn't expecting the hit, and it caught him at an awkward angle, knocking one of his legs out from under him.

Cliff watched as he slid uncontrolled, his momentum carrying him into the boards ahead of them at full speed. His shoulder hit first, but then Cliff heard his helmet hit the boards with a deafening *crack*.

Oh, shit. That could not be good. For a moment, the arena was deathly silent, as though the whole crowd was holding its breath. Cliff dropped to a crouch above Hollander's body, still splayed out on the ice. There was blood streaming out of his nose. He wasn't moving.

"Hollander?" Cliff called, nervously, careful not to touch the man. "Hollander, you good, man?" When he got no response, he waved at the Metros' bench, trying to signal their medic.

Suddenly, his Captain was there, on his knees next to Hollander's limp frame. When he spoke, his voice was wracked with a wild panic. *"Shane!"* Rozanov whispered, his eyes frantically scanning his rival for signs of consciousness.

He reached out, as if to grab for Hollander's head, and Cliff stopped him with an insistent hand on his wrist. If there was one thing he'd learned from all those sleepless nights with Catlyn studying for her Medical Boards, it was not to move someone who might have a TBI. Catlyn reminded him all the time. It was a workplace hazard, after all.

Rozanov ripped his wrist free of Cliff's grip and turned on him with a glare. *Holy shit*, Cliff thought. He'd never seen his Captain look so out of control. He startled back, away from the heat of Rozanov's expression. By then, the medical team was there, and the rest of the Montreal Metros had shaken off their surprise and raced over to protect their Captain.

Cliff and Roz were crowded back by their furious opponents. Cliff recognized one of them – the one getting in Ilya's face – as Hollander's linemate, Hayden Pike. "Get the fuck out of here, Rozanov," Pike snarled at him.

Ilya couldn't seem to hear him. His eyes were trained on Hollander's crumpled form, which the medical team was carefully straightening out and securing to a body board. He was still out cold.

"Wake up, Hollander." Rozanov growled through gritted teeth. Cliff raised an eyebrow at his concern. The way he'd said it, it sounded like a command. It also sounded a bit like a prayer.

Pike looked between Cliff and Rozanov, probably deciding who to punch first, and Cliff thought it was about time they got out of there. He went to grab for his Captain's arm again when Hollander finally stirred.

"Ilya?" Hollander slurred, confusion leeching into every syllable. Cliff frowned. That was weird. Since when were these two on a first name basis?

Beside him, Rozanov made a sound like he'd just got punched in the gut. "Is he alright?" He demanded from the medical staff. Hollander groaned, and Ilya went sheet white.

The EMTs ignored him, directing instructions at the rousing Hollander instead. "We're going to move you onto the spinal board, Shane. Keep your head still, please."

Rozanov leaned in, almost involuntarily, and one of the medics pushed him back with a hand on his chest. "Please stand back."

This time, his Captain didn't shove him off when Cliff dragged him away. Cliff could feel how tense the muscles of his arm were under his uniform. He wasn't entirely sure that Ilya was breathing.

Cliff stood in front of Rozanov, who skated backwards as his Alternate pushed him away from the crowd around Hollander. They needed to give the medics room to work. Rozanov's eyes hollowed out, staring unfocused through Cliff's chest.

“Shane,” the medics were trying to get Hollander’s attention. From the sound of it, he’d turned his head towards the retreating men. “I need you to lie still, okay?”

“They can see us,” Hollander muttered nonsensically in return. Rozanov stiffened under Cliff’s grip. “Ilya. They can see us.”

They can see us? *What the hell does that mean?* Cliff thought.

“Is he alright?” His Captain called to the medical team again, over Cliff’s shoulder. No one answered him.

Hollander muttered something incoherent as they went to take him off the ice, something that sounded like: “Tell him I’m fine.” And then he was gone. Out the doors of the rink to what was sure to be an awaiting ambulance. The crowd stood up and clapped for him, but the tension in the arena was thick. Both teams tapped their sticks respectfully on the ice. Cliff felt a little sick to his stomach.

With a firm palm on his back, Cliff led his borderline catatonic Captain back to their bench. His coach clapped them both on the shoulder as they sat down. As the Metropolitans made their way back, most of them shot downright venomous looks in Cliff’s direction. He cringed, knowing he’d have to pay for that hit the next time his skates touched the ice.

There was nothing malicious in it. He’d never intended to hurt Hollander, but Cliff knew that if it’d been his Captain lying there motionless on the ice, he would have put his fist through every single player in a Metros sweater that he could get his hands on. That was hockey: Blood for blood. Especially when that blood belonged to the Golden Boy of Canada.

After a few shifts, Coach called on Rozanov’s line, and Cliff followed him over the boards once more. Ilya hadn’t said a word to him since they’d sat down. Cliff wasn’t sure what to make of his reaction to this whole thing. It was always hard to see a guy get hurt, but Rozanov didn’t even *like* Hollander. There was no reason for him to get so worked up over the hit. If anything, in a fucked-up way, it probably gave the Raiders better odds at making it through the playoffs this year. There was no way the Metros would get out of the first round if Hollander was out for a while.

Cliff hoped it wasn’t any worse than that. Playoffs, he could live with, but he’d probably get shanked in the parking lot of Centre Bell if he’d prematurely ended the career of the great Shane Hollander.

They lined up at the dot, and as expected, the Metros player across from Cliff dropped his gloves right off the faceoff. Cliff let him get a few good licks in – enough to soothe his animosity but not enough to rile the crowd – before grabbing his jersey and tackling him to the ice. “Fuck you, man,” the guy spat in his face. “You’re fucking dead.”

Cliff ignored him. When he got up to grab his gloves, he saw they hadn’t been the only two to go at it. The crowd was roaring as Rozanov swung wildly at the Metros’ second-line center who had been bumped up to replace Hollander. The Russian was throwing haymakers, and dropped the other man with a particularly devastating blow to the jaw.

He should've let up once he was on the ice, but Ilya just followed him down, sweaty blonde curls falling into his eyes. Cold, emotionless eyes. He went to throw another punch, but Cliff lunged forward and grabbed his arm, at the same time Hayden Pike moved in to push him off of his teammate.

"That's enough, Rozanov," The ref barked. "Get to the box, both of you."

Ilya stood robotically and made his way across the ice to the penalty box, not even bothering to grab his fallen gear. Cliff and Kaner gathered it up and followed him, tossing it onto the bench after their Captain. When he got his stick back, Rozanov turned and slammed it against the boards in front of him, breaking it.

Hesitantly, Cliff went into the box and closed the door behind him. On the ice, the referee was calling out the penalties: "81 Boston, 45 Boston, 37 Montreal, 88 Montreal, five minutes each for fighting."

Cliff sat down. As play resumed, he ignored the chirping from the crowd at their back and studied his Captain. Rozanov wasn't even bothering to put his gear back on. He was just staring at the jumbotron, which was showing a replay of his fight. Cliff nudged him with his knee. "Hey. You good, man?"

Roz said nothing, just clenched his jaw so hard Cliff was surprised he couldn't hear teeth cracking. With a start, Cliff realized his Captain wasn't just generally angry – at the game they were losing or the fight he'd gotten into or the penalty he was serving. No, Rozanov was pissed at *him*. Cliff had drilled his friend's archrival into the boards, and for some reason, Ilya was fuming over it.

"Roz, look, I'm sorry, man." Cliff tried, not really sure what he was apologizing for. "I'm sure he's gonna be okay, right? I mean, this is Hollander we're talking about. They're probably flying in Canada's best doctors to McGill as we speak."

His Captain said nothing.

"C'mon, man" Cliff hissed. "You know I didn't mean to hurt him. It was a shitty hit, okay? I'll send Hollander a fucking care package after the game if you want, but it's just hockey."

Rozanov scowled at his skates, and said nothing.

Cliff let out a frustrated sigh. "Dude, why are you so worked up over this? You don't even like the guy."

Slowly, Rozanov clenched and unclenched the fingers of his right hand. His knuckles were still bloody. Cliff decided he should probably shut up.

As he waited for their penalty to expire, Cliff played the memory of the hit over in his head, trying to figure out what he'd done to get his Captain so upset at him. He couldn't figure out what he'd missed.

He remembered the sickening crunch of Hollander's body slamming into the boards, and how quickly Rozanov had gotten there. He remembered the fear in his Captain's voice, a fear Cliff didn't recognize.

"Shane!" Ilya had said. *Shane?* The Captain of the Montreal Metros had probably come up a million times in conversation over the last six years, but Cliff had never heard Rozanov refer to him as anything other than "Hollander." Maybe "Golden Boy," once or twice, but never by his first name. Never "Shane."

But then again, Hollander hadn't seemed all that surprised to hear it. He'd used Rozanov's first name, too. Tried to reassure him, even when he could probably barely understand what was going on. So, maybe they knew each other better than Cliff realized…

Cliff thought back to the conversation he'd interrupted during warmups, trying to find any glimpse of familiarity in their interaction. Rozanov had seemed disinterested, as usual, but what had Hollander said as he'd skated away? *"Later,"* Cliff remembered. At the time, it had seemed like a fairly typical salute, but playing it over in his head now, it sounded less like a collegial, "See you later," and more like a restrained, "We'll finish this later," as in: "We'll finish this conversation later, when your idiotic teammates aren't around to interrupt."

But that made no sense. Right? Cliff must have been overthinking it. There was no reason for Hollander to assume that he'd get another chance to talk to Rozanov tonight. What could they possibly have to say to each other, anyways? Unless…

"Ilya, they can see us."

Cliff's stomach dropped. He recalled the conversation he'd had with his Captain before the game. How dejected he'd looked. From his expression, Cliff had thought he'd been heartbroken, had teased him about not meeting up with the girl he usually saw in Montreal, and Ilya had just looked at him with those sad, Russian eyes and asked, "Do you think she would choose you, too?"

Jane, Cliff realized with a start. Rozanov's mystery woman. Her name was *Jane*.

Cliff shook his head. No. There was no *fucking* way. What the fuck was he on about right now? There was no chance in hell that Ilya Rozanov and *Shane* Hollander…

Movement beside him startled Cliff out of his thoughts. His Captain was finally putting his gloves back on, preparing to leave the box. Cliff looked up at the scoreboard and realized they only had 20 seconds left to serve on their penalty.

Unintentionally, he found himself studying Rozanov's face. He didn't know what he was looking for. As if there would be some kind of confirmation that his friend of six years had been secretly hooking up with his archrival – who was a *dude*, by the way – the entire time he'd known him.

Ilya scowled when he noticed the attention. "What?" He snapped.

Cliff just shook his head. "Nothing, man. Sorry."

The official opened up the doors, and they both skated back onto the ice.

The rest of the game was a fucking shitshow. The Montreal crowd booed every time Cliff touched the puck, and the Metros finished every check with a viscous edge. Every member of the Raiders was going to be feeling this one tomorrow.

That much alone might've been enough to lose them the game, but to top it all off, Ilya Rozanov played the worst third period of hockey he'd ever played in his life. The game ended 5-1, Montreal.

Back in the visitor's locker room, Cliff and the rest of the Raiders endured the expected lecture from their coach. When it was their Captain's turn to speak, Rozanov just sat on the bench in his stall and glared at the floor.

"Better tomorrow." He snapped – not a suggestion – before shucking his sweater and heading for the showers.

Cliff was about to follow him when he heard his name called from the doorway. "Marlow. Media wants you in 10."

Cliff sighed. He should have figured the media would request him after that hit tonight. He didn't know what they expected him to say, but he took a quick shower to rinse of the game, threw on a Raiders hoodie, and made his way down the hall to Centre Bell's media room.

Hayden Pike was already seated at the players' table, and his expression soured when Cliff joined him. Once they were settled, the journalists started with their questions. "Hayden, any update on Shane Hollander?"

Pike shot a withering look at Cliff, which he ignored. "We haven't heard much. I know he's being evaluated by the doctors at Montreal General, but nothing yet on his condition."

Then, as if Cliff wasn't sitting right next to him: "And do you think Marlow should face supplemental discipline for that hit?"

Hayden frowned. "I think that's up to the Department of Player Safety, but I would argue that it's in their best interest – in the best interest of the sport – to protect their best athletes from dangerous plays like that."

The journalists all scribbled in their notebooks. "And you, Marlow?"

Cliff shook his head. "It was a clean hit. I'm sorry that it ended up the way it did. You never want to see a guy get hurt. Especially a talented guy like Hollander. But that's hockey. It's a dangerous game. So, no. We aren't expecting any supplemental discipline." Well, maybe a fine. It was Shane Hollander, after all.

The rest of the scrum went on that way, tossing questions back and forth between Cliff and Hayden. Both men gave permissibly boring responses that wouldn't get them in trouble with the League or their PR teams. After a few minutes, the event organizers announced that they

were wrapping up. When Pike stood to go, his chair screeching back against the stone floor, Cliff grabbed his wrist to stop him.

“Fuck off,” Hayden hissed, snatching his arm back from Cliff’s grip.

“Wait, man. Just… wait,” Cliff pleaded under his breath. “I need to ask you something.”

Hayden narrowed his eyes, suspicious. “What do you want, Marlow?”

Cliff cleared his throat, trying to figure out what he was even going to say. “Listen,” he started. “When you guys come to Boston, does Hollander ever…”

The other man just stared at him, annoyed, waiting for him to go on. Cliff sighed. “Does he… leave? You know, to go see anyone?”

Pike’s expression pinched even tighter. “What the fuck do you care, Marlow?”

Cliff flinched. “I don’t. I just… Rozanov mentioned he thought Hollander might have a… girlfriend, or something, in the city. And he wanted to make sure someone let her know, I guess. About the injury.”

The rage on Hayden’s face shifted into incredulity. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

Honestly, Cliff had no idea. He figured if anyone could tell him whether Hollander snuck out while he was in Boston to hook up with somebody, it would be Hayden. He was pretty sure they were, like, best friends, or whatever. Cliff rolled his eyes.

“Look, man. Does Hollander have a girlfriend or not?”

Hayden scowled. “That’s not any of your fucking business, Marlow. How does Rozanov know about her anyway?”

Cliff’s eyebrows shot up. “So, there is a girlfriend? In Boston?”

A look of guilt flashed across Pike’s face when he realized what he’d revealed. He chewed anxiously at his bottom lip. “Yes,” he grit out, eventually. "There's a girl. But it’s nothing serious. They only see each other when we’re in town. I’m sure if Lily needs to know, Shane’s parents will call her. You and your buddy Rozanov can drop it. I think you’ve done enough, don’t you?”

Cliff nodded, numbly, awash with the revelation. Lily, he’d said. *Jane and Lily.* All this time. The last whispers of doubt went quiet in his head.

Hayden sent him one more confused look, and then turned and headed back for his locker room. After a minute, Cliff managed to do the same.

When he got back, the room had emptied out. Everyone was already off to the hotel. With one exception.

Ilya Rozanov sat in his stall with his phone clutched tightly in his hands. He was in his team branded sweats, and his hair was still damp from the showers.

He looked like a miserable fucking wreck.

Cliff walked over to his Captain, his linemate of six years, one of his best friends, and came to a stop in front of him. He studied Ilya's hazel eyes for a long time. At last, he said, "It's Hollander, isn't it? Your Montreal girl. It's always been Hollander."

He watched as Ilya stiffened, warring with his emotions. Finally, he just nodded. Cliff felt like he'd just been punched in the face for the second time in one night.

"Was going to call it off," his Captain admitted, dejectedly. "Tonight. Was going to be last time."

Cliff just shook his head, still unable to process what he was hearing. "Why?"

Rozanov gave a small smile, heartbroken all over again. "Was only one rule, and I broke it." His voice cracked on the last word, and suddenly, he was crying. "I love him, Marley," Ilya sobbed. "I'm so fucking in love with him, and I don't know what to do. Cannot check my phone. What if I look, and he is—" He couldn't even finish the thought. He just put his head in his hands as his body was wracked with tears.

Cliff stared, stunned. He had absolutely no idea what to do. He just stood there like a fucking idiot while the strongest man he knew broke down in front of him. At last, he snapped out of it. His Captain needed him. "Let's go," he demanded.

Rozanov looked up at him with tear-filled eyes. "What?"

"Let's go," Cliff repeated. "He's at Montreal General. Hayden just told the press."

Ilya shook his head. "Will not let me see him. We are not family."

"Oh, fuck that," Cliff scoffed. "They'll let you fucking see him, or we'll break in through a window. Let's go. I'll call a cab."

After a minute, Rozanov nodded and stood up, wiping the tears from his face. "Okay. *Da.* Let's go. I want to see him."

"Fuckin' rights," Cliff whooped, clapping his Captain on the shoulder. "Let's go get your fuckin' boy, Roz."

While waiting for their cab in the snow outside Centre Bell, Rozanov cleared his throat. "You have not said much, you know? About learning this thing. Must be strange night for you."

He tried to come off as his usual unbothered self, but Cliff could hear the edge of anxiety in his tone. "Which part?" He asked, with feigned nonchalance, "When I found out you're gay, or when I found out you've been sleeping with your worst enemy – our *divisional rival*, by the way – for the last six years."

Ilya cracked a smile. “Kind of happened all at once, no?”

Cliff just shrugged.

“Also, I am bisexual,” Rozanov continued with a grin. “Just so you are aware of whole story.”

“Cool,” Cliff nodded. “I have no idea what that means.”

Rozanov bellowed out a laugh, and Cliff joined him.

When they made it to the hospital, the nurse at the front desk informed them that visiting hours had ended, but when Cliff gave her his phone number and promised to get her a signed Shane Hollander jersey, she made an exception.

“Fifteen minutes,” she said, leading them to Hollander’s room. “That’s all I can allow, Mr. Rozanov.”

Ilya nodded mutely, too busy wringing his hands to acknowledge her words further. When they got to his door, Cliff took a step back. “I’ll just wait out here. He probably wouldn’t want to see me tonight, anyways.”

His Captain threw him a sheepish look, but nodded his thanks to his friend. Eyes clenched, he took a deep breath, and stepped inside.

Cliff retreated down the hall. He could see inside Hollander’s dimly lit hospital room through the hallway window, and he watched as the man’s face lit up as he recognized his visitor. Hollander’s arm was in a sling, and he almost certainly had a concussion, but there was no neck brace, and Cliff breathed a sigh of relief for that.

Hollander would definitely be out for a while, but he’d recover. He was going to be okay. Thankfully, it looked like Cliff hadn’t completely fucked up his life tonight. Honestly, he didn’t know what he’d do if Hollander had been seriously hurt, especially knowing now the kind of pain it would have put Ilya through, even if only by accident.

Through the window, Cliff watched as Ilya approached the other man’s bed, tears once again flowing down his cheeks. Hollander reached out his good arm to wipe them away, and then drew Cliff’s Captain in by the front of his sweatshirt and kissed him deeply.

Cliff looked away, clearing his throat. He realized he was being a bit of a creep. While he waited for Roz to come back out, he pulled out his phone and swiped over to Google, quickly typing “bisexual” into the search bar. He clicked on the first link that came up (Wikipedia, of course), and started scrolling.

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6 Months Later

Cliff is having breakfast with his wife on a beautiful summer day when he gets the news. The local Boston sports channel is on in their kitchen, and the anchors suddenly cut to a breaking

story. The headline reads: “Raiders’ Captain Accepts Trade to Ottawa.” Above it, there’s a photo of Ilya Rozanov lifting the Stanley Cup from the year they brought it home, looking the happiest that Cliff has ever seen him.

Well, with one exception.

“Oh my God,” Catlyn puts her hand on his arm and squeezes. “Babe, *did you know about this?*” Over on the kitchen counter, Cliff can hear his phone going off with a flood of notifications. He looks away from Ilya’s smiling face and turns to his favorite person in the world. Catlyn stares back at him with her beautiful lips parted in surprise. “He can’t go to the Centaurs,” she insists, “They’re *horrible!*”

Cliff’s whole world brightens at the sight of her, at the sound of her voice. All at once, he remembers Rozanov’s question from that fateful night in Centre Bell all those months ago: *“You would choose her, da?”*

Of course, I choose you, he thinks. *I love you. I love you. I love you.*

With a smile, Cliff turns back to the screen, raising his glass of orange juice in a toast to his Captain. “You’re a good man, Ilya Rozanov.” *Go get your fuckin’ boy.*

End Notes

Update: WOW!! Thank you all so so much for the love on this. All the kudos and comments are so kind. :,)

Also, Ep.4 destroyed me, but I had to update this because Hayden knows Lily's nameeee which is so adorable. Prepared to bawl my eyes out next week. Stay strong friends.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!