

The Shane Hollander Thing

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/75901446) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/75901446>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Categories:	Gen , M/M
Fandoms:	Heated Rivalry (TV) , Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid
Relationships:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov , Cliff Marlow & Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Ilya Rozanov , Cliff Marlow , Shane Hollander
Additional Tags:	cliff marlow is a good friend , Ilya Rozanov Loves Shane Hollander , Hockey , No one is subtle , Abuse of italics , Ilya Rozanov is a Menace , Swearing , POV Outsider , Shane Hollander Walks Ilya Rozanov Like A Dog
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2025-12-17 Completed: 2025-12-30 Words: 11,811 Chapters: 2/2

The Shane Hollander Thing

by [fandom_commitment_issues](#)

Summary

Cliff Marlow has been on Boston's team with Ilya Rozanov for the last seven years. Last week, he figured out the Shane Hollander thing.

*** Now with a 2nd Chapter of Shane's *slightly* more serious POV***

Notes

Hi! This is my first time writing for this fandom, but this story has bewitched me. I am obsessed.

Does not follow book nor tv timeline, but a secret third thing.

Thank you to my wonderful beta/editor Dani. I'm so glad she crossed fandoms with me. I adore her. I'm bullying them into also writing fic for Heated Rivalry so maybe you'll see that soon. Follow Dani here as [@the_navistar_carol](#) or on tumblr as [@the-navistar-carol](#).

As I lived with a hockey player for 15 years, I know a thing or two about how liberally they use swear words, and it was reflected in this fic. It's a lot, I'm aware. It's also accurate as fuck.

Also: I know Cliff is younger than them in the book, but we're ignoring that entirely. He's an old man (he's like 27 lmfao)

Edit: the birth place of the line "Shane Hollander walks Ilya Rozanov like a dog" and I cannot believe that became a popular tag

I'm going through and adding this to my notes because apparently this is needed now: FUCK AI. No AI was used in the creation of this fic.

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

- Translation into 中文-普通话 國語 available: [【翻译translation】 The Shane Hollander Thing \(关于夏恩·霍兰德的那件事\)](#) by [jokerli](#)

Chapter 1: The Shane Hollander Thing

Chapter Summary

Cliff Marlow has been on Boston's team with Ilya Rozanov for the last seven years.

Last week, he figured out the Shane Hollander thing.

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Last *week*, he figured out the Shane Hollander thing.

Of course, despite this, Cliff had yet to tell Roz what he had figured out. He still wasn't fully sold on his own theory, didn't know how Roz would take it — either mild confusion or complete nuclear meltdown with no in between — and honestly couldn't explain how he'd pieced it together.

Sometimes, when he looked back on his findings, he struggled to believe his own eyes. Other times, he looked back and wondered how no one else had fucking seen it.

Look, Cliff cared for Roz — he really, *really* did — and his fondness only grew for the little shit as the years passed. Especially after he'd become the best captain Boston had seen in decades.

All this to say: Ilya was not subtle. He was a disaster. Chaos wrapped in shoulder pads. A massive, hockey-playing, absolutely-*not*-straight catastrophe. Cliff had picked up on all of that the first time they met. The sexuality part included — even if he hadn't known what the hell to call it back then.

He knew Roz slept with women. Lots of them. Even had a long-time fling, or so Cliff had heard. In fact, the team had *met* one of the women Roz had on his long list of booty-calls. *Svetlana* from “back home.” Roz, ever the gentleman, insisted they were just friends and hadn't hooked up in years.

But Cliff Marlow had *always* known that Ilya Rozanov liked men. From the very first game they played together. He'd never had a problem with it, never said anything directly, but he'd made sure Roz knew he was safe with him. Little things: rainbow tape on pride night even when most of the team skipped it, agreeing to hit up a gay club without hesitation, speaking openly about queer people in a sport where few did.

Roz never said anything.

It was the second year of Ilya being on the team when Cliff first noticed something about Rozanov's... *fixation* with Shane Hollander.

It had made sense in their rookie year. At that point, it wasn't really fair to call it *Rozanov's* fixation with Shane Hollander. Everyone else was obsessed with their rivalry. It was shoved in their faces after practically every game — sometimes even games that neither of them had fucking played.

While it had been slightly annoying for some of the veteran players to be pushed aside that year, it had been expected. Honestly, well-earned. Anyone with eyes and a basic grip on a hockey stick could tell you that Roz and Hollander were some of the best the league had ever seen. The only thing more remarkable than their rivalry was the way they could almost telepathically track each other on the ice.

So really, it was Rozanov's *second* year on the team that Cliff noticed anything. The rivalry coverage was still a circus, but at that point it was just part of the routine. Almost part of the pre- and post-game rituals. Right skate, left skate, hockey tape, answer Reporter #12's question about Roz and his rival, go play hockey.

But then Montreal came to Boston for the first time that season, and Cliff noticed something... *else*.

He had taken Ilya out for a cigarette because, unfortunately, there was pretty much fuck-else to do in Boston between afternoon practice and game time. Not if they planned on coming back to the stadium at any point, given the amount of fucking traffic. Most days, the team just stayed put. That was how he and Roz ended up with their pre-game cigarette ritual.

Montreal had shown up early that day. How they had managed to get there *early* when most of Boston's own team could barely make it before the puck dropped, Cliff would never know. Either way, it had happened.

Cliff couldn't remember exactly what he'd been talking about — probably a bar. Somewhere to go *after* the game. To celebrate, of course, because there was no way in hell he was putting a loss out into the universe.

Rozanov spotted the visiting team's bus before he did. The second he saw it, he flicked his cigarette to the ground and stomped it under his toe, waving his hand through the air like he might make the smoke disappear. "Put it out!" he had hissed.

If Cliff didn't know him so well, he would have thought it was *panic*. But he did know Roz, and there was no fucking way. "You're crazy if you think I'm not finishing this," Cliff had said. "Ritual's important."

But when he turned back, Roz wasn't next to him anymore. Actually, he was ten feet away, pulling mints out of his pocket and popping them like candy. "Is your funeral," he'd said.

Cliff scoffed, shaking his head. It was a cigarette, not a bomb.

Montreal stepped off their bus slowly, shooting Cliff dirty looks the moment they saw him. He just glared back — this was *his* home game, and he wouldn't be intimidated in his own damn house. Montreal could suck his dick.

Rozanov slipped back to his side, clearly trying to reinforce the intimidation efforts, though Cliff noticed he kept just enough distance to avoid him. As if the lingering smoke from Cliff's cigarette might somehow undo the work of the fifty-five breath mints he'd just watched Rozanov swallow whole like some kind of snake.

The last person off of Montreal's bus was Shane fucking Hollander. A player skilled enough to deserve a nickname and yet too boring to have ever earned one. Surely *someone* had called him something other than "Hollander," but Cliff couldn't remember one. He'd even tried to come up with his own nickname for the kid opposite Ilya, but all he could come up with was *Quick Stick*, and that... well, it certainly hadn't stuck, because it was fucking awful.

But what he noticed *now* was the fact that Hollander locked onto the still-lit cigarette between his fingers. Even narrowed his eyes at it the same way he did at Roz in a face-off.

"Smoking will kill you, y'know," the kid said as he hauled his hockey bag off the bus.

Before Cliff could even open his mouth, Roz was chirping right back. "I am not smoking!" he called, very defensive for someone who *absolutely* had been smoking.

Hollander tilted his head like a confused puppy — and *wow*, it really was like the anti-Rozanov. "I wasn't talking to you, asshole."

Okay, nope. They were exactly the same.

Cliff would be a liar if he said he hadn't followed their entire draft process — every press conference, every interview, everything leading up to that day in LA a year and a half ago. He knew Boston would be getting one of them.

The kids never did change. They'd been the same on and off the ice since the first interaction Cliff had seen of the two of them.

This, however, was the first time Cliff had ever seen Ilya Rozanov *grumble*. Like, full toddler-in-a-grocery-store grumble.

And he did it again when Hollander walked past without offering a second chirp. Cliff could swear Roz looked genuinely offended that Hollander had chosen to yell at a cigarette instead of him.

That night, for the first time in a while, Cliff watched Roz turn back into the *kid* he had been last season. He spent most of the evening grumbling into his phone, neglecting all other pre-game rituals he swore kept the hockey gods happy. He'd stayed that way until ten minutes before the puck dropped, when suddenly he was smirking again.

Cliff didn't ask. He didn't want to know, and he was sure Ilya didn't want to share. They'd both been around enough hockey players to know exactly what kind of text could pull that kind of smirk out of someone. And on the ice, Hollander and Rozanov chirped at each other like they never wanted the rookie rivalry rumor to die.

It never did, but Cliff should have suspected that by now. No one entertained like those two did, and they were probably getting some pretty damn good bonuses because of it. Honestly, if someone had offered Cliff an extra million dollars on his contract to keep a rivalry burning, he would have done the same.

He could have sworn they were *smiling* at each other as they shouted insults. As they slammed each other into boards and stole the puck back and forth like no one else mattered. It wasn't like anyone else could keep up with them. Sometimes, it felt like they were the only two actually playing.

Cliff was *sure* he had seen that rare Roz smile as he shouted, "Watch your stick!" at Hollander, and he was *sure* he had seen Hollander grin right back, unrestrained and impolite like he *never* was in an interview. He was also *sure* that he hoped they never ended up on the same team, because that sounded like a nightmare for everyone.

Looking back, though, that was the first time Cliff Marlow noticed it. Whatever the *thing* was that Roz had with Shane Hollander. It was in Boston, with one cigarette, fifty-five breath mints, and two idiots smiling over shared insults.

The things Cliff noticed after that seemed to develop over the years. Things he picked up on, but never really registered until he couldn't ignore how out of the ordinary it was.

For one, Ilya Rozanov almost never talked shit about Shane Hollander in the locker room. Not really. Sure, he'd toss out the occasional jab about Hollander being boring, but nothing personal. Not like the other players. Some of Boston's roster made it their personal mission to shit-talk every other hockey player in the league in the most personal ways imaginable.

Roz joined in sometimes. Especially when they were playing teams like LA or New York. He seemed to hate those teams almost as much as he hated Montreal. And he *did* hate Montreal — he'd spend hours before those games tearing down every player he might face on the ice.

But never Hollander. Not beyond hockey.

Cliff had once heard Rozanov call Boiziau a bastard son. He'd heard Roz speak about how Pike's wife must not be satisfied with such a weak man. But Hollander?

Hollander was... *boring*.

Hollander was *off his game*.

Cliff never noticed it in the moment. Mostly because the team could only bully so many players at once, and nobody had the energy to join every conversation. Sometimes, Roz didn't participate at all — head too in the game to look up from his skates.

So really, Cliff didn't notice any of it until years later. Not until he started having suspicions and looked back, trying to find *anything* Roz had said that might prove him wrong.

In reality, he'd only found more proof. Because of course he did.

The fact was, Roz just knew *too much* about Hollander. Way too much. More than Cliff cared to know, or anyone else could justify as normal. The kind of deep, specific knowledge that didn't seem strange until it started to slip out.

Like that one time when one of their (now traded, thank god) players had failed in their attempt at racism. Cliff had kicked that guy's ass directly after he was traded — it was pathetic enough to be racist, but even worse to be *bad* at it.

Anyway, the guy tried it on Hollander.

Turns out, Hollander is Japanese, and Ilya Rozanov *will* argue with you about it. To the point of yelling and almost getting physically removed from the locker room.

It didn't *have* to mean anything. And it probably didn't to the rest of the team. Roz hated racists — like *most* of them, not including the racist — and he had yelled at the guy. Simple. Easy to be explained.

Except Cliff knew better. He had seen how Roz dealt with bigots while they were out, and he *never* yelled about it. Roz didn't argue, he just threw his fist.

Something about Hollander was *different*.

The other things Roz knew about Hollander were normal. Stats, points and goals, facts that had long since made their rounds with the press and the paparazzi. *Of course* Roz knew that stuff. They all did. It wasn't like they were talking about just any rookie; it was *Shane fucking Hollander*.

Cliff assumed Montreal was the same way, probably able to list off facts about *Ilya fucking Rozanov*. Everyone knew at least some of it.

But Roz... he just knew *more*.

And sometimes that *more* didn't seem to have a rhyme or reason. Like knowing the names of Hollander's parents, or what brand of hockey tape he used. Strange things.

The thing that made the most sense, *strangely*, was that Roz always knew the specifics of Hollander's injuries — he was the only one who could keep up with Hollander on the ice. They were evenly matched in nearly everything, despite their endless press-conference pissing contests.

If anyone was going to notice if Shane Hollander had fucked up his knee or his elbow, it was going to be Rozanov. Cliff was convinced Roz could tell just by the way Hollander was holding his stick if he had so much as a bruise. And he was just as sure Hollander could read Roz the same way. Sometimes, they weaved around each other so easily that it looked like they were one being. If they had gone into ice dancing, they might've made history, but instead they were on bulkier skates and making the biggest paychecks the leagues had offered in a decade or more. Making history all the same, just for a different sport.

But then, sometime around the sixth year, Cliff noticed the way Ilya — yes, *Ilya*, not the big-bad-Roz — had hung back near Montreal's bench when Hollander was pulled from a game. Almost like he was circling that half of the ice.

The first time he passed, Cliff noticed Hollander nod. The second time, he swore that Ilya had lifted his hand. And the third time, Shane Hollander pointed to his shoulder. And wasn't that... *something*...

They won the game that night, which wasn't surprising since they were already leading before Hollander got injured. But Roz just seemed... *off*. Not as happy as usual.

Back in the locker room, Cliff tested his — *admittedly* — ridiculous theory. He chose when Roz was the most distracted: the moment he picked up his phone and started texting *Montreal Girl*.

"Hey, you catch where Hollander got hit tonight?" he asked, not really expecting an answer. Again, his theory was ridiculous, and Hollander had been pulled so late that he hadn't even made it back onto the ice for Roz to get a close look.

Rozanov didn't even look up from his phone. "Shoulder."

So... *weird*. Not damning, but weird. And to be fair, *anyone* would have come out of that hit with a wrecked shoulder. It could have been a coincidence.

What Cliff did next was not his proudest moment. He could admit that.

The next time they played Montreal, Cliff let his stick fall behind him just a little too far. Just enough that Hollander would skate into it and knock his shin. Which, of course, he did. And that little bump sent him swiveling off balance and straight into the wall.

They pulled him for a second when he started leaning to one side.

But Cliff *watched*.

He watched as Ilya Rozanov passed the puck on a goal he absolutely should have run with — passed it to a *rookie*, of all people — and then drifted into circles near Montreal's bench.

First pass, they nodded to each other. Second pass — Cliff could see more clearly now when he was looking for it — Ilya subtly raised his hand and tapped against his own body. Third pass, Shane Hollander lifted his skate onto the bench and patted his shin. The left one.

Back in the locker room, Cliff waited again. He watched Roz come in from his victory lap and go straight for his phone before even peeling off his gear. *Montreal Girl*, he guessed.

And when Roz was just distracted enough, Cliff asked: "Hey, did you see where Hollander got injured tonight?" He paused, waited for an answer, and then, just to be safe, added, "I felt really bad. Didn't mean to clip him, just didn't realize I was carrying it so far back, y'know?"

Roz hummed, nodding slowly. “Do not feel bad, Marlow. He was off ice for only seconds. Hollander deserves it,” he said, though it didn’t sound as convincing as it once did. It took a minute before he even answered the original question. “Left shin, by the way. Skated weird rest of game.”

Okay, yeah... Cliff *hadn’t* imagined that. Ilya really was checking on Hollander. Which... *technically* wasn’t a problem. Boston had good rookies that year, and with Hollander benched, they didn’t *need* Roz to take the goal. If anything, it just evened the scales. Besides, Hollander didn’t get injured often.

Rozanov wasn’t giving up anything to go check on Hollander. Not really. Not that Cliff could think of, anyway. It was just unbelievably fucking weird.

And what Cliff noticed after that was what happened *after* Hollander’s injuries. If Hollander was checked particularly hard in a game against Boston, it wasn’t unusual for Roz to give that player the cold shoulder for an entire week. And if anyone ever called him on it, he’d just shrug and mutter something about “being Russian.” Somehow, everyone bought it.

Cliff Marlow did *not* buy it. Because he was paying attention, he had picked up on it, started keeping track, and the Venn diagram between “people who touched Hollander” and “people Roz hated that week” was a perfect fucking circle.

When Hollander got into a fight in Tampa — the second fight of his entire career — it had been with a player named (ironically) Hazard.

Two and a half weeks later, when *Boston* played Tampa, Rozanov broke Hazard’s fucking nose.

And yeah, Cliff sure as shit noticed that.

When Ilya Rozanov became Boston’s captain, Cliff didn’t even need to check if Hollander had taken a hit in his game the night before — wherever that game had been. He could always tell. Practice the next day was brutal. If Hollander had taken a nasty hit from *Boston*, it wasn’t unusual for the team to find themselves skating until their souls left their bodies. Twelve-hour days. Sometimes more.

Still, Cliff had no proof. Nothing except the giant, flashing neon sign that Roz was obsessed with Hollander in a way no one else on the planet was.

It could have been purely friendship.

...in the same way Cliff *could* have been the tooth fairy.

It would’ve made sense, maybe, if they’d actually been friends. The league had spent years doing everything short of blood sacrifice to pit those two against each other. Even before they were drafted, they were doing press together. Every year during preseason, almost every sports channel wanted to have an interview about the famous rivalry — though they rarely got the two of them in the same room at the same time.

There was something unique about them. Something Cliff would simply never understand, no matter how long he'd been playing or how good he was. Rozanov and Hollander were *Rozanov and Hollander*. They were legends before they even reached the league, and sure as hell cemented their legacies by seven and a half seasons in.

At this point, Cliff was convinced they were in a race for the Hall of Fame. He was also convinced the league would simply induct them together, purely to keep the rivalry alive even after they retired.

People *wanted* them to hate each other. That was what sold. None of it — not the fight highlights, not the interviews, not the endless fan commentary — could change the fact that they were the *only two people* who understood what that was like. The only two who'd been told over and over to think about each other.

Friendships blossomed in those environments. Even now, Cliff had the phone numbers of the people he'd been drafted alongside. They didn't talk anymore, but at the time, he remembered being relieved to see them on the ice with him. A reminder that he wasn't alone.

However, the way the two of them circled each other on the ice — the way they had hidden it — didn't seem friendly. It was obvious to Cliff, but maybe that was just because he actually cared about Ilya.

He tried to push it from his mind. Roz hadn't said anything about it, and he was playing like a man possessed. He was going for another Cup, and it was obvious. If whatever this *thing* with Hollander was had made Roz play like that, then Cliff had no interest in fucking it up. He would deal with it whenever it became a problem.

That didn't mean he stopped noticing things. He didn't. Every time they were on the ice together, *something* happened between Roz and Hollander. Sometimes it was just a snarky comment. Other times it was the way they followed each other with an almost psychic understanding of each other's fakes. At one point, Cliff even heard Roz tell the alt-goalie exactly where Hollander would shoot. And the bastard blocked it.

The incident that finally made Cliff snap was at the beginning of this season. They had traveled up to Montreal for the first time, and they all knew they were at a disadvantage. They always were in Montreal, the same way Montreal was disadvantaged in Boston. Their fans were *fierce*. The home-advantage wasn't a myth.

Roz always ramped up his antics in Montreal. If they couldn't have the crowd, he would chirp at the players until they broke. Sometimes it worked. Sometimes it earned him a bruise on his cheekbone and a two-minute timeout.

Cliff always warned him to cut it out. Roz never listened.

He expected a bloodbath in Montreal. He expected the fallout of marathon practices after one of their players inevitably checked Hollander a little too hard in the chaos.

Cliff had *not* expected to hear Ilya Rozanov speaking Russian at the face-off.

He sure as shit did not expect Hollander to *understand him*.

That is precisely what happened. The two of them leaned down for the face-off, and just before the puck dropped, Cliff heard Roz mutter something in Russian. He couldn't make it all out, and even if he could, he didn't speak fucking Russian. That wasn't what mattered — *Hollander understood*.

He understood, and he *blushed*.

Cliff was almost certain he heard Hollander snap back with “*asshole*,” but that wasn't the important part. The important part was that Ilya Rozanov had been in the league for seven seasons, and the *first* person who bothered to learn Russian just to keep up with his chirps was his rival, Shane Hollander.

The bloodbath didn't happen at that first game, but it sure as hell happened at their game last week. It started with Pike and Hammersmith, and it only took two punches before everyone got involved. Cliff couldn't even hear the whistles — the fans were losing their minds.

Before it could actually be split up, Cliff saw Roz sliding past him. Or rather, Roz was being pushed backwards on the ice. By *Hollander*.

He wasn't even putting up a fight. At least not a convincing one. Cliff had known the guy for seven years. Roz could land a punch in his sleep. Meanwhile, Hollander was a puppy dog and couldn't fight for shit.

Roz's fake struggling was pathetic, and Cliff wasn't buying it. The Russian could end Hollander's entire night with one decent punch. Instead, he let himself get shoved out of the chaos so he wouldn't take a penalty for instigating.

This was the last year that Cliff was dealing with this shit. That moment cemented his theory. Everything else could be explained as a weird, secret fixation, but Cliff didn't know any other player who would learn Russian for their “enemy,” or willingly lose a fight their rival couldn't win if their life depended on it.

He did the responsible thing with his theory, okay?

He waited until they were knocked out of the playoffs. The loss stung — losing to LA *always* stung — but at least the season was over. Nothing he said now could tank Roz's game. Not this year. And it helped that the game had been in Boston; they both saw this rink as home more than their own houses.

Cliff also knew that Rozanov was a stubborn motherfucker. If he was asked outright, he'd deny everything, shut down, or pick a fight. Probably all three. Definitely all three.

So Cliff stalled like a coward. He took longer than normal to peel off his gear, and then he sent a text to pretty much everyone he had ever met, and then he took a thirty-minute shower. When he came back out to change, everyone was gone except Roz, who was still sitting on the bench, staring at his phone.

Until mid-season, Cliff would have assumed it was *Montreal Girl*. Now, he was pretty sure that “girl” was Shane Hollander. He had worked that out around the time he realized this girl wasn’t just around when *they* played in Montreal, but also showed up when *Montreal* played in Boston.

What were the odds that this girl traveled with her home hockey team?

Zero.

There was no girl. There had never been a girl. This person was around when they were in Montreal, and they were around when Montreal was in Boston, and they were Shane fucking Hollander. Always had been.

Cliff dressed quickly, and Roz was still sitting on the bench, staring at his phone. Disappointed, dejected, and waiting for what Cliff assumed was comfort. Montreal’s game was still going, just a skip away in New York, and Cliff could guess exactly who Roz was thinking about.

In the back of his mind, Cliff wondered if Ilya would hop on a train that night. Disappear for a few days like he sometimes did. If he would come back for the final team meeting of the season and pretend that he’d been drinking his weight in vodka.

He pushed the thought away and put his juvenile plan into action instead.

“Hey, so...” This was a stupid plan. One of his worst, probably. That didn’t stop him from hanging up his jersey and dropping onto the bench beside Roz. “Think I could get Hollander’s number? For my sister-in-law.”

Roz froze and locked his phone without looking up. That was confirmation enough, but Cliff wanted *answers*. Everyone had left for the night anyway; they were alone.

“Why would I have Hollander’s number?” Roz asked, barely looking up. There was a panic there — a tightness. His voice had cracked into a suspiciously high register.

Suddenly, Cliff felt bad. “I thought you, uh... had that contact in Montreal,” he said. “The one from the photoshoot you guys did earlier this season.”

Roz’s jaw locked up so fast it was almost audible, and suddenly, he was just *Ilya* again. The same kid Cliff watched at the draft almost eight years ago.

“I do, but I do not text them,” he said. His voice had dropped a little, and his accent felt thicker in Cliff’s ears. That only happened when he was upset and pretending not to be. “I do not like them. I definitely do not want to ask them for Hollander’s number.”

Not good enough. This plan was truly awful. Childish, maybe. Cliff was still going to push. “Can I ask them for it, then?” He watched closely as every muscle in Ilya’s body went rigid. “My sister-in-law’s obsessed with Hollander. Promised I’d set something up.”

It looked like Ilya was getting red in the face. “*Nyet!* There are better players than Hollander. Better—” He cut himself off hard, clearly aborting *better looking* at the last second. “Besides,

your in-law should not date someone from Montreal.”

Well, that just gave him away. Cliff didn’t want to trap him, but the truth was right there. One excuse had just hammered the final nail in Ilya Rozanov’s coffin.

“You’re seeing someone from Montreal,” Cliff said carefully. He looked closely, then saw the panic flash in Rozanov’s eyes. It hurt to watch. “Aren’t you?”

Ilya just... *froze*. Like a blank computer screen. The spinning wheel of doom had overtaken the rest in his mind. Cliff had known him for a long time, and he didn’t think he had *ever* seen Roz speechless. The guy talked nonstop, chirped relentlessly, sometimes it seemed like he just opened his mouth and the words were already there. He had *never* been speechless.

And yet, as the two of them sat alone in the locker room, Ilya Rozanov’s words came slowly. He had to *think* about them. “And I am bad example.”

Jesus Christ, this kid never gave up. Most of the time, Cliff respected that — it was half the reason they won so much — but right now it was damn near infuriating. It was a staring contest. A face-off with no puck. One of them was going to break, and Cliff was *done with this shit*.

He didn’t care. Seriously, he didn’t fucking care what Roz did off the ice. What he *did* care about was the fact that if *he* could figure this out, someone else definitely would. He didn’t want Roz to get even sloppier, because they both knew he could not afford the fallout.

And he’d never admit it aloud, but Roz played better when Hollander was around. Cliff wouldn’t jeopardize that if he didn’t have to. He just wanted the truth. Preferably before he lost his mind.

Roz was stubborn.

So was Cliff.

It was a miracle they became friends and didn’t kill each other years ago.

“C’mon, Roz,” he practically whined. Like a child. “Just this once, can I—”

“No!” Roz snapped. *That* was the Ilya Rozanov that Cliff knew and loved. The fire. The temper. The guy who threw his gloves off the second someone deserved it.

Good. Cliff was getting somewhere. “But Holl—”

Roz stood up from the bench, gripping his phone so tightly his hand shook. It was the first time the two of them had really gotten into it.

“Hollander is—”

“He’s *what*?”

Cliff had known Ilya for seven years, but he had never seen Roz look afraid before. Not on the ice, not in a fight, not ever. Not until now.

“He—” Roz stopped himself, eyes widening as he scanned the empty room. No one was there. There were no cameras. Everyone had fucked off a long time ago, and Ilya knew that just as well as Cliff did. “He is *mine*, okay?” Ilya snapped, voice low and shaking. “Is that what you want? He is mine.”

There was silence for a moment, where Cliff tried to deal with the confirmation and Ilya tried to deal with the fact that he’d actually said it out loud. The Russian’s eyes had somehow grown wider, *wetter*, reminiscent of a child about to cry.

What really seemed to break him, though, was how *not shocked* Cliff seemed. He plopped back down onto the bench with a huff and buried his face in his hands. Cliff reached out and placed a hand on his shoulder, mostly because he had no idea what else to do.

Cliff didn’t have siblings of his own. He didn’t have kids. Hell, outside of hockey and his wife, Cliff barely had *friends*. He wasn’t sure how to help here. All he knew was that Roz needed comfort, and the person Cliff suspected he *wanted* was in New York.

“What does that mean, Roz?” Cliff asked quietly. Maybe having this conversation here was a bad decision. Maybe he should’ve taken Ilya out for a drink, or ordered pizza, or literally chosen *any* setting other than the empty locker room. Because now he felt awful — Ilya Rozanov had never looked *small* in here before. “What do you mean by *yours*?”

The beat of silence was the calm before the storm. Cliff had been stupid to trust it, but then again, everything about this was stupid. He shouldn’t have been surprised by an outburst — and maybe he wasn’t. Maybe he just hadn’t anticipated the sheer size of it.

Roz threw Cliff’s arm off his shoulder and launched back onto his feet. “What do you want from me?” he asked, jutting his chin out. His voice burst out too loud, and he had the good sense to rein it in immediately — so fast that Cliff wondered just how much practice he had in hiding this. “You want me to say that we are together? That we meet when we can? That when he comes to Boston, he stays with me and I cook before we fuck? That I go to Montreal on long weekend? Or—what is—*timeline*! Do you want timeline?”

Cliff stayed still on the bench, watching as Ilya finally started to shed his gear in the middle of his panic. It was the first time since the game that he’d even put his phone down, let alone bothered to take off his jersey. But if this was what he needed — if he needed to scream at Cliff while he used his gear as a way to keep moving — Cliff would let him have it.

He just watched as *Rozanov* came off piece by piece. Watched as he turned himself back into Ilya, in sweatpants and a wrinkled white T-shirt that he’d shoved onto his body before he even showered.

And Ilya kept talking *at* him, but at least he was still saying something. He wasn’t shutting down.

“What do you want, Marlow? Dirty details?” He chucked one of his pads into his locker hard enough that he might have broken one of the shelves. “You—you want me to—that he is—that he—”

“That he’s your Montreal girl?” Cliff offered, hoping it sounded like an olive branch and not a threat. He thought his voice was soft enough. He knew he could be intimidating — big frame, booming voice — but after seven years, he hoped Ilya knew he could trust him. “And he’s *been* your Montreal girl this whole time?”

Ilya didn’t look too pleased about the assessment. Actually, it kind of looked like he wanted to punch Cliff in the face hard enough to end his career, which was... probably fair, honestly.

“I’m not gonna tell anyone, Roz. I’m happy for you,” Cliff continued when Ilya didn’t say anything. For the first time, Ilya seemed to relax. Not all the way, but enough that his fists had unclenched, and he didn’t look two seconds away from punching a wall. *Progress*. “How long?”

Ilya took a seat all the way on the other side of the bench, like physical distance might actually make Cliff disappear. “Whole time,” he whispered as he pulled on his finger.

“What does *that* mean?” Cliff almost felt bad about asking so many questions, but at the same time, it wasn’t like Roz was making this conversation easy for him. “Since we found out about Montreal Girl? Was that your second or third season?”

Ilya shook his head without looking up. “No, since before. *Whole* time. Since draft.”

Cliff had to sit back and stare at the wall for a second.

He had known Rozanov and Hollander had *something* going on since the Montreal Girl joke had started. That was still a long time — three, maybe four years. Five at most. And even then, it seemed like they only met when the teams played each other.

But no.

Ilya had been traveling to Montreal on off-weeks. Hollander was staying in Boston at Ilya’s house instead of his team’s hotel. And they had been doing this for *eight damn years*.

It hit him like a sucker punch. It wasn’t casual. It wasn’t pent-up rivalry turning into something stupid and heated. It wasn’t league stressors or media-pressures turned into something else. Whatever it was, it hadn’t started because of hockey.

It had started at the *draft*.

“*Shit*, Roz.” What else was he supposed to say to that? How many times had Ilya turned down a party or disappeared from a club, only to be with Hollander?

Ilya was quiet. *Too* quiet, which Cliff never knew him to be. “How did you figure it out?” he asked softly.

Cliff had never felt worse about himself. Worse still was that he didn't think he could give a clear answer to this question. "I noticed a lot of things."

"*Which* things?" Ilya pushed. He had finally looked up from the floor, turning back toward Cliff so they were face-to-face again. Which meant Cliff had a clear view of Rozanov's bloodshot, teary eyes. "So I know not to do them again."

Cliff sighed and attempted to reconstruct the world's worst mental timeline. It wasn't like he had memorized every interaction he had witnessed. There wasn't a mental list — on account of the fact that he didn't *mean* to figure this out. He hadn't been invested enough to write it down or anything.

He did his best because he thought he owed his captain that much. "Well, I think the first time I noticed something was five years ago when you chucked fifty mints down your throat like an old pro because you didn't want Hollander to know you were smoking."

Some color finally crept back into Ilya's face as he waved his hand dismissively through the air. "Easy fix. I already cut back."

Cliff didn't know why he asked, but the next question flew out of his mouth before he could stop it. "For him?"

And Roz just nodded. "Yes, he was very annoying about it," he said, as if he was bored. If it weren't for the obvious panic, Cliff would have thought this whole thing was a sick joke, because that was exactly how Roz always talked about Hollander. *Annoying*. Every single time. And now Cliff was starting to understand why nothing in that tone had ever changed over the years. "What else? I must know what not to do. I will not let his career end over this. Not my mistake."

It occurred Cliff kind of all at once that Ilya Rozanov was not worried about his own career. *Fuck*, he wasn't even worried about Russia. *Fucking Russia*, where this would get him thrown in jail or worse. He was only worried about Hollander.

In hindsight, maybe Cliff should have put that together over the last *five years* of accidental evidence collection.

He tried to shake those thoughts from his head. Those were too heavy for an already heavy day.

"Hollander understands Russian," Cliff said instead. "When you speak it on the ice, he knows what your chirps are."

Ilya shrugged, but didn't have much more of a reaction. "*Da*, I teach him things. He teaches me mor—" He stopped and thought for a second before finishing his sentence. "He teaches me *better* English."

At that, Cliff couldn't help but smile. If Ilya was sitting just a little closer, he might have ruffled the kid's hair. "I'd noticed you were getting better at that. You've been sounding less like Google Translate lately."

Roz paused, like he hadn't expected an acknowledgement of his improvement. Almost as if he had been bracing for the opposite. Cliff nearly repeated a sentiment he'd said years ago: *you're straight up blushing, Roz*. Because whatever Hollander was to him — *his*, or whatever — it clearly mattered.

Ilya just looked down, smiling at himself like a lovesick teenager. "He is good teacher," he mumbled. It had always been obvious that his accent got thicker when he was upset, but now Cliff was noticing that it got thicker when he was *embarrassed* too. "Taught me words like *conniving* and *smug*."

Cliff barked out a laugh, surprised and warm. For everything he'd misunderstood about that so-called rivalry, the shit-talking had apparently been 100% real. As strange as it was, that was pretty damn hilarious.

The conversation flowed easier after that. Rozanov had relaxed a little bit, picked his phone back up and passed it back and forth between his hands as he waited for whatever message he was clearly hoping to receive. Cliff purposefully didn't mention it.

"I noticed that when he gets hurt, you circle to make sure you know exactly where." It was probably the most damning piece of evidence he had — the most obvious thing Ilya did. And saying it out loud was as much a warning as an observation. Ilya needed to *stop* if he didn't want anyone else to notice.

But he was stubborn, so Cliff wasn't holding his breath.

As expected, Roz seemed to brush it off. He had no plans to stop that particular habit. "Need to make sure is not serious," he said, but as he said it, his face tightened with embarrassment. Like he'd never meant for anyone but Hollander to see that side of him. The *boyfriend* side. "Shane is... he is not good at his limits. He pushes. I make sure he doesn't."

It was easy for Cliff to smile about that. A real smile, though it was just a little smug. Of all the things he'd noticed over the years, the most obvious was that Hollander walked Roz like a dog.

"Like he does for you?" Cliff asked. He didn't try to hide his smirk. He didn't try to hide the teasing. Shit-talking was one of their love languages around here. It was the language of hockey. "Every time you get into a fight with Montreal, you let him push you right out of it."

Ilya Rozanov shrunk in on himself with a faint blush on his cheeks. Cliff had never seen anything like it. He was embarrassed. He was *actually* embarrassed. And it was because of fucking *Hollander*. Jesus. *Russians do not blush*. What a baldfaced lie.

Sometimes, Cliff wished he would have left this thing alone.

Right now, seeing Roz like that, was not one of those times.

"*Da*," Roz said. His eyes stayed glued to his phone, even though Cliff could clearly see nothing had come through yet. They would both know when Montreal v. New York was over

— they would get about a hundred texts each — but Roz kept checking anyway. “He also... he makes sure I do not get suspended for fighting. He knows I will. I push too.”

Cliff Marlow did not have siblings of his own. He did not have kids. He wasn’t entirely sure how to deal with situations like this.

But he’d grown stupidly fond of Ilya Rozanov. Part of him wished that he had waited the kid out — waited until he finally came clean about it all. Another part of him wondered if he ever would have if Cliff didn’t bring it up.

None of it mattered now, he supposed. The only thing that mattered was making sure Roz knew he was supported. Knew that Cliff was in his corner and always would be.

... even if that meant he had to be nice to *Hollander*.

God help him.

Cliff shifted his way across the bench and threw his arm around Ilya’s shoulders. It was the closest to a hug he was going to get — Roz wasn’t much of a hugger. At least not with the team. Of course, Cliff now realized that there was much he did not know about his friend.

“You know, Roz, if you *want* to...” He wanted to make sure he emphasized the *want* part of his proposal before letting the rest out into the open. The last thing Cliff wanted to do after this was push the kid any further tonight. “You can always bring your boy over to mine sometime. We can have drinks. Double date. Let him know that I’m... that I’m cool with it.”

He *was* cool with it. Really, he was. It wasn’t the fact that Roz was with a man — it was the fact that Roz was with *Hollander*. It was going to take a minute to adjust, but Cliff *was* fine with it. Or at least, he would be. Eventually.

Roz shook his head, checking his empty home screen for what had to be the hundredth time in ten minutes. “He does not drink,” he said. “Besides, we cannot tell Shane you know or he will have aneurysm during game.”

Cliff snorted, squeezing his arm around Ilya’s shoulders. “Who taught you the word *aneurysm*?”

“Shane,” he answered instantly. Not joking in the slightest. “Last time someone found out about us.”

“So you’re never going to tell him I know about you two?” Cliff asked. He didn’t have the full picture of whatever *this* was between the rivals, nor what their future looked like, but hiding this information from Hollander seemed like a disaster waiting to happen. The guy had Roz heel-trained better than any coach they’d ever had, and Cliff had noticed that *before* he realized they were sleeping together.

“No, I will tell him,” Roz conceded. Smart. At least that part of their relationship had structure, even if Cliff thought the rest of it was a little messy. “I will tell him after I cook for him, draw his bath, and suck his dick. When he is too tired to yell, I whisper it and run.”

Roz smiled. Like, *genuinely* smiled. Wider and brighter than Cliff had ever seen. It was so endearing that Cliff decided to ignore the part about Roz giving a blowjob.

And Cliff did not *understand* the Hollander thing, but whatever the fuck was happening with Ilya both scared and delighted him enough that he didn't want to mess with it.

Chapter 2: Shane Hollander's Rules

Chapter Summary

Shane Hollander had exactly three pre-game rules:

1. No caffeine after 3PM.
2. No press interviews within thirty minutes of warmup.
3. No seeing Ilya Rozanov.

He had broken that third rule exactly thirty-two times since joining the league.

OR

A slightly more serious Shane POV of everything Cliff Marlow noticed.

Chapter Notes

heyyyyy...

so, yeah, I wrote Shane's pov of this. I know it's not the double date, I'm sorry. I'm hoping to get to that at some point, but I've got a (somehow) even more unhinged fic coming at some point soon.

Dani, my wonderful beta/editor, once again made this better before I posted it. Everyone say "thank you Dani." Go follow her here as [@the_navistar_carol](#) or on tumblr as [@the-navistar-carol](#)

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

Cigarettes:

Shane Hollander had exactly three pre-game rules:

1. No caffeine after 3PM.
2. No press interviews within thirty minutes of warmup.
3. No seeing Ilya Rozanov.

He had broken that third rule exactly thirty-two times since joining the league.

Thirty-three. Or maybe more. He had stopped counting after the math became depressing, because admitting he'd broken the rule only made him want to remove it — and that would

make it worse.

It wasn't superstition. It was *survival*. Ilya Rozanov got under his skin in a way no one else had ever been able to – before or after the draft.

Shane was a creature of structure. Of lines and systems and routines, all the way down to his road-mapped nervous system that lit up like a switchboard at any sense of change. Letting Rozanov into those routines would mean...

Well...

Shane already knew what happened when he let Ilya into *anything*.

It meant chaos. It meant loud noise. It meant a thumping in his chest that never seemed to go away, even when he really, really needed it to. And none of *that* was ideal for a game day. Especially not when that game day meant seeing Ilya on the ice.

So it wasn't necessarily ideal when the first thing Shane saw when Montreal's bus rolled into Boston was Cliff Marlow standing outside, smoking a cigarette like it was 1972.

Shane was young, but not ignorant. It was his second year in the league, and he knew plenty of players smoked. He knew players on his own team smoked, and the coaches pretended not to see it. The problem wasn't the *cigarette*.

The problem was Cliff Marlow. Because where Cliff Marlow went, Ilya Rozanov tended to follow like a very hot, very inconvenient obstacle. So rule number three was likely going to be broken for the thirty-fourth time.

Great.

Sure enough, the second thing Shane saw that evening was Ilya Rozanov with the startled, guilty look of a teenager who had just been caught shoplifting for the first time. He was aggressively stomping a cigarette into the concrete and flailing his hands through a cloud of smoke. *Real subtle, Roz. Truly breathtaking.*

And then Ilya *bolted* ten feet to the left like the Montreal team was the health inspector coming to make sure he specifically was not indulging.

Shane knew why he was doing it. Part of him was stupidly endeared by the idea of Rozanov trying to hide the filthy habit just so Shane would still kiss him later. It was a ridiculous, traitorous flutter in his stomach — because he and Rozanov weren't *anything* right now.

They hooked up sometimes. That was it. Kissing wasn't required — *nothing* about them was required. They could skip it. They probably *should* skip it.

But Ilya *wanted* to kiss him — *liked* kissing him. Enough so that he was making an ass of himself in front of the Boston arena.

Stupid fucking *butterflies* in Shane's stomach were the reason rule number three existed.

Shane still paused at the bottom of the bus steps, bag over his shoulder, despite telling himself not to. It really was a *pathetic* cover-up, but Ilya had never been subtle a day in his life.

“Smoking will kill you, y’know,” Shane called out, mostly because he could not believe the audacity of Rozanov trying to hide the evidence. The man was a menace. A very *talented* menace. One that Shane had made the repeated mistake of sleeping with because his talents did not end at hockey.

Also because — he would never admit this out loud — it was *fun* to tease Rozanov. Sometimes, it was too much fun.

I saw that. I know what you did. I’m still going to kiss you about it later, dumbass.

None of it was said out loud, and yet the challenge still fizzed like static under his skin. The idea that Rozanov might hear him anyway. Might make him follow up on those silent promises when they found themselves alone later.

“I am not smoking!” Rozanov shouted back with all the conviction of a toddler denying he broke a lamp.

Shane just blinked at him. Honestly, it would have been more subtle if he’d thrown a rock through the bus window. The man wasn’t even holding a damn cigarette anymore.

“I wasn’t talking to you, asshole.” Shane meant it affectionately. *Painfully* affectionately. Which was exactly why he turned away and started walking into the arena before his face had the chance to do something embarrassingly fond.

Even without looking back, he could feel the weight of Rozanov staring at him. He felt the tug of recognition as he pretended not to understand. There was always an impulse around Ilya to make sure he was on his game — that he wasn’t limping or favoring a hand or breathing wrong. To make sure he hadn’t taken a particularly bad hit at practice.

Hockey was more fun when Ilya Rozanov played his best game against Shane. At least, that was what he told himself to avoid admitting the truth. He didn’t want to think about the other reasons he might feel a pull to check on Ilya.

Shane hated that impulse.

He also never ignored it.

Fine. So he broke rule number three again. Sue him. One more violation wasn’t going to kill him. *Probably.* As long as Ilya still played a good game.

By the time he got to the visiting locker room, he already had five messages from Rozanov. Each one was a different variation *fuck off*. There was even one in Russian, though the only word Shane actually recognized was *idiot*.

He pushed off responding for longer than he should have. The teasing was fun, but he knew Ilya would be a disaster on the ice if he felt ignored. And he — both of them — wanted to

strap nothing but their best, boldest, and meanest selves into skates. So ten minutes before he was supposed to hit the ice, Shane was grinning at his phone like an idiot and telling Ilya Rozanov to make sure he brushed his teeth after the game.

And *that* — that was why rule three existed.

**

The Injuries

Shane couldn't tell you when it started. Maybe after the draft. Maybe in that hallway in Montreal. Maybe the first time he'd checked Rozanov into the boards while Rozanov chirped in Russian, laughing into Shane's ear like the whole league didn't hate them for stealing the spotlight.

But sometime in their second or third year as "rivals," Shane noticed that Ilya watched him as closely as he watched Ilya.

It wasn't the kind of watching people thought it was. Not the "I've studied every game you've ever played so I can destroy you on the ice" kind of watching. Not the *rivalry* kind.

It was... softer. Delicate. *Dedicated*.

It was the kind that meant when Shane took a hit to the ribs and pretended he wasn't hurting, Ilya skated around him in half-circles like a shark that could *smell* it.

At first, Shane didn't know how to deal with that. It felt too *big* for whatever the two of them were doing. Back then, Shane wouldn't have even called them friends. He barely knew anything about Rozanov besides the way he kissed or the way he laughed against his throat.

When it first started happening, he didn't know if Ilya had siblings. He didn't know Ilya's favorite color. He didn't know whether Ilya preferred carrots or peas.

After a while, all those things felt like easy answers, and the *watching* stopped feeling so monumental. He wasn't exactly sure when the shift was, only that it happened. They went from strangers who had sex to something more than friends, and the watching wasn't Shane's biggest concern on the ice.

Ilya was.

So Shane learned how to answer those unspoken questions whenever he got hurt, because it meant Ilya got his head back in the game.

He would nod if he was okay, tap his stick if he wasn't. He would flip Ilya a very enthusiastic middle finger if he needed him to *stop looking at me before someone notices us, you lunatic*.

He shouldn't have done it. He definitely shouldn't have *kept* doing it.

But some rules broke themselves, and he wasn't just going to ignore it after responding for years on end. At this point, the check-ins from *Dr. Rozanov, M.D. (Medical Disaster)* were

basically part of the routine Shane had so meticulously crafted for himself. If he *didn't* respond, he had no doubt in his mind that Ilya would do something stupid like skate over to the bench and ask out loud.

He told himself it was *safer* to keep the routine going.

Besides, the only person close enough to notice was Cliff Marlow. If he expected *anyone* from Boston to notice Ilya's bizarre behavior, Marlow wouldn't be it.

Marlow was a good player — reliable, tough, deceptively observant of plays — but he was also the kind of guy who named his dog “Dog.” He was *not* going to notice what Ilya was doing, and if he did, he wasn't going to jump to *oh, those internationally famous hockey rivals, best players in the world, are totally sleeping together and have been for seven years* just because he noticed Rozanov circle the ice a few times.

Shane figured it was fine. *They* were fine.

**

Face-Off

Shane didn't speak Russian. At least, not *well*.

He knew Ilya's chirps. He knew the vocabulary with a cadence of river-over-rocks that came out between clenched teeth and hot breath at the face-off. He knew the tone of Ilya's voice when he was angry versus when he was... *something else*.

Shane knew most of the Russian Ilya used in bed. He knew the terms of endearment pressed to his neck in the morning when Ilya was still bleary-eyed and waking up. He knew playful phrases that Ilya had taught him over breakfast when they had an entire day to lounge around in nothing but their socks and underwear.

So when Ilya leaned over the dot at a Montreal face-off and muttered something that absolutely *did not* belong on the ice, Shane felt his ears burn. Because *those* words were meant for Shane *alone*. Those were socks-and-underwear words.

And Shane did the single dumbest thing he could have done in that moment: he started fucking *blushing*. On the ice. At a Montreal home game. In front of both of their teams, thousands of fans, and God himself.

Ilya had never been subtle, but *Jesus Christ*, he could have given a guy some warning. There was always some kind of flirting between them at a game, but usually it wasn't *that*.

Cliff Marlow was staring at Shane over Ilya's shoulder, wide-eyed, and Shane knew he'd heard something. Luckily, Shane also knew Marlow didn't speak Russian, which was the only thing currently saving his life.

Ilya had the audacity to smirk at him, half proud and half smug, as if he'd scored a hat trick without even lifting his stick. It should've been annoying, but Shane hadn't found Ilya

annoying in a long time. Even when he *was* annoying, Shane never actually felt irritated. Not anymore. Sometimes, he wished the irritation would return in moments like these.

Shane shook his head and snapped, “Asshole,” because there were cameras and teams and *rules* that they kept breaking. Not just his own rules, by that point.

But the damage was already done. Marlow was looking at them like he’d just been handed the answer key to a very stupid test.

Shane could already feel his stomach dropping. He had felt that before, and he knew what it meant. They — **read: Ilya** — had never been subtle, but it felt particularly awful that it had been Cliff fucking Marlow to figure them out next.

The puck dropped half a second later, and Shane didn’t have the chance to spiral about what he was pretty sure had just happened. There was hockey to play, and if Marlow had any plans to say something, it wouldn’t be until after the buzzer.

Ilya could tell something was off that night. Despite months apart, they didn’t even have sex. They ate dinner and then crawled into bed because Shane felt *sick* about it. He couldn’t even bring himself to tell Ilya why he was panicking.

Marlow never said anything. Not that night, not the next day, and not months later. If he *had* seen something, he would’ve said so. That’s what Shane kept telling himself.

You didn’t need to be a genius to know Rozanov was an asshole. If he muttered something in Russian, odds were good it was something snarky. So Shane let himself believe Marlow hadn’t noticed anything — and that his own reaction hadn’t confirmed it.

**

The Fighting

Shane wasn’t a fighter. He didn’t even look like one. Fans had made entire meme compilations about how little he fought during games. Ilya’s favorite was a picture of Shane on the bench labeled **“WARNING: will cry if punched.”**

Fair. Embarrassing as hell, but fair.

It was the one part of hockey that Shane didn’t obsess over. Other players fought each other. Once every few games, a fight would break out and someone would get a black eye. It was normal, but that didn’t mean it had to be *him*. Shane was perfectly content with his bruised ribs from checks against the board, or his broken nose from taking a puck to the face.

He let Hayden and JJ do the fighting, and he stayed out of it. He was the brains of this operation. He was the *speed* that got them two Cups. As much as Shane liked to claim he was a well-rounded player, he just wasn’t the muscle of this team.

He *had* muscle. Could probably use it if he asked Ilya to teach him how to throw a punch and land it. Fighting just wasn’t his thing. He didn’t like it. Didn’t want to. It wasn’t enough of a

rule to make The List (because it was *hockey*, come on), but if there was an unwritten version...

So when a Tampa player clipped him in the jaw that season and he'd immediately popped back up to swing back with an impulse buzzing along his bones that was very much *not* in the book, the entire arena assumed he had lost his goddamn mind.

He had.

Taking on a guy of that size was just dumb. Shane left the stadium that night with a black eye, a gash on his chin, and only a vague idea of how many of the punches he'd actually thrown. All he knew was that he'd landed at least *one*, because his knuckles hurt like a bitch and Hayden had spent the entire night hovering with an ice pack.

The truth was, he'd done it because he'd watched Ilya take a brutal hit the night before — he hadn't been able to talk to him about it yet. He had gotten a text saying everything was fine, but as much as he loved Ilya, he didn't fucking believe him.

Even through the screen, Shane had seen the signs: stiff shoulder, tight jaw, the way Ilya started favoring his right side. Ilya had hidden it well, but the hit was nasty. No matter how many times he lied about being fine, Shane knew he wasn't.

He had taken that fight because Ilya hadn't been able to. Which was stupid, and dangerous, and exactly the kind of thing he kept telling Ilya to *stop doing*.

Shane had been on edge the entire game. Everyone could see it. He was playing harder than normal, and one of his goals had been sloppy enough that he wasn't entirely convinced it should've counted. By the second period, he was downright *aggressive*.

Aggressive Shane was new. Everything he did that night was retaliatory, but Shane Hollander had never done a retaliatory thing in his life, so *everyone* noticed. Especially Tampa. It was like they specifically started targeting him just to see how far he'd bend before he broke.

Turns out, he didn't have much room to bend that night.

Hazard had slammed him into the boards, and Shane shoved back without thinking. The absurdly large Tampa player had grabbed him by the jersey before he could skate away, and the next thing he knew, he was on the ice with an ache in his jaw.

The only thing he could think about was: *this is how Ilya felt*.

And suddenly his gloves were off, and he was back on his feet, and the arena had *exploded* because Shane Hollander, infamous pacifist, had just started the second fight of his entire career. He knew other players had joined in. He could feel Hayden trying to pull him away by the back of his neck like one might do to a feral cat. Shane never stopped swinging.

Two weeks later, Ilya broke Hazard's nose.

When he saw the replay of the Boston-Tampa fight, Shane felt a stupid, involuntary warmth in his chest. He wasn't supposed to like that. He definitely wasn't supposed to *love* it. But he

knew what it meant, even if the rest of the league didn't.

Later that night, Ilya had called to tell him he was suspended for two games. He had instigated the fight out of nowhere, and there weren't any more excuses Boston could make for their captain. Probably because their captain's only excuse was, "I just felt like punching him."

It was a light punishment, given the circumstances, but it still meant Ilya had to be careful if he didn't want to end up on probation. The league was lenient, but not stupid — Ilya Rozanov had made himself a liability that night.

When the fight broke out between Montreal and Boston, Shane's mind immediately went one-track. It was too soon. Ilya had been a perfectly good boy since Tampa. He played every shift with almost painful restraint because he literally couldn't afford to screw up again, and Shane was *not* about to let him screw up now.

Shane could afford to get involved. He hadn't been suspended — he hadn't even *started* his fight with Hazard. If he jumped into this one, most people wouldn't look twice, but they would *absolutely* notice if Ilya did.

Shane might as well have gone blind to everyone else around him. He just saw Ilya, who was doing his very best not to get involved and was absolutely about to do it anyway. Those signs were as obvious as his injuries: the twitch of his eyebrow, the roll of his shoulders, the way his lip pressed against his front teeth.

Getting Ilya out of the mess was surprisingly easy. Shane planted a hand against his chest and kept skating, while Ilya half-heartedly pretended to resist. They both knew it wasn't convincing, but at least the fight caused somewhat of a distraction. It was better if Ilya wasn't fighting too hard anyway — there was no reason to punish him if he never threw a punch.

**

Cliff:

The second Shane saw the news, he knew where Ilya's head would be: nowhere near Boston's locker room.

The loss wasn't unexpected, but expected pain still hurt. Boston—Ilya wanted the Cup that year more than anyone alive, and losing to LA only rubbed salt in the wound. He must have been *devastated*.

Privately, Shane wondered if he'd be able to catch a red-eye to Boston. It was only a forty-minute flight from New York, which meant he could be with Ilya by two in the morning. It would take a great deal of lying to his own team, but at least he'd be there to comfort Ilya in person.

Texts never felt like enough in moments like this, and calling only made it worse. Over the phone, he could hear the hurt in Ilya's voice too clearly. Even when Ilya insisted he was fine, it only made Shane ache more.

He was searching round-trip flights before he'd even taken off his gear. It was dumb, but they had tomorrow off. He could spend the day in Boston if he could come up with a convincing enough reason to abandon his team for twenty-four hours.

Shane didn't text Ilya first. He never did after a loss. It was easier to wait — to give Ilya the space to make his peace with it, instead of pressing him with questions he couldn't answer yet.

Even then — even though all of this was *normal* now — Shane felt a chill crawl down his spine. Something felt *wrong*. Off-kilter in a way he couldn't name yet.

And then he got the text:

Lily

Cliff knows.

Shane's heart promptly stopped beating in his chest, and he looked over his shoulder as if his teammates might be reading it. Logically, he knew none of them would figure it out. There had to be a million *Cliffs* in the world, and surely none of them would put together that *Lily* was actually Ilya.

Still, he glanced over his shoulder. Twice.

Cliff. As in Marlow. As in Boston's alternate captain. As in one of the last people in the fucking league that Shane wanted to find out about this.

Logically, Shane was aware that Ilya Rozanov must have still been hurting from his playoff crash-and-burn against LA. But logic had absolutely nothing to do with how fast he answered in a panic.

Jane

WHAT DID YOU SAY?

The answer took a full three minutes, and Shane stared at his phone as each one of his teammates made their way to the shower. He couldn't care less that the world was moving on without him — he was *here*. Stuck on this phone in this shitty locker room in New York, having a minor mental breakdown.

Lily

“He is mine.”

Shane plopped down on the bench behind him, chest tight and throat burning. He stared at the message until the edges of his vision started to blur. He didn’t know if he wanted to scream or laugh or book the next flight to Boston in the other tab. He didn’t know if he should be furious that Ilya had said it or relieved that he finally had.

What he knew — what he’d *always* known — was that when Ilya Rozanov said something out loud, he fucking meant it.

And Shane Hollander had spent the better part of eight years pretending like he wasn’t in love with the one person in the league that scared him more than any goalie, fight, or playoff game. Eight *years* of pretending. Of circling Ilya like a planet orbiting the sun, caught in his gravitational pull and just as equally unable — *unwilling* — to break free of it.

Clearly, they hadn’t been pretending very well — not if Cliff fucking Marlow was the first person in Boston to figure them out. Cliff Marlow, the guy who had *literally* named his dog “Dog.”

He typed his reply carefully, his fingers trembling too much to move any faster.

Jane

Ilya.

Jane

You didn’t have to do that.

Ilya’s reply came almost immediately, which meant he had definitely thought about this, even if he’d only been sitting with it for a moment.

Lily

I did. Cliff asked. I told truth.

Shane felt his breath catch in his throat, and he had to get it together because he could *not* be caught sobbing on the bench of this locker room. There was no universe in which he

explained that to his teammates. So he sat there, staring at the ceiling while fighting tears, and pretended his world wasn't pitching below his feet like some kind of *Edmund Fitzgerald, Part II*.

To Ilya, it was the truth. Not a chirp, or joke, or *mistake*. Just the truth. One that had probably always existed between them.

For the first time since he'd last had Ilya in his arms, Shane felt himself smile. A small, slightly terrified, *real* smile. The kind of smile only one very specific, very dramatic Russian man ever seemed capable of pulling out of him.

Shane's hands didn't shake as much when he typed his reply this time.

Jane

Okay. We'll figure it out together.

When he received Ilya's reply of *always*, Shane breathed out slowly. Sometimes it was difficult to be with Ilya — to hide and sneak around and pretend he wasn't seconds away from booking a flight and throwing himself into those arms. But most of the time it just felt like this. It felt light and warm, and those stupid butterflies in his stomach refused to settle.

He didn't have to even pretend to think about it when he switched back over to the airline's website and bought his ticket to Boston that night. He would ask Hayden to take him straight to the airport after he showered, and he'd land in Boston just after eleven. Ilya would still be awake by the time he got there — undoubtedly brooding, definitely waiting for Shane's goodnight call.

Shane broke a rule. Again.

No regrets.

Chapter End Notes

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End Notes

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