

three words, eight letters.

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/76188981) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/76188981>.

Rating:	General Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Heated Rivalry (TV)
Relationship:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Ilya Rozanov , Shane Hollander , Ottawa Centaurs Team Ensemble (Game Changers)
Additional Tags:	Fluff , Feelings , Found Family , Post-Book 6: The Long Game (Game Changers) , Canon Compliant , Comfort , Coda , Mild Hurt/Comfort
Language:	English
Series:	Part 2 of heated rivalry coda
Stats:	Published: 2025-12-22 Words: 1,845 Chapters: 1/1

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Summary

“Okay, but I have to ask... who said it first?”

Ilya tried to play it cool, a faint smirk tugging at his lips. “Who said what first?”

“You know,” Haas chimed in, voice teasing. “I love you.”

——> the Ottawa Centaurs debate who said 'I love you' first.

Notes

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

The Centaurs are out for drinks again—part of their monthly ritual, and an attempt to get away from the pressure of the competition that comes with their career. It's mandatory, no skipping, and no excuses, everyone actually has to show up so they can talk about stuff outside of hockey.

It starts out tame. Beers sweating, the background tattle of the crowded bar, someone arguing about whether pineapple belongs on pizza. Bood's already halfway through a story that keeps getting derailed by his own laughter, and Wyatt's pretending not to listen while absolutely listening. Shane leaned back in his chair, hoodie sleeves pushed up, grinning at nothing in particular. Beside him, Ilya watches with the softest smile on his face. He's happy to be there—more than happy to be surrounded with his team, accompanied by the love of his life. And yes, Shane is a Centaur now too. Ilya still almost can't believe it, that he gets to have this. *Forever.*

Somewhere between the third and fourth round of glasses, the volume goes up. They loosen, the way they always do when no one's checking the clock and no one's talking about ice time or drills. They laugh about the same topic they talked about last week, but it feels good anyway. Someone suggests karaoke and immediately gets shut down. Someone else suggests it again, louder.

The Ottawa Centaurs may not be the best hockey team in the league, but they make a pretty damn great family.

It's Coach Wiebe who clocks it first. His gaze flicks across the table, then back again, narrowing.

"Troy," he says slowly, "why are you sitting like that?"

Everyone looks.

Troy's chair is angled just a little too close to Harris'. Not touching—but close enough to be intentional. Harris is mid-sentence, hands moving as he talks, and Troy is watching him with the kind of focus he usually reserves for breakaways. He laughs a second too late at Harris' joke, then reaches for his drink at the exact same time Harris does.

Harris freezes. "What?"

Ilya squints at them, then snorts. "Wow. Did you think you were, eh, not obvious?"

"We're sitting," Harris says weakly.

"More like hovering," Haas adds.

Troy straightens, immediately defensive. "Can we not do this?"

"That's a no," Boodram says cheerfully. "Absolutely we're doing this."

The table erupts—boos, laughter, someone pounding the wood hard enough to rattle glasses. Harris' ears go red, and Troy rubs a hand over his face like he's already lost.

"Nothing about this is *subtle*," Shane says, shaking his head. He glances sideways at Ilya, eyebrows lifting just enough to answer the question circling in his mind.

Ilya catches it immediately. *Ah, that's the word I forgot—subtle*. His mouth curves, small and private, and he nods once. Shane grins like he's been handed a gold star.

"Seriously," Someone starts. It's Hayden, because he's part of this now too. Part of the family that Ilya has worked to build. Don't tell him about that though. "Leave some PDA for the rest of us, will you?"

The table howls again. Harris groans and drops his face into his hands. Ilya leans in then, and presses a long kiss to Shane's cheek, showy, and exaggerated enough to make a point.

"Keep it PG, please."

Shane laughs, tipping his head unconsciously toward Ilya before bumping their shoulders together. If anyone doubts who belongs here, it doesn't show.

Ilya knows Shane is sad about the Voyageurs, and that he wishes things would've been different. But Shane didn't deserve that. Shane doesn't deserve to get shit on just because he fell in love with someone they hated. The Voyageurs do not deserve a captain like Shane. Not after winning them cups. Not after showing up for them not only as captain, but also a friend.

But Ilya also knows that Shane is happy to be there, with him, and all of their friends. And maybe that's enough.

He can't help it, so he takes Shane's hand under the table, just as he always did before. Shane breaks whatever argument he was having with Hayden to look back at him with a questioning smile, but caresses his hand back anyway. Ilya watches him—how his freckles glowed under the reddening blush on his cheeks. Their eyes speak before Ilya can even open his mouth. *This feels good. Thank you for being here with me.*

"Ya tebya lyublyu."

Shane's then confused smile turns into a full blown one, shy and content. "I love you too."

"Alright, lovebirds," Hayden called over, leaning back in his chair with a sly grin. "We get it. You *looove* each other."

The table erupted in laughter. Ilya felt a warm, fluttering heat creep up his neck. He glanced at Shane, who was obviously more flushed than him, and for a moment, just looked at him.

Bood leaned forward, elbows on the table, eyes sparkling like he was about to uncover a secret. "Okay, but I *have* to ask... who said *it* first?"

Ilya tried to play it cool, a faint smirk tugging at his lips. "Who said what first?"

“You know,” Haas chimed in, voice teasing. “*I love you.*”

Immediately, a jumble of voices erupted. “It has to be Hollander.” “No, Roz is just more confident!” “Nah, Shane confessed first—I can already picture it.”

“Alright, kids.” Shane held up a hand, a crooked grin tugging at his lips as he looked at Ilya. “I *was* the one who confessed first, though. This guy was too busy being an asshole to even say he liked me back.”

Ilya laughed and nodded. “That... is true.” The warmth of Shane’s gaze held him in place, made him feel lighter than he had in the past hour.

Shane leaned in, still grinning. “But, technically, Ilya said it first—when he came to my cottage, after Scott Hunter came out on live TV.”

The table practically vibrated with laughter and exaggerated gasps. Ilya’s stomach did a small flip at the memory, and he found himself nudging Shane’s shoulder lightly.

“You are *wrong*, though, moy lyubimyy,” Ilya said, a mischievous spark in his eyes. He could feel Shane blink at him, confused, as if he’d just been dared to solve a riddle he didn’t know existed.

"Ouch, Hollzy doesn't remember the first *I love you*?"

The rest of the table practically leaned in at once, a chorus of “oooh” filling the space. Ilya felt the familiar mix of embarrassment and amusement.

Harris’ voice cut through the noise, insistent. “Okay, now you *have* to tell us.”

Ilya’s ears burned, a faint laugh escaping his lips as he tried to mask it. “Not really something I want to say... in front of all of you.”

Troy snorted, leaning back lazily. “What a killjoy.”

Ilya shot him a narrowed look, a tiny smirk threatening the corner of his mouth. He could *not* believe fucking *Troy Barrett* of all people was teasing him. Not today. Not *ever*, actually.

“Changed my mind. I will tell,” Ilya said, voice low, giving Shane a glance that made his pulse skip.

Shane’s brow furrowed, confusion softening into something warmer—amusement, maybe even anticipation. “Wait... seriously?” His fingers curl instinctively around Ilya’s.

Ilya’s grin widened, the familiar thrill of control paired with affection radiating through him. “Seriously,” he said. And as Shane’s eyes searched his, the rest of the table leaned in, oblivious to the tiny, perfect bubble they had carved out between them.

Ilya could remember it then. After his father’s funeral, after finally cutting ties with his brother, the tunnel had felt cold and endless. The walls seemed to stretch farther than they really did, and for the first time in months, he realized he was alone—*really alone*. His chest

ached with the sharp, hollow kind of loneliness that makes the world feel impossibly big and cruel.

But he also remembered dialing Shane's phone. Remembered the call. Remembered how the sound of Shane's voice—the *easy, warm tone*—made everything snap back into focus. For a fleeting moment, the anger and grief softened, and suddenly, everything made so much fucking sense. Because even as a police car screamed behind him in the cold Russian night, he had been so damn ready to lay his heart bare for Shane in that phone call.

"It was after my dad's funeral," Ilya said, voice low, catching Shane's eyes. "I called you. Do you remember?"

Shane's gaze softened, and he nodded. "Of course," he said, voice gentle.

"I was really sad," Ilya continued, a half-smile tugging at the corner of his lips, trying to keep the memory light for the team. "And I needed my prince charming to save me... but I was in Russia," he added, glancing at the team with a teasing shrug, "so I had to make a call. All the way to Montreal."

He chuckled faintly, remembering the way Shane had answered, calm and patient. "I was having hard time telling him how I felt, so he told me I could say it in Russian... even if he did not understand," Ilya said, and the warmth of the memory made his chest tighten slightly.

He paused, glancing at Shane. Shane's eyes, already soft, had grown glassy, and Ilya felt a small thrill of intimacy in the shared memory. "I did. I told him everything," he said, voice quieter now, almost reverent. "I said, Я так сильно тебя люблю и не знаю что с этим делать." *I'm so in love with you, and I don't know what to do about it.*

Shane's expression shifted subtly—his lips pressed together, quivering faintly. He hadn't realized at the time, hadn't known Russian well enough to understand the weight of the confession. But now... now he did. He understood exactly how heavy those words had been, how vulnerable Ilya had been in that cold, lonely tunnel, and the sheer courage it had taken to reach for him across an ocean.

The team, a little confused at the Russian, looked lost. Ilya smiled wryly. "Translation: I love you even more than hockey."

The table erupted in laughter, breaking the intensity, letting the moment breathe. But Shane? Shane didn't laugh. He couldn't. He couldn't take his eyes off Ilya—the tilt of his head, the way the memory lit up his face, the small tremor in his hands as he gestured for emphasis.

Shane's chest felt tight. He realized, suddenly and fully, that it wasn't just affection he felt for Ilya. It was gravity, a magnetic pull he orbited for years. He wanted to be there for every moment of Ilya's life, to protect it, to hold it, to hold *him*.

And so, even as the team moved on, bantering about drinks and lines, Shane's eyes remained fixed on Ilya.

It's true. Ilya had been the first one to tell Shane he loves him. The *three words, eight letters* that had haunted them both for the entire damn eight years of their... complicated mess. But it's okay, because for this one—it was not a competition.

End Notes

i'm just milking my brain atp, trying to see how many fics i can finish before ep 6 comes out.
does this count as a coping mechanism??

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