

Tinder Surprise

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Tinder Surprise

by [JulianHartley](#)

Summary

S. and Ivan are matched on Tinder, while they both use fake names for obvious reasons.

At the same time Shane Hollander, Montreal Voyageurs captain has to work with an insufferable hockey player Ilya Rozanov, who becomes a nuisance from the first meeting.

OR: Enemies in live, lovers at Tinder. But they don't know it, yet.

Notes

this is an old fic of mine (different ship, tho, pynch), but honestly i had to change almost everything except the title and the main plot, because hockey is a specific theme (?) to write

so if you have read "tinder surprise" with Ronan and Adam, i hope you'll enjoy this old but new thing

also

1) i know nothing about hockey

2) i know even less about Tinder and some mechanics and functions are probably made up

Chapter 1

S.: Important question.

S.: White shirt or blue shirt?

Ivan: it depends. are you going to church (white) or are you trying to be boring?(blue)

S.: Ehhh, I'm going to work. Kinda.

Ivan: saturday night?

S.: Yes. Kinda.

Ivan: sucks to be you

S.: I'll text u later, keep your fingers crossed that I don't spill champagne on myself.

Ivan: that would be spectacular

For more than two weeks, Shane and this man had just been talking this way - online, via Tinder.

Shane set up his profile a month, maybe two back, when Rose visited him at his apartment and decided she'd had enough of his workaholic only-hockey tendencies and he should get back to dating. Shane shrugged his shoulders. He didn't count on finding love on Tinder, but for Rose's sake he could try, maybe casually, just texting. His last relationship was long time ago, while he was still playing for an unknown team, but it fell apart when Paul announced that he was returning to England after the season was over and had no plans to renew his American visa.

After that, he was too busy with his workout, trainings and the new team, especially after he had become a captain.

So he downloaded the app, flipped through his photo gallery with a sigh, and selected one of the photos Rose had taken of him with an analog camera when she was in her vintage era. He liked the photo, maybe because he didn't look like him in it. It was a bit like the kind of hippy, artsy designs that always seemed too much to him, until his friend took an interest in it. He chose his cat as the second photo. He wouldn't want to date someone who didn't like cats, so it seemed reasonable to him.

And at that moment, he realized that he couldn't put his real name on the gay side of Tinder. It used to be no problem; he played for a team that didn't mean much in the world of hockey, and his face was only recognizable to a few fans. Now that he had become captain of the

Montreal team, the stakes were too high. In the world of professional hockey, there was no room for gay romances, coming out, and scandals.

So Shane decided to use the first letter of his name and, after consulting with Rose, decided not to reveal his identity until the potential relationship is serious enough and his trust in the other person is great enough to be able to admit who he is. This is still a big risk, ranging from the potential lover feeling lied to, to the worst-case scenario in which the trusted person is tempted by a moment of fame, in which he confesses everything to the paparazzi, attaching screenshots of messages and all the secrets associated with the relationship. However, Shane does not think that such a situation could happen, because first of all, he does not believe that he will find *anyone* on Tinder.

After considering all pros and cons, he gave his fake details: ***S., 25, Montreal.*** He thought about the description for the longest time, until he finally came up with a not-so-funny one: ***Boring by day, but can speak with birds at night.*** Then, he chose a few categories to fill in and, without giving it much thought, entered his zodiac sign, some of his interests, and a few favorite songs that could be added at the end: Tim Buckley's *Phantasmagoria in Two*, Moody Blues' *Night in white satin* and Hozier's *Angel of Small Death and the Codeine Scene*. And that's it, all set.

In Ilya's case, the story of Tinder's downloading was quite different. He was sitting on the roof of his favourite small and cameral icerink along with his friend, Svetlana, dizzy from the intense training and high from a half-smoked joint. They took turns throwing pebbles downward, trying to hit a Coke can sitting on the concrete outside. Svetlana hit his car, Ilya threw a rock under his own feet. They laughed like it was the funniest thing in the world.

"I bet I could hit the center of the can with a rock," said a confident Ilya.

"Roz, you wouldn't even hit it if it materialized five centimeters in front of your nose."

"Wanna bet?"

"Deal. If you lose, you're downloading Tinder."

Ilya laughed. She tried to set him up for a long time, since they stopped hooking up last spring, when Svetlana fall in love with some artist.

"Okay. If you lose, we're going to Marleau's house at night to scare him."

"Agreed."

Ilya stood up, closed one eye and aimed at the can. He didn't hit it. It wasn't even close. The stone landed a good few feet away and rolled toward the parking.

"Welcome to the world of online dating," sang Svetlana, getting up on her feet. "We're going home to set up Tinder for you."

Once they were at Ilya's place, he reluctantly pulled out his phone and began downloading the app. Meanwhile, Svetlana, who was hit by post-high hunger, began searching Rozanov's refrigerator, shoving anything she came across into her mouth. Two bites of lasagna left over from dinner. A handful of arugula, which she spit out into the sink. A few spoonfuls of jam. A plum, half a box of raspberries, a gooseberry, which she also spit out into the sink. Ilya tried to ignore the invasion and complete his profile. He didn't try too hard; he was convinced that he would delete the app anyway as soon as Svetlana got home. He wasn't up for love and dating right now and he never had problems with finding somebody for one night.

Still - although his appearance and manner didn't indicate it - he was a romantic and didn't believe it was even possible to find love through an app where you choose a potential partner based on a photo. There was something dehumanizing about that. So he didn't bother to choose the best photo of himself. He didn't even want to, knowing that all the attention he would receive would be related to his career and fame. Anyway, by setting his preferences for women and men, he was aware of the risks involved. And although he liked trouble, he only liked the kind that could also be kept secret. So, Ilya added only one photo, in which you can hardly see his face, except for a piece of his ear and jaw. What can be seen, however, is his naked arm, on which a small dog is sleeping. For a moment he considered typing in his real name, but decided it was too much of a commitment. Besides, his name was quite unique, here, in North America. Instead, he typed in his second name: **Ivan, 25, Boston/Montreal**. In the description he entered - how fitting for his personality - **I don't even want to be here**. At the very end he chose his preferences, both men and women.

As proof that he had fulfilled the terms of the bet, he showed his phone to Svetlana and rolled his eyes when she did blow him a kiss. Later, he threw the phone in the cutlery drawer to forget what he had just done and joined Svetlana, who had decided to make scrambled eggs from 20 eggs.

He really forgot about Tinder. He even forgot to uninstall it. That's why, when a few days later came a generic notification from the app saying *we miss you!* he was almost surprised. However, something tempted him to click on the notification. Ilya rarely read text messages, even more rarely read emails, let alone answer the phone on a regular basis. However, the Tinder notification tempted him in a bizarre way.

He sat down on a counter in his kitchen and opened the app. The first thing that popped up was a picture of a muscular guy strutting to the camera. He didn't even read his description. He immediately swiped to the left. The next few men looked similar, as if it was a trend on Tinder. Pictures from the gym, pictures of tensed muscles photographed in front of a mirror, naked chests, pictures of cars. Ilya didn't mind the cars or the muscles, but that was too boring for him. They looked too much like him.

Only after a few minutes did he realize what he was actually doing. The whole application seemed to him like a character simulator game. He was ready to close the app and delete it once and for all, but when he looked at the screen, he stopped with his finger halfway down.

A sunny man against the backdrop of a forest clearing was looking at him from the phone screen. His head was pointed upward so that the sun was coming straight down from behind him, illuminating his hair and casting a shadow over most of his face. The other part of his face was lit so that the photo was overexposed. He could see his even teeth, exposed in a smile, broad shoulders, dark hair and some freckles on his face. Ilya wouldn't be able to recognize him on the street, but he would certainly turn around if he saw such a man. He involuntarily moved his finger to see another photo. This time it was a red-haired cat, looking straight into the camera. Underneath the photos was written: **S., 25, Montreal.**

Thinking little, Ilya swiped to the right.

Shane tried to check Tinder regularly, as he had promised Rose. He had a few matches, and he was writing with one guy, but it didn't look like anything would come of it. Nick was nice, but Shane didn't feel the vibe. So he browsed through the profiles again, swiping most of them to the left. He really had no idea by what miracle people found their other halves online. Were they luckier than him, or had less inflated expectations? He promised himself that if he couldn't find anyone worth meeting, or at least talking to on the phone, within the next month, he would delete Tinder and return to his single life. He would be okay with that, dating was too risky right now, anyway.

Suddenly, a rather peculiar dark photo appeared on the screen. It looked like someone had taken it with an old phone. The quality was poor, and the rather dark background didn't help either, but the man - whose face wasn't visible in the photo, but signed himself as Ivan - had a puppy on his shoulder. The man's sharp jaw did not add to his charm, and Shane had experienced enough bully in his life, but he decided not to judge a book by its cover, even if the book defined itself as *I don't want to be here*. Shane, thinking little, moved to the right. Even if the guy was going to turn out to be a boor, he was completely entranced by the cute dog, that's it.

As soon as he swiped to the right, the screen displayed *It's a Match!* Shane opened the conversation and started typing, feeling a sudden rush of courage.

S.: Hey.

S.: Cute puppy

Ivan: fuck off

Ivan: im not into that, whatever *that* is

Ivan: i know that Tinder has also been a dating site for hook-ups for a while and I don't have problem with that, but if you're into some weird pet play then I assure you that you'll find someone faster on erotic dating sites for pervs

S.: ???

S: Do you have a stroke?

S : You literally set up a picture of yourself with a small dog on your shoulder, so I said it's cute.

S.: Unless you downloaded the photo from the internet and it's a weird kind of catfishing. Or dogfishing. Or catdogging, I guess.

Ivan; fuck

Ivan: right

Ivan: but firstly: it's not "a dog", but Anya, secondly, it's not it, she's a lady. and thirdly, yes, she is cute

Ivan: sorry for calling u a horny perv

S.: You're forgiven.

S.: So, you are here for love?

Ivan: is it a mock or

S.: Just curious. Because I don't know what I'm doing here.

Ivan: same

Ivan: so you're fishing for animals you could pet?

S.: Yeah, definitely.

S.: My cat says hi.

Ivan: hi cat

Ivan: Anya says hi too

S: So... Are you from Russia?

Ilya thinks about an answer. He's pretty sure he shouldn't say anything about Russia, it would be easier to lie. Safe. This S. - whatever is his name - could someday connect the dots. Ilya doesn't know him and doesn't trust him. And this guy won't see the difference between accents, if they'll talk someday. So, yes, lying it is.

Ivan: Poland. Mom was from Belarus, hence the name.

S.: Well, I'm from Canada.

Ivan: boring

Ivan: are you really named after a letter?

S.: Yeah, you have to make a snake hiss if you want to call me

Shane thinks about a fake name. Something similar, but maybe even close to the real one.

S.: But you can call me Sean.

Ivan: okay, sssssean

And that's more or less how their conversations have been going for the past two weeks. There was a bit of flirting and teasing and even more banter, but mostly ordinary conversations, the kind people have at the beginning of the acquaintance. Shane and Ilya discussed movies, in which they were pretty much in agreement, and music, which divided them to the point that Ilya couldn't respond quickly enough to the ever-new insults coming from Shane. Well, maybe there was Ilya's fault in this. He sent some EDM in the middle of the night, and Shane turned it on full volume on his headphones. They talk about Ilya moving out from Boston in couple of weeks and living in two places for a while. Shane says he never really moved out.

Ilya sometimes sent him pictures of sunrises, visible from his window and photos of dogs he saw while walking with Anya. Shane mainly sent pictures of the cat. In response, Ilya would send even more photos of Anya in all sorts of strange places, from the sink to the hood of the neighbour's car. They also talked about cars. Shane used to help his father with his car in high school, and Ilya treats his sports car like a first-born son, so that's another of the topics they discuss. Ilya asked: *what's wrong when the car makes that sound: khhhhhhshhhfffff*. Shane answered: *tuberculosis*.

Shane still hasn't seen Ilya's face either, but he has a feeling that whatever he looks like, Shane would be pleased.

This evening a party is held in New York, to celebrate the new hockey season. There are lots of players, both current and retired, quite a few coaches from various teams, and even more executives who manage the world of professional hockey.

These types of galas, from award ceremonies to simple celebrations, are not Shane's favorite part of his career, but he knows that they are an opportunity to network and show a different side of himself than the one he shows on the ice. Thanks to these types of events, his mother has been securing sponsors and advertising opportunities for him for years. What's more, thanks to such a gala, he was able to negotiate the terms of his transfer to a bigger team a few years ago. So, that's why, despite his enormous discouragement and fatigue, he stands in the room where sports talks are taking place and watches, hoping that no one will try to accost him for the next few minutes. But suddenly his flute is empty.

He's on his way back, somewhere between the bar, where he went for a refill and the conference room, when he accidentally bumps into a muscular man standing in the aisle. The man manages to keep his balance, but lets the phone out of his hand.

Shane spills the champagne on himself and tries to grit his teeth to keep from exploding. The man may turn out to be his teammate or even a coach one day, so it's better to pretend nothing happened than to have problems later. However, the man turns around and it quickly becomes clear that he is far from anyone who could coach. He has piercing gaze that would make even a sociopath cry and jaw so sharp it probably could cut. And Shane obviously knows him. But Shane doesn't know him *personally*. On the ice, he is ruthless, mean, and provocative. Off the ice, he could be the sweetest person in the world.

"Do you have two left feet or a vision defect, Hollander?" growls the man with strong eastern accent, picking up his cell phone.

Shane tries not to explode. The *meanest* one then, Ilya fucking Rozanov.

"Sorry, I didn't notice you," he says.

"A vision defect, then," Rozanov snorts.

"You're standing in the aisle," Shane replies.

"I'm standing in the aisle of the United States, the land of freedom," he rolls his tongue on the *r* letter.

"What's your problem?" Shane really doesn't understand why he is forcefully continuing the argument. Sure, they are rivals. On the *ice*. *Only*.

"I have such a fucking problem that I don't want to be here, I don't want to speak with Americans nor boring Canadians, and I don't want anyone to touch me, whether the fuck they bump into me by accident, or poke me, or fuck knows what else."

"Ooooh, then I'm sorry I touched your sacred body with my dirty arm!"

Shane knows that he let himself be provoked, and the whole argument is childish. Rozanov, however, looks as if arguing is his hobby.

"Didn't your mother teach you to dress nicely for a party?" Ilya asks. "You have a stain here."

Then, he points his finger at Shane's shirt, which has a light, wet champagne stain on it.

"Didn't your mother teach you that sometimes it's worth letting go? It's something they teach in kindergarten."

"Not a fucking word about my mother."

Shane feels like adding *it was you who started it*, but then he quickly realizes that would lower the level of the argument even further, somewhere to the third grade of elementary school.

"Ilya, that's enough," a familiar voice suddenly interrupts them.

Shane turns around and sees Cliff Marlow, Rozanov's teammate. Good player, decent guy. And somehow he can tame Rozanov, because he snorts again, throws one last angry look at Shane and storms his way out as quickly as possible.

"I'm sorry about him, Hollander," Marlow says. "He's pretty cranky, and today... let's just say he was forced to come here, while he had some other stuff to deal with."

"It's fine," mumbles Shane, then heads to the bathroom to minimize the damage done by the champagne.

Shane returns to the hotel room an hour or two later, tired and frustrated. He pulls out his phone to immediately text Ivan.

Sean: I hated this.

Sean: I was bored, the room was stuffy, I lost my only free evening of the week, and on top of that there was a fucking asshole there.

Sean: There is no point in telling you the whole story, I try not to accumulate negative emotions, but fuck, some people have no social skills.

Ivan immediately writes back.

Ivan: don't even tell me, i met a man that i cannot stand today

Ivan: i also overreacted a little, I transferred some anger related to family problems to this guy, but I can't stand this type of people, they pretend to be better than they really are, and they are just plain, boring non playable characters

Sean: I'm sorry.

Ivan: yeah, nevermind. you would hate him

Sean: Probably.

Sean: Anyway, tell me what is Anya doing? I need some distract.

Ivan sends a video of Anya trying to eat a piece of furniture. An evening is much better now.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

for the context; sometimes i use Shane/Ilya names during narrative, sometimes i switch and use Sean/Ivan - it depends on whose POV I am writing mostly

also, english is not my first language, so sorry for any mistakes!

Ivan and Sean do not bring up the subject of that evening. Shane figured he probably wouldn't meet Rozanov soon. Shane lived in Canada, Ilya in Boston. They had a couple of matches scheduled, but players rarely talked outside of the icerink. So he was safe.

Sean conversations with Ivan return almost to the usual track - they continue to send each other recordings of their animals and links to songs, Ivan sends him a photo of his garden, where he finally planted some herbs and in response, Shane only attaches a pixelated photo of the piles of papers on his desk with the caption: *I'd love to touch the grass, too*. His mom really cannot say no to a sponsor and then Shane has to deal with the taxes, since he doesn't trust anybody, but himself with it.

Ivan, however, becomes less talkative. He doesn't joke around as much as he used to, he pesters Shane less often with silly taunts, and just writing back begins to take up more and more of his time. Shane tries not to see this as a loss of interest on the part of the other man, but at the same time his analytical mind cannot find any other reason why Ivan should behave differently. They both were pretty busy during the days, but late evenings were theirs.

Finally, after a few days, Shane decides to confront his feelings and suspicions. A few years earlier, he wouldn't have been able to ask directly, but years of talking with media have taught him that running away from questions won't make problems solve themselves and answers will not come from nowhere.

Sean: Are we ok?

Sean: I mean, I can leave you alone. It's just Tinder.

Ivan: waht

Ivan: what?*

Ivan: where did you get that assumption from

Sean: Eh.

Sean: To put it bluntly, I have a feeling that you got bored, or you decided that it doesn't make sense, or you met someone else, which is totally fine, you know, it's Tinder. But if that's the case, just let me know and I won't expect anything.

Ivan: first: you're the only person I've swiped to the right at all, second: I don't know if it makes sense, we've known each other for what, a few fucking weeks, so I'll let it flow for now, third: wtf man

Ivan: is it because I don't write back as before?

Sean: Yes, but also... It's just that when you do write back, it's often just a picture, or a haha that I don't know what to write back, or a few words that I don't know how to write back either.

Ivan: I have a lot of shit on my mind lately

Ivan: told you, i was moving out and living here and there, sharing my time between boston and montreal

Ivan: and i have some problematic family stuff

Ivan: actually, that's an understatement

Ivan: they want

Ivan: sorry, clicked too early

Ivan: they still want my money, because i make a lot of money in america

Ivan: and in the same time they want to disinherit me

Ivan: and i know i dont visit them often, but half of the stuff belonged to my mama

Ivan: and i want these things, her photos and trinkets and sentimental shit

Sean: WHAT?

Sean: Sorry, this is nosy, but since you are a son how can they wipe you off the will?

Sean: i know a lawyer, if you need help, he can take a peek at the documents.

Ivan: i have a lawyer, too but she isn't Polish, she doesn't know the law and it might be difficult since I live here since i was a kid.

Ilya almost made a mistake, his first mistake. He almost has typed Russian, instead of Polish

Ivan: they want to call it negligence and “blatant ingratitude,” which in my country is enough to disinherit somebody

Sean: This may not be the best time, but maybe you would like to talk on the phone?

Not even a minute passes and Shane gets a row of digits in response. He immediately calls. A hushed voice answers him. He sounds like he's crying or trying not to wake someone up. He has an eastern European accent, but tries to hide it.

It doesn't sound like Russian, nor Polish, more like a poor attempt at scottish accent. But Shane doesn't know that Ilya is really trying to sound like not-Ilya, because he's probably well-known in Canada, and so is his accent.

"Ivan?" asks Shane. His voice is much more withdrawn than during live conversations. Yuna, his mother always used to joke that, due to the strange anxiety caused by having to talk on the phone, Shane's voice would rise a few tones, becoming more shy and polite, completely distorted.

"Yes. That's me."

"Hi."

"Hello."

"You don't even know how bad I feel about the fact that you've been worrying about your family thing all this time, and all I could think about was myself and the fact that you were ignoring me."

In response, he hears something like an attempted laugh.

"I probably would have thought so too," he says.

"Are you sure you don't need legal help?"

"No, I'm trying to find a lawyer there, in R- in Poland," he replies. "But I'm not sure it will help. They want to prove that I'm not taking any interest in family and I only send them money to brass them off. Which is a lie. I do everything I can to make their lives easier and better. And I don't want the home or any expensive shit. Only my mom's things, like her diary or photos. She died suddenly, without a will, so legally it all belongs to my father now. And he is sick. Alzheimer. So my brother controls him, my dad is completely under his influence."

"You don't need a will for children to inherit from their parents. They shouldn't be able to cut you off completely. The problem might be your brother, though, but you *have to* get something. Like, a compromise, your lawyer should negotiate or..."

"It's more complicated than that," Shane hears footsteps, as if Ivan is walking around the house and talking. "Because I know that my brother doesn't care about my mom's belongings. He would have taken it years ago, if he would want to. He just want to piss me off. Probably because I said I won't sponsor his whims. Now I have to find a lawyer and wait."

"All right. Would you rather talk about something else, or look for a solution?"

"We won't do anything about it. You can tell me how you liked the movie I recommended to you, though."

Shane loosens up a bit and somewhat reportingly begins to list point by point what he liked about the film Ivan recommended. Later they decide to play fuck, marry, kill, bickering every round. Shane says he won't forgive Ilya for choosing Cillian Murphy over Kate Winslet. Ilya promises to block Shane's number when he decided to marry River Phoenix instead of Taika Waititi. They only agree on Tove Jansson, whom they'd both marry, even though Shane declares it would be a white marriage (which would make sense, given Tove's sexual orientation).

They end their conversation relatively early. Before bed, Shane gets one last message, this time in the form of a text message:

Ivan: thank you

Ilya wakes up and knows he's late. Even if he skipped breakfast, coffee, brushing his teeth, texting Sean and getting dressed, he would still be more than 40 minutes too late. He curses himself in spirit for deciding to lie down on the couch for a nap when he returned from the gyn in the morning. He rarely decided to get an extra few dozen minutes of sleep after his usual workout, but this time he decided to lie down for just five minutes. Five minutes turned into fifty, and thus he was late for a photoshoot.

So, he quickly puts on his shirt, picks up crackers on the run and, ignoring the phone that had been ringing for several minutes (displaying the caller's name on the screen: Papa Bear (do not answer) hastily sets off.

The coach is waiting in the parking lot. He is almost red with anger and nervously walks back and forth, holding his cell phone to his ear. He lifts his head when he spots a familiar car, hides the phone and - yes, it's possible - turns even redder.

"Rozanov," he says through clenched teeth as Ilya gets out of the car. "You had one fucking job."

"Better late than never," he says.

"Sometimes when I look at you I'd rather never."

"I can still go home."

"Don't you even fucking dare. Give me the keys."

"Excuse me?" Ilya clenches his fist.

"I don't know if another stupid idea will come to you in the middle of the photo session, so for God's sake, give me the car keys. If you run away on foot it will be easier for me to catch you."

"For your information, this duet photo shoot was mine idea. Last thing before you will sell me to Canadians. A souvenir for you to look at, when I am no longer with Bears."

"You wanted to transfer."

"Yeah. Easier to get a citizenship in Canada."

"We will miss you, you know. Even when you're a stubborn, late asshole. Now, get dressed. Hollander waits and he is even more pissed off than me."

"Does he know I will be there?"

"Not yet."

Ilya smirks.

"Awesome."

Shane was sure that the photo shoot, which was to take place at the ice rink, was a solo session organized by his mother for a sports magazine. It was just a regular photo shoot, promoting the new hockey season, nothing out of the ordinary.

So when he arrives five minutes early and hears that his partner is not there yet and is not answering his phone, he is both angry that no one told him and stressed. Posing was no problem for him until he had to do it in company. Then his poses became awkward, his face tightened like a stone mask, and his muscles stiffened. However, his coach and photographer refuse to reveal who the mysterious partner will be. Shane can only guess that it is someone from the Boston Bears, since their coach is present at the ice rink.

A quarter of an hour passes, then another. Finally, the Bears' coach leaves, still holding the phone to his ear. He's gone for five minutes, ten, until finally...

"No, *no no no no*," Shane mumbles to himself, seeing an already familiar silhouette.

However, Shane has no way to escape or negotiate. Before he can move, Ilya skates to the center of the rink and strikes a pose similar to Shane's, imitating the face-off moment.

"You look pretty, Hollander."

"Shut the fuck up. What are you even doing here?"

"Photo shoot, I think? My idea."

"Your... What?"

"Don't be surprised, I wanted to meet before my transfer."

"What?!"

"Boys!" the photographer yells. "You'll gossip later, we have a job to do!"

Shane has no choice but to hold back all the questions that are on the tip of his tongue for the next few dozen minutes and focus on the task. He mechanically poses according to the photographer's instructions, striking one pose after another, aware that his face must look awful. However, he is unable to give more of himself, not at a time when the specter of Ilya Rozanov joining his team looms large.

"What are you doing here?" asks Shane, as they are finished.

"Photo shoot. Focus, Hollander, we've already established that."

"You know what I mean, Rozanov."

"Well, I am joining Voyageurs, that's for now. Later, I'm taking over your captaincy. Watch your stool, Hollander."

Ilya walks away down the corridor, to the locker room, satisfied that he managed to get Shane off balance. Shane locks himself in the bathroom and tries all the methods of calming himself he knows to keep from exploding.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

I have no idea how the law works in Canada, the US, or Russia, but I made up a lot of things to make Ilya's court battle make sense in the context of his transfer to Montreal. You have to forgive me.

And as usual, english isn't my first language, so please be gentle.

I appreciate kudos and comments, enjoy!

Shortly after the photo shoot, and then after talking to Rozanov, from whom Shane learned nothing, the man tries to find his club's coach. He looks for him in the parking lot, in the stands, and in all accessible areas of the building, but finds no one except the cleaning staff and a man refilling the Gatorade in the vending machine. Shane tries to call, but after the third missed call, his mind begins to tell him that the coach is deliberately ignoring him.

Hollander returns to his apartment, takes a ginger ale out of the fridge, and stares blankly at his cell phone, which he left on the coffee table. He wonders if he should inform his parents about the player's transfer. No, not the *player*: Ilya fucking Rozanov. Secondly, he wants to contact his teammates as soon as possible and break the tragic news to them. He's just not sure if this whole mess isn't another nasty joke by Rozanov, who wants to cause chaos. Joint photo shoots or commercials featuring players from such competitive teams as Montreal and Boston were rare, but not unrealistic. Therefore, after weighing all the pros and cons, Shane decides not to call his mother or Hayden that night and instead visits the coach in his office at the rink first thing in the morning, before practice, to find out if Ilya's words yesterday were just another of his antics or Shane's death sentence.

The building where Shane's team trains is huge. A huge ice rink surrounded by stands. Several large locker rooms connected to a shower area, a section for fans, a gym, and several smaller rooms that can be used as a temporary coach's room or meeting room. In fact, concerts are held here during the off-season, which only confirms the monumentality of the building.

And yet, by some fucking miracle, Shane met Rozanov more than a half dozen times that day.

This is what Shane feared most. He couldn't come up with any explanation that would justify Rozanov's presence at the ice rink in Montreal, not when the man trained and lived in Boston, hundreds of miles away. But let's start from the beginning.

The first encounter that day is the most shocking, but also logical, if Ilya is indeed transferring to the team captained by Shane. The man knocks on the coach's door, then he hears *come in!*, opens the door and sees none other than Ilya fucking Rozanov leaning against the wall, right next to the door to the room.

Shane's body is paralyzed for a moment, his ears start to ring, and a feeling of intense heat hits his face. Sure, he tried to prepare himself for the possibility of meeting Rozanov again, but subconsciously he hoped it was just a joke. That he would walk into the coach's office, ask about the situation, and hear the laughter of a man who would never even consider taking someone onto his team who, just a moment ago, was the captain of the team with which the Voyageurs had the biggest feud.

Now there was no point in denying reality. Ilya was standing just a few inches away, a cynical smile on his lips and a whole set of team gear under his arm, from a Voyageurs jersey, to a blue helmet.

It takes less than half a minute for Shane to finally recover from the initial wave of shock and numbness. He opens his mouth, closes it again, and opens it once more, knowing that there is no point in pretending to be polite.

"I guess you like standing in the aisle, huh?" asks Shane, finally paving his way inside the office.

Ilya's shoulders, however, are wider and take up the entire space, from doorframe to doorframe.

"Password?"

"Excuse me?"

"You have to give the password if you want to enter."

"You can't be serious. Move over Rozanov, some people *really train in here*."

"You don't know the password, you don't get in. But you can possibly... buy a ticket to the office."

Shane is already tired, frustrated and has no desire to play games with Ilya. In addition, the coach is on the phone and is not even aware of what a terrible asshole his apparently-new-player is at the moment. *At any moment*. However, something tells Shane that he should ask about the price of entry.

“Mhm, what do you want in return?” asks Shane, while trying to make eye contact with the coach.

“HMMMMMMMMMMMM,” Ilya drags out the proclamation and scratches his chin, as if he is actually thinking. “Tell me one of your secrets.”

“Mr. Rozanov,” suddenly, *at last*, the coach appears just behind his back.

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

The coach clenches his teeth. He is furious that the new player is humiliating him in front of the team’s captain. Shane feels uncomfortable, but finds it interesting, that their coach doesn’t want Ilya in the team, either.

“Rozanov,” he repeats. “Why don't you take a walk down the hallway a couple of times, eat an apple, and go whine about gasoline prices at the kiosk next door.”

“I’m good.”

“That wasn't a request.”

Ilya growls something through clenched teeth, but leaves, throwing Shane one last look.

“Hollander, you stay. I owe you an explanation.”

Shane is still standing in the doorway, unsure of his own situation at this point. He won't be traded to another team, will he?

“As you've noticed, Ilya Rozanov has joined our team,” the coach lets out a weary sigh and combs through the remaining hair on his head. “No one is happy about this transfer. Not us, not Ilya, not the Bears, and probably not the entire hockey world when they find out that the Boston fans' favorite player is no longer loyal. But hockey isn't everything we think it is.

Rozanov has his own personal... stuff, maybe he'll tell you when you stop feeling the need to compete. Moving to Canada was simply a best option. A man from outside North America is first and foremost an immigrant, and only then a hockey player. I know you're not happy, and the guys on the team are going to be furious. There will be a small scandal, and for a while, everyone, us and the Bears, will be in the spotlight, and the games will be a little awkward. But it's the only way out of the situation Rozanov is in right now. Today at practice, I'll tell the rest of the guys about it, and Rozanov will watch our training from the stands. Later, in a week or so he'll join you on the ice."

"Why am I finding out so late?" Shane can't hide his anger.

"For a long time, we didn't know if Ilya would be transferring to us or to Ottawa. Besides, the fewer people who knew until the end, the better. We didn't want the information to leak to the press or affect how the team plays and trains."

"When was the transfer to us confirmed?"

"Hollander. It really doesn't matter. I'm just asking you, to accept Ilya into the team and not treat him like a stranger."

"Rozanov *is* a stranger!"

"But he won't be for long. I don't want him to be a loner, okay? Coach's orders."

Shane grits his teeth and grabs the doorknob.

"See you at training, Hollander. In three hours, I want to see you positive. Go to the gym if you want to be angry."

The next of their encounters is brief, though enough to catch Shane off-balance. Again. After the meeting with the coach Shane decides to do something he has indulged in from time to time, though still not very often, because of his strict diet— a sweet treat. Nothing elaborate, a small cinnamon roll in the cafe nearby. He just... deserved it. Shane feels that after this morning from hell - and with the prospect of more equally hard days to come, by the way - he deserves to be treated.

So he leaves the building, and *of course*, there's Ilya sitting on the bench outside the door with his phone in one hand and a cigarette in the other. He hasn't had time to notice Shane yet, so Hollander sees this as a good opportunity to get a closer look at the man. His face is relaxed, looking less combative than usual, and the shadow of a smile is discernible on his

lips. His fingers tap on the keyboard, stopping every now and then, tapping again. Shane doesn't know who Rozanov is writing to, but he already feels sorry for the poor sod.

And this is the moment when Ilya notices him. Shane feels his face flush as he is caught in the act. If he had been smoking a cigarette or talking to someone, he would have had an excuse for why he stopped in front of the door. However, he stood solely to look at Rozanov, and the latter is well aware of this, as he raises an eyebrow and settles into a pose with his hands spread out.

“Take a picture, it lasts longer.”

Shane clenches his fists and turns back to the building. Suddenly he's not hungry anymore. He goes to the gym, because the coach is right - it's the best solution for an anger.

Then, they meet in the restroom. Twice in a row.

The first time, Shane enters the restroom, because before the workout he has had a bottle of water and quite naturally, like a healthy person, needs to use the restroom. Too bad for him, when he enters the room, Rozanov is sitting on the windowsill and smoking a vape pen with the window ajar.

“You can't smoke in here,” Shane says, then bites his tongue. He should ignore Ilya's presence and not accost him. It's too late now. Ilya turns away from the window, and that mischievous, mocking smile appears on his face.

“Are you following me of your own accord, Hollander, or did the coach send you?”

“You must be a special case since your coaches keep you on a leash and tells people to watch over you so you don't get off the chain.”

“It's not me, who is the special case with his obsession with control. By the way, are you going to pee or are you waiting me to let you?”

Shane doesn't respond. Ignoring Rozanov's mumbling, he walks over to the urinal and unzips his zipper. He really hopes Ilya has already gone back to looking through the window and vaping, rather than staring at him, well, at a time like this.

“Remember to wash your hands, Hollander,” Ilya speaks up as he hears the distinctive sound

of the zipper being fastened.

As Shane turns on the tap, he hates the feeling that comes over him. He feels as if he is actually fulfilling Rozanov's command.

When they meet in the toilet the second time, the situation is reversed - it's Ilya who goes inside while Shane is already there.

“Bladder problems, Hollander?” mocks Rozanov, taking a seat on the windowsill. “Or are you addicted to masturbation?”

Shane is not in the restroom to pee again, absolutely not. This time he went there because he felt overstimulated, angry and couldn't focus. So he decided to help himself the only way he could now. He puts his wrists under cold water for the second time that day and waits until the noise in his head subsides. Shane liked to think of it in a symbolic way, as if water would wash away all negative emotions. Unfortunately, at a moment like this, when Rozanov is still yapping over his ear, even icy water isn't helping.

As he exits the restroom, ignoring Ilya, two thoughts accompany him. Firstly, the next few days will be hell. Secondly, he will have to start using the bathroom on the second floor.

Of course, the next time Shane sees Rozanov, the man is too far away to make another snide remark. Hollander skates onto the ice and immediately looks up at the darkened stands in search of a pair of sharp, malicious eyes. But Rozanov doesn't look at Shane. He is typing on his phone again, fully focused.

Shane's team still doesn't know, and the secret weighs on him like a ball and chain. He couldn't join in any of the conversations in the locker room, let alone smile at any of the jokes. Hayden immediately notices the change in his friend's behavior, but Shane just shakes his head and positions himself on the ice, ready to warm up. He has no idea when, or if, the coach will tell the rest of the boys that the enemy is watching the practice. No, not the enemy. *A new team member. Fuck.*

“Boys,” says the coach after their warm up, and Shane knows this is it. The moment before tragedy. The minute before the iceberg is spotted, the silence before the alarm siren, the last heartbeat before the explosion. “We have a new player joining us for the upcoming season.”

The tension on the players' faces is probably noticeable even from the last, furthest seat in the stands. The men exchange glances, begin to whisper and look around.

“I ask you to remain... calm. We have a few practices ahead of us with the old lineup, the new player will only be observing, and only in a few days...”

“Okay, it's always the new player, the new player, just tell us who it is already!” Drapeau shouts, interrupting the coach's speech, who is still carefully choosing his words, as if he had been practicing them in front of a mirror.

Shane closes his eyes, still unsure of what will happen when the coach says the name.

“Ilya Rozanov.”

There is an explosion. First silent, then loud.

Someone lunges forward in anger, another player throws his helmet on the ice. Everyone is shouting, one over the other, gesturing and waving their hands. There are probably more swear words than there are ordinary words in a decent English dictionary. There are also swear words in French. Comeau shouts a single sentence in Russian - Shane is convinced it is an insult, probably the only sentence the man knows in Russian, and one he surely learned from Rozanov himself.

Shane stands paralyzed on the ice and only raises his head toward the stands, where an amused Rozanov is standing, whom the rest of the team has already noticed.

Ilya gives them his middle finger. The coach yells again. He calls a break, during which no one is allowed to leave the ice, for fear that the players will go and fight with Rozanov in the stands. After returning, things are not any better. It is the worst training session in history.

“I knew you were fucked up,” says a voice behind Shane.

After practice, Shane didn't go to the locker room; he didn't want to know what must be going on inside. Instead, he headed in the opposite direction, to the soda machine for a ginger ale. Now, behind his back stands Rozanov and crinkles his eyebrows. He's waiting for

Shane's response. Moments later, however, Ilya opens his mouth again and that's where his tactfulness ends.

"Are you one of those fuckers who likes sweet mocktails? I might have guessed."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Rozanov shrugs his shoulders while clicking the Coca-Cola on the vending machine.

"Ilya Rozanov, Russian spy, transmitting to base. Log entry number 81: the target is addicted to masturbation and sugar. Possibly bladder problems. Manifests voyeuristic tendencies."

Shane opens his mouth to say something, but at that exact moment Ilya interrupts again.

"Move over, Hollander. *Some people here are trying to train in here.*"

And then, he is gone.

Before five o'clock Shane reaches home. His stomach is growling, but he doesn't have the strength to prepare food for himself. He is mentally exhausted, doesn't know where he dropped his phone, and wants to write to Ivan. With a sigh, he reheats the leftover pasta from two days ago for himself, pulls his phone out of his bag and looks at the screen for the first time that day.

21 unread messages from: Ivan

For a moment, Shane thinks something has happened. He puts down his fork and immediately scrolls through the messages with his finger to do a cursory check to see if everything is okay in relation to his father's will and the lawyers. When it turns out that most of it is just Ivan's chatter and rants about his work (whatever he does) Shane goes back to his pasta.

Fifteen minutes later, he lies down on the couch to read all the messages carefully. Shane doesn't even know he's answering all the messages - only in his head - as if Ivan can hear him.

Ivan: good fucking morning

Good morning to you, too.

Ivan: I know you're probably already at work, I'm just on my way to meet my destiny (finally finished with my move)

At least your destiny is not Ilya fucking Rozanov tormenting you.

Ivan: I report that the first confrontation behind me, the number of people I brought out of balance: one (1)

Number of people who brought me out of balance: one (1)

Ivan: oh no, the fucker is here

The lawyer?

Ivan: i hate my new coworkers, especially the one i met a couple weeks ago, you remember, the npc one

Ivan: if you had to choose between fighting one dragon-sized armadillo or a hundred armadillo-sized dragons what would you choose????

I don't know, armadillos exist, dragons don't. But if I had to choose a hundred dragon-sized dragons or one Rozanov-sized Rozanov, I would choose the dragons.

Ivan: I met that idiot again.

Ivan: some people have strange eating and drinking habits, but maybe it's just canada

Ivan: maybe I'll climb to the roof of the building to see if I can see my new home from here

Ivan: i can't see it, I could expect, it's about a half hour away

Shane you need to calm down, you can't think about throwing Rozanov off the roof.

Ivan: man, fun spoiled, fucker stopped responding to my taunts

Ivan: I'm about to have a meeting with a lawyer, i didn't tell you but we have a solution, i tried to keep it private to not jinx it

Ivan: but it's almost like psychotherapy 2.0

Ivan: psychotherapy was cheaper, tho

Ilya Rozanov should take Ivan's example and go to therapy too.

Ivan: I have a music recommendation for you: *[link]*.

Ivan: DONT TURN IT ON IN PUBLIC

Ivan: fuckkk, I ruined the joke with a spoiler

Ivan: wonder what you're doing now since you're not writing me back, maybe you don't exist and are a figment of my imagination...

Ivan: just watched the movie you recommended to me (in between tormenting this guy and reviewing notes from a lawyer I don't understand)

Ivan: it was ok I guess, I was hoping for a romance between the two guys tho

Ivan: i have movie recommendation for you: the devil's advocate

Ivan: i'm bored out of my fucking head

Ivan: skull* i checked the sentence

Only after reading all the messages - and answering them only in his own head - does Shane realize that he still hasn't written back and is just smiling stupidly into the phone. He's never gotten so many messages in a row, and Ivan was clearly thinking about him for most of the day. Shane wonders if he should go over each of the messages in turn, or send one longer one, until he reminds himself that after all, he might as well call.

Sean: Hey, I just received your messages, I had a terrible day at work. Do you want to talk?

Not five minutes pass and his phone buzzes, notifying him of a new message.

Ivan: m in the car, gonig to a mting with a laweyr, later? il call u whn im don

Sean: Are you driving and texting?

Ivan: ys

Ivan: flttering, isnt it?

Shane - apparently more responsible than Ivan - doesn't write back the last message, not wanting to distract the other man. Shane decides to close his eyes for a moment, feeling how - still - each of his tissues pulsates.

He must have fallen asleep. Shane still feels like his body is sleeping off all the jetlags. He is awakened by the steady buzzing of his phone. The screen displays the name of the caller: **Ivan**.

“Hey,” says Shane.

“Hi.”

Ivan's voice is again hushed, as if he's hiding or trying not to wake someone.

“Did they lock you in the broom closet, or are you hiding under the covers so your wife won't hear you talking to your Tinder lover?”

“Tinder lover... We're running into the future, yes?”

“Shut up.”

“Why did you ask if I'm hiding?”

“You always have a hushed voice when we talk.”

“After being an asshole all day, I like to talk quietly,” says Ilya, who can't just admit that he's changing his accent and voice to stay unrecognizable.

“Aw, man, I feel so special now.”

“Don't flatter yourself. You have an french accent, sometimes.”

“I hope it doesn't bother you. My mum used to say I sound diffrent through phone,” Shane replies, unsure how to treat Ivan's remark. “But one thing at a time, I have to answer your text messages: first of all, I'm sorry you don't like your new workplace and especially that you met that asshole. Secondly, I wouldn't want to fight dragons because they would burn me in a second, but I wouldn't want to fight armadillos because they're cute. As for food and

beverage habits, I totally agree. What's next... Don't go up on the roofs of tall buildings, because I like to talk to you, and maybe when we meet, all your limbs will come in handy if they're not broken...”

“Are we running into the future again?”

“Shut up. I'm not going to turn on the song you sent me, you're guilty yourself of spoiling your own joke. And I saw the Devil's Advocate, you thought who was my gay-awakening?”

“Fair. It's funny, because my gay-awakening, well, bi-awakening was Keanu, too. You look a bit like him.”

“You don't know what I look like.”

“You look like Keanu in your Tinder photo. Even if I couldn't see much.”

“You on yours like a recidivist. Except puppy.”

“Asshole.”

„Pot met the kettle. Have you driven anyone else off balance?”

“Other than my lawyer? No.”

"American lawyer or European lawyer?"

"My usual lawyer. He did the research and contacted his friend in Europe."

“And you said you’ve found a solution?”

Ivan takes a deep breath and sighs.

“The lawyer says that from a legal point of view I shouldn't worry. I send them money, so they can't say I abandoned them.”

“And from a non-legal point of view?”

“From an non-legal point of view, it's not the court that will decide, formally. Everyone will be bribed, the judge, the jury, not much can be done in this case, since my father and brother are in the police."

“And what do you have to do to get them on your side? I mean, how could you convince them?”

Shane starts walking around the apartment, as if trying to solve a case.

"First, I need a second citizenship. I don't understand why, but apparently if I am a legal citizen of another country and I still send money, it is considered... decent, caring. It is easier to obtain citizenship in Canada than in the US, which is why I moved. So theoretically, if we can speed up the process and I will continue to finance my dad's treatment until he dies, the court may decide that I deserve the estate. At this point, the lawyer will step in and say that I am actually giving up my apartment, my rights to the land, and so on, and that I only care about my mother's small belongings, so there should be no problem. The question is, to what extent will my brother be able to convince everyone that he is right. Everything is still uncertain. But... Can we talk about something else?"

"Yes, of course."

"We can play 21 questions," Ivan decides. „It's very... american."

"I thought you wanted to become a Canadian?"

"Shut up. We're playing."

"How do you want to do it?" asks Shane, who is not familiar with social games. "We take turns asking or..."

"It can be."

Shane gets up and decides that if the conversation is going to be longer than he anticipated - not that he's complaining - he needs to make himself some tea and change out of the uncomfortable pants he fell asleep in on the couch. In the meantime, Ivan tries to explain to him the general rules of the game, as if asking questions could be complicated.

"We can get started," Shane says as he sits on the couch in his sweatpants, with a mug of tea and a blanket pulled over his lap. His cat wriggles right next to him. "You ask first, since that was your idea."

"Okay," he is silent for a moment. "Do you believe in soul mates?"

"Damn, you're starting off rough, aren't you?"

"I can ask you what your favorite color is, but I don't promise you won't hear me yawn."

Shane wonders if he believes in soul mates. He doesn't think he does. He has never met - at least in person - a person with whom he would immediately spark enough to think of elope or something. In high school he didn't have time to date, he was on the ice almost all the time, then, he met one guy, but it wasn't serious. And he *still* was always on the ice. Besides that,

he was a hockey star now, he couldn't date publicly. That would cause a scandal in the straight hockey world.

"I don't deny that some people are made for each other..." begins Shane uncertainly, as if he didn't want to accidentally hurt Ivan. "But so far I haven't experienced it myself."

"So far, huh? So you don't deny that somewhere out there, your soul mate potentially exists?"

"Of course I'm not denying it. But... it hasn't happened to me, not yet. So, yeah, I'm not sure, but not denying, either. But I do believe in platonic soulmates. My turn. What's something people misunderstand about you?"

Ivan is silent for a moment.

"You'll get a laugh."

"Maybe."

"People think I'm an asshole."

"Because you *are* an asshole. You said it yourself."

"Yes, but deep down I'm not. I mean, I am, but not in that... asshole way. It's easier to deal with life and people that way, it's like a defense mechanism, but I think I'm softer than people think. But that's a good thing. This way no one will hurt me."

"Yeah, I get it."

"My turn, although I think I know the answer. Would you like to get married someday?"

"I think so."

"Why... wait, what, really?" Ivan didn't seem to expect such an answer. Shane realizes that he doesn't look like a man who could devote himself to anything other than hockey, but he wouldn't really see any obstacles to marrying the person he loves.

"Yeah, why not?"

"You don't seem... wait, you're the pragmatic type who would marry for credit, insurance and tax issues, right?"

Shane starts laughing. He can't believe that Ivan is so shocked that he starts looking for an excuse for Shane's answer.

“That too, but I think... if you love someone then why not?”

“Would you be the one who proposes or the one who accepts the proposition?”

“I won't answer you, I'll be discreet. Besides, now it's my turn. What's your job, exactly? I don't think you've told me.”

Ilya knows he has to lie. „Hockey” is too risky. „Sport” is too general and Sean will ask more questions. He has to say something boring, something that isn't interesting enough to ask about it. He hates that he has to lie, but he can't tell Sean the truth, not yet.

“Eh, nothing special. Right now, it's more of a trial period or internship than a job. You could say that everything revolves around public relations,” says Ilya. His answer isn't a full lie. “Okay. Stop being boring and stop asking boring questions. My turn, let's heat it up. What's the strangest place you've done it?”

Silence fell on the line.

“Uh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to...” begins Ilya, looking for some sort of excuse. „Maybe too forward.”

“No, that's not the point,” he says.

“Was it so wild that you're ashamed to admit it? As long as you don't say confessional or, I don't know... labour ward then...”

“No.”

“Huh?”

“I... I don't, I've never...”

Ilya recalls that Sean once mentioned that he isn't really into hook-ups. Maybe he likes the romance, but not the sex. Or maybe it is a taboo subject for him and something he waits until marriage.

“I'm sorry, I shouldn't...”

“God, no, stop, what are you apologizing to me for? You asked a normal question, we're adults, you assumed I was having sex. There was no opportunity, I'm a fucking virgin, that's it. Is it a deal-breaker for you?”

“No. Are you waiting until marriage?”

“It's my turn to ask questions, Ivan.”

The man snorts. He doesn't replies, because Sean asks.

“So what's *your* body count, then?”

"What's body count?"

"How many people have you slept with?"

“Oh, I see we're no longer shy and boring, huh?” Ivan mocks. “I don't know, eight? I had a couple of one-night-stands after my last situationship ended. But nothing really relevant and serious. Now my turn and you know that I'm gonna ask this. Are you waiting until marriage?”

“Man, you're fucking stubborn,” Shane hears a dog barking in the background. “No, I'm not waiting until marriage. I had only one boyfriend, but I was living with my parents back then an I was working all the time, so we haven't done much, except making out. And the word *boyfriend* might be exaggerated, we were together for like three months, max. Then I was too busy to date, or even to hook-up. There is nothing to talk about. Let me warn you in advance that yes, I would wait until *at least* the third date. I'm not easy.”

“I've noticed, you're pretty difficult, you asshole,” he said.

“Yeah. But I don't mind talking about it. I'm not a blushing virgin.”

Sean, in fact, was not. From then on it got hotter and hotter from question to question, and Sean seemed obsessively interested in Ilya's sex life. One by one he had asked about the first time (*I was stressed and came in five fucking minutes*), whether he had ever faked an orgasm (*no, how would I?*), whether he had sent nude photos to anyone (*maybe...*), whether he had sex in the car (*My car is my baby, of course I had*).

Ilya didn't get a chance to ask the same thing, but found a loophole: he started asking about *hypothetical* things: where Sean would *hypothetically* like to be kissed (*thighs*), what he would *hypothetically* enjoy during foreplay (*fingers sucking and spitting*), and how he would *hypothetically* feel about receiving love bites (*fucking hot*).

Sean responds quite confidently, knowing what he wants and doesn't want.

“I think we've crossed 21 questions,” Sean notes after a moment.

Ilya realizes that somewhere in about three questions ago, a problem arose in his pants.

“Do you think our phone calls qualify as dates?”

“These are not pandemic times.”

“Yes, but you know, *hypothetically*.”

“Hypothetically, yes.”

Ilya smiles and gets up from the couch. He involuntarily walks to the bedroom.

“So...” he says. “Do you wanna have phone sex?”

Chapter 4

Shane feels his whole body tense up and a red flush appear on his face. Did he want to have sex on the phone? Maybe, probably yes, certainly with Ivan, but he wondered if it would take away all the excitement when he did it for real, in person. Is it a loss of virginity at all if, for good measure, he will only be instructed by Ivan what to do and will touch himself? Where does sex begin and masturbation end? The questions were too many, and the silence on the receiver heralded Ivan's waiting for an answer.

“It's just an offer, you know...” says Ivan, not wanting to press the other man in any way.

“No, it's not that, it's just... I don't know if... What would it look like?”

“Hm,” he lets out a mutter. “I'll tell you what to do, just as if I was there. Only if you want to, yes?”

“Tell me what to do.”

A murmur is heard in the receiver for a moment, then the creaking of the bed and the rustling of clothes being removed. *Ivan undresses.*

“Lie down,” he orders. “Turn on speakerphone mode and put the phone down, I need both of your hands.”

Shane hastily places the phone on the bedside table and begins to remove his pants. Ivan must have heard the rustling of the material, because he immediately reprimands him.

“Stop. I didn't tell you to take off your clothes.”

“Okay. I'm lying on the bed. In clothes.”

“Mhm, okay. I want you to touch yourself first through your pants. Palm yourself, I need you hard.”

Shane doesn't need much to get hard, but he does as Ivan ordered. He moves his hand up and down, massaging his crotch, making a needy sounds every now and then.

“What is your other hand doing?” Ivan asks.

“Nothing, I put it on my chest,” he says.

“I want you to put two fingers in your mouth and imagine that it's my hand,” he instructs, and Shane obediently follows each command. “Press down on your tongue.”

Shane's index and middle finger are in his mouth. The man's eyes are closed and he almost feels as if it is not his own hand, but the other man's. He forgets about the other hand, which stops near his thigh.

“Use as much saliva as you can.”

“Mhh-mm,” replies Shane, unable to make a coherent statement, given the fingers in his mouth and his general excitement.

“Take off your pants.”

“Okay.”

“I didn't tell you to take your fingers out of your mouth. Undress with one hand.”

Shane lifts his hips and tries to remove his pants with one hand. He slides them off one hip, then the other, until he is able to lower them to his ankles and finally knock them to the ground with his foot.

“Are you wearing briefs?”

“Mh-hm,” he mumbles.

“Take them off.”

Shane repeats the process of one-handed undressing.

“You can touch yourself, start with your thighs,” Ivan commands.

For a minute, or five, they don't speak.

"If I were there, I'd be on my knees."

"God."

"Look at you, religious now. I think you're done with your thighs. You can touch the tip with your thumb."

"God," he repeats. Shane has been touching his cock exclusively with his thumb for the time being, but he already feels he won't last long. Ivan's voice only encourages him, and the wet sound he hears from the other side announces that he is touching himself lazily.

"You can wrap your hand around your dick now, don't limit yourself."

Shane finally gets permission and starts moving his hand up and down, just as he likes. He imagines, however, that it is Ivan's hand, with long and slender fingers. His other hand - which has been out of his mouth for some time - touches all the other places he likes: nipples, neck, inside of thighs, hips and belly. He deliberately avoids his ass. Ivan didn't give any similar commands.

"I-vahhhhn," Shane moans. "I'm..."

"Stop."

Shane stops mid-length and pants heavily.

Suddenly Ilya regrets he gave Sean a fake name. He'd love to hear his real name right now.

"Turn around. I want you to kneel next to your bed."

Shane instantly gets up and kneels on the carpet.

"Lean back on your elbows."

"Do you want me to..."

“Not today. For now, I want you to stay in this position for a while and tell me how you feel, yes?”

“I feel exposed, not just naked. Like I'm being observed. Like I'm going to come in five fucking seconds.”

“Do you feel like praying?”

“Ivan, I...”

“Answer.”

“I do.”

“What if someone walked into your room right now and saw you, huh?” Ivan's accent is different for a second, but Shane is too turned on to notice.

“I don't... I don't know.”

“Would you want someone to come in there and fuck you?”

“No, if it's not you.”

A satisfied purr is heard from the receiver.

“You can go back to the bed and lie down like you did before,” Ivan says, and his breathing is getting faster, as if he's losing control. “You have one minute to come.”

“And then?”

“And then I hang up.”

The pace Shane is taking is lethal, although both men know he will come in less time. Every now and then, Ivan makes a mumbling sound. Shane lifts his hips, as this has always turned him on in some way. He finishes with a loud moan, coming on his hand, belly and chest. A few seconds later, he hears a protracted *ahh!* from the speaker, announcing that Ivan, too, has come.

“Sean?”

“Yes?”

“Time's up.”

“I thought you only hung up in a scenario where I didn't come?”

Ivan laughs.

“Good night. I'll call you tomorrow.”

“Goodn-” *beep*.

Sean: No one taught you that you can't leave immediately after? What if I'm the cuddler type?

Ivan: thought it would be awkward.

Sean: It won't be, next time stay on the line

Ivan: next time, huh? that's bold of you.

Ivan: i promise, I won't hang up, next time.

Sean: Thank you for today (okay, NOW it's awkward)

Ilya goes to training in an exceptionally good mood. The previous evening was pleasant, and his sleep was better than usual. He feels rested and doesn't even feel like starting an argument with Hollander, nor the other guys from the team. He's positive enough to even talk with them, at some point. He is still supposed to watch them practice, but if they'll approach him, he won't be as mean as he's used to.

At the door to the building he passes a receptionist and smiles politely. The woman - who is probably a good observer, at the same time prejudiced by guys from the team about Ilya - squints suspiciously and replies only *morning*. Ilya doesn't blame her. She's from Montreal, she works with the Voyageurs and she knows Ilya's reputation. If she is a hockey fan, she probably even hates him.

He takes the stairs to the first floor and heads toward the coffee machine to make himself a cup of coffee. *Of course*, by some fucking miracle meets Shane in the corridor, who is trying to find something in his sports bag with one hand and holding his gear in the other.

“Good morning, Hollander,” Ilya says, stopping for a moment. He really *tries* to be nice. If they are supposed to play together now, they should at least try to be civil.

Shane tucks his gloves into the bag and raises his head. He doesn't speak, as if waiting for the next part of the speech. For the part where Ilya used to insult him.

“Rozanov,” Shane nods, as a greeting.

“Did you have a good evening?”

Shane again doesn't speak. He looks well rested. Only his gaze betrays that he would rather be elsewhere.

“Yes,” he replies stiffly. “And I assume you had surgery yesterday?”

“Surgery?” repeats Ilya.

“Mhm.” Shane nonchalantly corrects the cuff of his jacket. “A lobotomy. You said good morning to me and initiated small talk. I'm pretty sure someone tampered with your brain. Although I have at least two other theories.”

“Go ahead,” Ilya growls through his teeth.

“The first: aliens abducted you and performed experiments on you, accidentally swapping your personality with the other poor guy, who is now an asshole and probably putting curses on someone. The second: you finally got laid and the post-orgasmic high hasn't left you yet.”

Ilya's good humor disappears. Fuck being civil. Fuck this team. Fuck Shane Hollander.

“Fuck you.”

“Welcome back, Rozanov.”

Ilya bypasses Shane and moves directly toward the coach's office to ask about plans for the day. He suspects that he will once again have to watch practice from the stands, enduring the insults from below, which Ilya is aware, he has earned. However, he wants to convince the coach to let him get on the ice, or at least go to the gym for a while. Watching the team practice did not help him become part of it; on the contrary, he realized that his presence was

distracting the group, which was focusing more on the presence of their former rival than on the puck and improving their team play.

“Ilya, finally,” the coach says, straightening up in his chair. “I have some good news.”

“Is Hollander moving out to another continent?”

The man looks at his new player like a disappointed parent at a child who has again been suspended.

“”First, I talked to a few of the guys. The atmosphere is still tense, but they are willing to cooperate. A few of them are still threatening not to come to practice if you're there, but they're bluffing. But I don't think there's any point in you watching practice from above any longer. It doesn't do us any good, as you probably noticed at the last training session.”

“Da.”

“Secondly,” he continues. “I think you should tell them the real reason of your transfer. You don't have to go into details, but they'll be more... understanding. Many of our players come from other countries, so they'll definitely know what you're going through. It will help ease the tension if empathy comes into play. If you don't want to make a big deal out of it, you can tell Hollander about it, and he'll tell...”

“No,” Ilya cuts him off.

“Excuse me?”

“I don't want fucking Hollander involved in this,” says Ilya.

“Rozanov. Shane is the captain, he has an influence on the energy in the group. I think if you tell him part of what's going on, that you need citizenship because it will help you resolve family issues, everyone will understand. They'll know that changing teams isn't a whim or some kind of intrigue, but...”

“I don't give a damn what the other players think. I don't want anyone to know the reasons of my transfer, especially Hollander.”

The coach gets up and walks over to the window.

"I know he was your biggest rival, you were both captains of enemy teams. But Shane is a professional. He won't interfere or show you any weird pity when it comes to that. I just want us to not waste training sessions on squabbles. We won't win the Stanley Cup if we're not working together. No taunting, no arguing, no bickering, okay? Save that for the matches, you can fight with the Admirals."

"Whatever the fuck you want. What am I supposed to do today, then?"

"Just come to the training."

Ilya is quite happy that the coach has given him the green light to train. However, only after leaving the coach's room does Ilya realize one crucial thing - he has to change into his hockey gear. Which means going to the locker room. Which means facing the whole team. He alone against a dozen or so players whom he recently pushed, insulted, and defeated on the ice.

The man glances at his watch. There is just over half an hour left before practice, so there is a risk that some of the players are already there. Hollander is definitely in the locker room. If Hollander is there, then Pike is probably there too. And if Pike is there, then... Fuck. Ilya grits his teeth, adjusts the strap of his bag, which is slipping off his shoulder, and heads for the locker room to meet his fate.

There are perhaps less than half of the team in the locker room. When Ilya enters, some of them deliberately ignore him and don't even look at him. This reaction is the most comfortable for Ilya in this situation. Hayden Pike gives him the middle finger. Someone tries to provoke him with verbal taunts. Rozanov unconsciously searches for Shane among the sea of blue helmets.

There he is. Hollander sits on a bench in the corner in full gear, typing something on his phone. His face seems tense, but it's hard to tell if it's because of the strange situation the team finds itself in or if it's his usual pre-practice focus. Ilya feels like getting into an argument, or at least making a comment to Pike, but he knows it won't improve his situation. And the coach — it's hard for Ilya to admit — is right. Training won't do much good, and the team won't win any games if the atmosphere doesn't improve at least enough to maintain neutrality. So the man grits his teeth, hurriedly puts on his uniform, trying not to think about how much the blue color on his skin, hitherto identified with the enemy, burns him, and heads for the rink, refusing to be provoked.

Right after the warm-up, the coach bluntly cuts off any potential taunts, threatening to send anyone who focuses on personal feelings instead of training to the bench. They are going to practice cooperation and puck passing skills. Ilya tries to ignore the fact that the players deliberately do not pass him the puck, even when he is in the best position to score a goal. He feels more like a referee skating behind the players than a full-fledged player. Despite his anger, frustration, and recent hatred for all the men gathered at the rink, he is aware that if someone from Montreal had been transferred to Boston, his former team would have behaved the same way, and knowing Marleau and Ilya himself, probably even worse.

After practice, Ilya decides to go to the top floor of the building and use the gym. He doesn't want to go home yet, let alone take a shower and confront the rest of the team again. So he takes off his gear, stuffs it into his bag without much care, and heads for the elevator near the main entrance. The door opens with a loud thud, Ilya steps inside and raises his head.

Of fucking course, inside stands Hollander. He's holding a Gatorade, which means he was on level -1 at the best-stocked vending machine. Rozanov does a quick calculation in his head and concludes that Hollander is probably also going to the gym - it makes no sense for him to go up just one floor to leave the building. No one is that lazy, even after an intense workout. Well, maybe Ilya, who always takes the elevator if he has the option. But not Hollander, he is sure of that.

Four floors. It's only four floors. One, maybe two minutes and it will be over, unless the elevator stops at every level. They are silent for a moment. Ilya hopes it will stay that way.

“The coach said you moved here for citizenship reasons.”

“That’s not your fucking business, Hollander.”

“It is, actually. I am the team’s captain and I really need us to get along. We won’t all be friends, but the team should at least accept you. We won’t do shit like this.”

„Look at you. So nice and friendly now.”

„Because you weren’t a dick today.”

„My private stuff shouldn’t be any of your concerns.”

„Yes, but...”

„Fuck off, Hollander, will you? I know the coach told you the same thing he told me. That I should tell you why I'm really in Montreal, so you can pass on my sad, sad story to the rest of the team. Everyone will suddenly feel sorry for me, they'll cry, I'll hand them tissues, and at the end we'll hold hands and sing some Canadian country chant, or whatever you listen to here."

The elevator starts up. Shane stares at the screen displaying the floors at least as if he is trying to force the elevator to move faster with his eyes.

“Okay. Keep your secrets. I don't care what reason you're here, whether you got involved in some illegal shit, drug dealing, car racing, or the fucking murder of an old lady with special cruelty. I don't want anything to do with it. But the coach is right and I just need to tell our team *something*, so they will start playing good again.”

For a moment, Ilya is silent. The elevator stops at the second floor, but no one goes inside. Presumably an impatient employee has chosen the stairs. Shane looks furious. His face is pale, the skin around his forehead tight, his brow furrowed, his fists clenched along his body. Suddenly, Ilya feels bad.

“Is this exactly how you think of me?” Ilya asks frankly. Until now, he was convinced that Shane is just as much of an asshole and doesn't mind all this run-ins. They were rivals, for fuck's sake, what should they do, other than arguing? Pretend to be enemies on the ice and make out like a couple of lovers behind closed doors, like in some kind of sport-themed, erotic romance?

“How am I supposed to think, Rozanov? You hate me, I get it, we were rivals. But you were mean at *anytime*, off the ice, too. And now we play for the same team. And yet, you are hostile. I mean, sure, I wasn't really nice this morning, either, but you knew for a long time, you were going to transfer. You knew, when we met at the party couple weeks ago.”

“I don't hate you,” mumbles Ilya, poking his gaze into his own shoes. “You always were an asshole too, so I figured...”

“You figured what, Rozanov!” exclaims Shane. „I was asshole when we played against each other, yes. But I can separate matches and rivalry from reality. I don't need to be mean off the ice, because I am mature enough.”

Ilya wants to apologize. He has the word in the back of his throat, somewhere clenched and blocked, but he is sure that a maximum of ten seconds is enough and he will apologize. He didn't know that Shane felt so bad, and all this time he thought Ilya was some kind of abuser.

“Listen,” Ilya begins, but interrupts when he feels the elevator jerk.

Somewhere from behind the elevator, a protracted creak is heard, as if something has jammed against the hinges and won't let go. The elevator gently jumps up, then drops down a few inches and stops for good.

“*Blyat,*” comments Ilya.

“No,” whispers Shane. “No, no, no.”

Ilya pushes all the floor buttons one by one: 1, 2, 3, 4, then the button to open the door, close the door, but halfway through Shane grabs his hand and knocks it down.

“You're making things worse,” he says. “You need to ring the emergency bell.”

Shane presses the button with the drawing of the bell and waits for the call. For a moment, in a dispassionate tone, he talks to the woman, who instructs them not to try to push any buttons or jump up to get the elevator moving, just sit down and wait for help.

Shane presses his forehead against the metal surface of the elevator and tries to take a few deeper breaths. He's not claustrophobic, but being stucked with Rozanov in a limited space isn't his dream, either.

Ilya immediately notices that Shane is uncomfortable. Sure, Rozanov's mere presence probably made things worse, but the man is now not only angry - as he was before - but also upset.

“Spy's log: I got stuck together with the observed target in the elevator. Given the subject's previously observed difficulty in urinating, I'm beginning to feel apprehensive,” Ilya jokes.

“That's your kind of joke to defuse the situation?” whispers Shane, turning away from the elevator wall.

“What else am I supposed to do? You're not the person I'd choose to be stuck in the elevator if I were playing 21 questions.”

Shane recalls the previous evening and the game mentioned. He tries to anchor himself in the memory and move to yesterday. So he sits down in the corner of the elevator, shrinks his legs so that he can wrap his hands around them and at the same time rest his chin on his knees, and finally closes his eyes.

Ilya watches the man for a moment, but guesses that there is unlikely to be a sudden reconciliation - not that he cares - so he pulls out his phone out of idleness to describe the whole situation to Sean.

Ivan: ffs

Ivan: hope you're having a better day than me, because

Ivan: im sitting in a broken elevator

Ivan: you ask: with whom?

Ivan: with this npc

Ivan: but i thought we were, like, an enemies

Ivan: he's not really npc, just annoying

Ivan: the worst part is that I actually have a guilty conscience and feel bad and can't fucking apologize

Ivan: what if I really am an asshole and I am evil and cruel

Ivan: and he looks like he's about to have a panic attack

Ivan: and i want to apologize but I can't

Meanwhile, a steady buzzing can be heard from the other corner of the elevator.

“Hollander, someone is calling you. Maybe it's somebody from the staff,” Ilya speaks up.

Shane pulls out his phone, but the display shows no incoming call, only a series of messages. Ilya wrinkles his eyebrows. Next, Shane wrinkles his eyebrows.

And then, a whole series of strange events follow: Shane unlocks his phone, reads the messages, looks at Ilya, drops the phone with the screen still unlocked, tries to take a breath, as something creases in his throat and he starts crying.

Chapter 5

For the first few seconds, Ilya has no idea what just happened. One minute Hollander was pulling out his phone, and the next he was collapsing onto the elevator floor. At first Ilya thinks that maybe somebody sent a message that the repair will take longer. That, however, would not get Hollander into such a state. He would have been furious, not distraught. Later, he thinks that maybe someone has died. Only when he glances at the phone lying on the floor and sees the messages, *his own messages* from a moment ago, does it occur to him what has just happened.

Sean is Shane.

The pieces of two stories begin to come together. The party that Shane had to go to on Saturday night was the same one where they met and argued. The idiot Shane was talking about was Ilya. The NPC that Ilya complained about was Shane.

All this time Ilya was so busy mocking and tormenting Hollander that he didn't notice that Sean and Shane had the same voice and similiar name. Sure, on the phone his voice sounded higher, a little distorted, and less soft, but probably not enough to make him unrecognizable. If Ilya had looked more closely, he would have noticed that Hollander's hair was the same one he saw in the overexposed vintage photo he had become infatuated with.

It's obvious that Shane couldn't have known. Ivan is a soft-hearted man who knows the names of his neighbors' dogs, takes pictures of sunsets, and sends postcards for the holidays. And Ilya is a ghost, a fictionalized character who wears a mask of an asshole so he wouldn't have to confront reality. Shane couldn't have known, especially since Ilya, as Ivan, feigned a different accent and didn't admit to playing hockey, which could have made him even slightly recognizable.

“Hollander, I...” begins Ilya as everything begins to come to him, but at the same moment the elevator vibrates, goes for three seconds and stops at some floor. The door slides open and the man spots the electrician and the coach, who, with a cell phone glued to his hand, stares at the scene before him.

Shane instantly rubs his eyes, picks up the phone and runs out before either of men is able to speak.

“What did you do to him?” asks the coach with a stone face.

Ilya's eyes are wide open, his hand clenched on the phone and his thoughts going in all directions at once. He shakes his head, as if chasing away an intruding thought, he runs out of the guilt and then out of the building. He knows there is no point in looking for Hollander, who has probably holed up in one of the twenty bathrooms. He doubts that joking about his bladder will fix what he screwed up.

So he calls his therapist's private number, which he got for a "crisis," and asks for advice. He ignores the aforementioned *give him time, don't call, don't write* advice and sends a dozen messages, then throws the phone against the concrete. He knows he's probably being watched from the building's windows. He picks up the phone, which, except for the shattered screen, appears to be fine, gets into his car and heads off in a random direction. He doesn't return to his home until darkness falls outside and he falls asleep on the couch, clutching his phone tightly.

Shane doesn't know how he gets out of the building, arrives at his car and then outside Rose's apartment.

He remembers snippets of events, as if he was watching a strange movie bordering on art cinema and surreal stop-motion horror. He was in the elevator, reading the messages, the phone fell out of his hands, which, like his legs, were suddenly completely paralyzed by an unknown emotion.

Shane Hollander's entire body was made up of emotions. Mostly of longing and anxiety. Sometimes there was rage and helplessness, sometimes happiness and hope, such as yesterday when he thought he had finally found something that could be fully his.

The emotion he feels now was unknown. He can't describe it.

There is an unfilled void between the phone falling out of his hand and the elevator doors opening. He doesn't know if Ilya tried to speak to him, or if he said anything to Ilya. He doesn't know how much he sat on the floor and cried. It could have been brief seconds, it could have been an hour. The next thing he remembers is the road leading out of town to Rose's apartment accompanied by the buzzing of the phone. He wasn't going to read what Ivan had written - because it was definitely him - although his hands itched in a strange way a need to check.

Given that Ivan has turned out to be a fucking Ilya Rozanov, anything could be in the messages.

Shane doesn't think Ilya would use any of the information against him, but on the other hand, the past few days have confirmed to him that Rozanov, when he wanted to, could be merciless. Yes, they shared the same secret and giving Ilya's fake name and fake accent, he didn't want to be recognized, either. But he still was Rozanov, a menace, a chaos personification.

"Shane?" Rose opens the door. "Aren't you supposed to be at practice?"

It's a silly question and both Shane and Rose know it. The man's eyes are red and swollen, his scarf carelessly untied and he is still in his gym clothes.

"Pretend I didn't ask, come in."

Shane throws his jacket to the ground in a gesture as if he has given up and in his mind has managed to quit.

"Remember when I told you that I met someone on Tinder?"

"Honey, we talked on the phone last night. You told me with details that only Miles would want to know. Did he dump you?"

Shane ignores the question.

"And remember how I told you that Rozanov was traded to Montreal?"

"Babe, let me repeat, we talked less than twelve hours ago.... Wait. What do these two things have in common?"

Shane's gaze spoke for itself.

"No," Rose denies, as if denying the fact would change anything. "What do you mean... But... Did he know?"

"I don't think so. The elevator broke down today, when we both were inside. He wrote me a series of messages, thinking he was writing to Sean."

“After all, he was writing to *Sean*. Give me the phone,” Rose holds out her hand.

“I don't think...”

“If it's as you say and he found out at the same time, he probably had time to send you a hundred messages.”

"Rose, please."

Rose rolls her eyes, then reaches into the pocket of Shane's jacket lying on the ground.

„Can I read your last text messages?”

Shane nods.

“Don't tell me what he wrote. I don't want to know.”

Rose sighs, then her finger slowly begins to slide across the screen. Shane deliberately doesn't look at his friend, not wanting to see her reaction. He tries to hook his thoughts into something else: he looks around the small apartment, searching for any new trinkets Rose might have bought since their last meeting. He counts her vinyl record collection. It seems to him that forty minutes have passed and Rose is still reading text messages.

“You should read them,” she says finally, putting the phone down on the table.

“It won't change anything.”

“Maybe it will.”

“He is still the arrogant asshole.”

“Mhm, yes,” Rose takes a sip of coffee. “But he's also still the same man who sends you silly songs and reads books you've recommended to him, sends you pictures of his dog and tells you secrets.”

Shane does not think soberly and tries to find a point to rationalize Ilya's behavior.

“It was a mask. The real Rozanov insults strangers, breaks all prohibitions and...”

“I think the opposite, Shane. Really, you should read it. This situation has broken not only your heart.”

“I'll do what I'll do,” replies Shane.

Rose sighs.

“You'll do what you'll do.”

Shane doesn't go home for the night. Rose offers him a couch, french fries and an *X Files* marathon, so he's not about to refuse. This one time he decides that screw training and responsibility and planning, The coach won't be mad at him after a one-time incident. At most, he'll lie that he's claustrophobic and needed a break. He heads home only to take a shower, feed the cat and grab a change of clothes, then returns to his friend's apartment, which has already managed to prepare them a fort of blankets and a tray of snacks.

Still, he deliberately ignores the phone, which lies where Rose put it. He doesn't intend to read excuses, nor flimsy apologies - if such a word even exists in Rozanov's dictionary. Rose sees that the man looks at his phone almost as often as Mulder looks at Scully, but she grits her teeth and doesn't comment. She is able to predict that Shane will eventually read the messages. She is also almost certain that the story will have a happy ending.

Shane, however, is quite a disciplined soldier and doesn't succumb to temptation either during the marathon, when he checks his email in the evening, or just before bedtime, when he scrolls TikTok unknowingly.

However, he wakes up during the night. He's sweaty and had one of his show-stopping sleep paralyzes, in which it seemed to him that his apartment was on fire and he couldn't move. He checks the time on his phone and sees that since Rose read Ivan's text messages, nothing new has appeared in his inbox. He struggles with his thoughts for a long moment. His hands begin to scab over until he finally gives up and unlocks his phone. The string of messages doesn't seem to end, but they were sent one after another, just after he escaped from the elevator.

Ivan: im not sure what I should write

Ivan: my therapist just said I shouldn't write at all, but I'm afraid then you'll think I'm worse than I really am

Ivan: but the most important thing you need to know: I didn't know you were you and you don't need to worry, this secret is safe

Ivan: and I wanted to apologize to you, when we were in the elevator, you as a Hollander, the hockey player

Ivan: I had no idea that you took my taunts in such a way, I was convinced that you were an asshole too, that it is a rivalry thing, being mean to each other

Ivan: wait, no, that's actually an understatement

Ivan: the other night, literally moments before the gala, my brother called and said a lot of nasty stuff. even then, I knew there was a risk of disinheritance. Andrei had mentioned it many times, so my lawyer and I prepared a preliminary plan. the first point of which was to transfer me and arrange for citizenship, just in case. transferring to your team didn't suit me, I hated you even more than usual.

Ivan: I wanted to skip the party because all I could think about was all this family mess, but the coach told me to go. so when I saw you, I exploded.

Ivan: the very thought that because of my brother I would have to grovel before the team I had recently competed against and defeated, made me ready to fight.

Ivan: then you were an asshole too, that's why i was sure that all this... bullying was mutual and it was about our rivalry.

Ivan: when we spoke on the phone yesterday I was telling the truth. that sometimes i'm intentionally mean because it's my defense strategy against being hurt

Ivan: and i know it's not an excuse, none of this is an excuse if you felt persecuted.

Ivan: I'm aware that you won't write me back again and that I fucked up, so just... fuck, just don't worry you will meet me at the training, i am taking a break

Ivan: i also wrote to the coach that i don't know if you'll be back tomorrow, because you were a little freaked out by the broken elevator situation, so you're covered if you need to be

Ivan: yeah, so, that's it. i am sorry.

Shane involuntarily tightens his fingers on the phone. His analyzing mind is trying to consider all options. He's never been good at reading what people want to convey through text messages. Is Ilya apologizing because that's what the culture demands, but he doesn't want to keep in touch since he knows that Sean from Tinder is Shane Hollander, or is he apologizing because he knows he screwed up a potential acquaintance? Would Shane himself - assuming the second scenario - want to, perhaps, potentially, try for a second time? Would he even be able to forgive? Especially now, knowing that Ivan is Ilya Rozanov?

Shane asks himself hundreds of questions in his head, but he knows he won't solve anything this way. He wants to hear what Rozanov has to say, but in person. Even if it hurts, even if it

turns out that indeed Rozanov is an asshole incapable of showing emotions in the real world.

That's why he writes back before the rational part of his brain starts analyzing more arguments against it.

Sean: I want to hear what you have to say to me in person.

He doesn't expect an answer in the middle of the night, but a maximum of ten seconds passes, and Ilya writes back.

Ivan: of course. where, when?

Sean: I'll be at practice tomorrow. Probably late, so we can talk after.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

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

Shane wakes up sore. Rose's couch, far too short and hard, was not the best decision after all. In addition, the man's head hurts at least as if he had a decent hangover, which is not helped by the Rose herself.

„Rise and shine!” she sings. “Are you going to eat breakfast? You know what, don't answer, I know you'll tell me no, I'll say yes, you'll say *you don't need a private cook*, I'll give you a lecture on gender roles, we'll end up arguing that it wasn't the point, and you'll feel bad, so as an apology you'll stay and eat. We can skip that step today and go straight to the kitchen.”

Shane sighs. This situation has only happened twice, but Rose was right, and besides, Shane didn't like the saying *third time's a charm*, so he's not going to argue.

“You make the toast, I'm looking for the jam,” Rose decides, trying to dig through the mess in the cupboard of sauces, preserves and condiments.

So Shane brews the coffee and makes the toasts. They end up eating it with garlic butter and tomatoes, because Rose's mission proved too complicated for such an early hour and such a big mess.

“I wrote him back,” Shane admits, taking a sip of coffee. “That we can talk. Today, after my practice.”

Rose would like to say she's surprised, but she's not. She knew that sooner or later Shane would soften. Although, if she had to bet, she'd say that Hollander would first analyze, take notes and weigh the pros and cons and write back after two business days, not a few hours.

“Good. The apology looked sincere.”

“You don't know him.”

“But you do know him. The man who sends you pictures of sunrises and dogs may still be an asshole, but he's not a bad person.”

“Rose, *baby*,” mocks Shane. “Maybe you've missed your calling and should be a couples therapist instead of an actress?”

“Oh, so you admit that Rozanov is your enemies to lovers kind of situation?”

“Shut up.”

After breakfast, thanks and goodbyes (as well as Rose's entire speech on relationships, forgiveness, listening and other golden advices), Shane drives to his apartment to change clothes and feed the cat, who looks on with disapproval for being left alone overnight. In the car, Shane rehearses the entire speech he prepared in his head at night. He suspects that Ilya will lead the conversation his way anyway and Shane's meticulous plan will fail, but it's good to have a plan prepared, just in case.

As he walks very late through the building toward the locker room, he feels the stares of passing employees, who are probably convinced that the previous day Shane experienced a panic attack caused by an elevator malfunction. Fortunately, he doesn't encounter the coach on the way, much less Ilya.

He finally arrives at training, answers a barrage of questions, ranging from how he is feeling to those related to Rozanov and his presence in the lift. Finally he grabs his stick, cutting off further questions and comments. Ilya, as previously announced, does not show up for training, but the coach does not mention that the man is taking a break from hockey. He does not explain why Rozanov did not show up for training, but judging by the expressions on the faces of the other players (and the quality of their training), it is easy to conclude that they are not sorry and are quite happy with the situation.

After training, Shane brushes off Hayden, who tries to invite him to dinner, and deliberately delays changing and showering so that he has an excuse to stay in the building. When he is ready and sure that all the players have gone home, he takes out his phone to write a message to Ilya.

Sean: I'm finished, where do you want to meet?

Ivan: on the roof in half an hour? the entrance is from the inner parking lot

Shane can't joke about potentially being thrown off the roof, he's too stressed, and besides, they're probably not at the joking stage with Ilya. If they ever will be. He chooses the stairs - by no means because of yesterday's malfunction - and, trying to stretch the allotted time as much as possible, climbs laboriously up the stairs.

The door leading to the roof is unlatched, so Rozanov is probably already there. Indeed, as Shane crosses the threshold, he notices Ilya sitting on the concrete, leaning against one of the walls. He stares at the city skyline with furrowed brows and smokes a cigarette.

“Hey, Rozanov,” begins Shane, sitting down right next to him.

“Hi, Hollander,” replies Ilya in a half-whisper, exactly the way he talked on the phone. Now without a doubt Shane can recognize that Ivan and Rozanov are the same person.

“So... Uh. Would you rather I didn't call you by your first name? Since you used a fake one and we've never...”

“No. I mean, yes. It's intimate, you know? I am Rozanov to people from my team, well, our team now, for the press, the couches, to all. Ivan is like my second name, but... well, uh, not exactly?”

Ilya has no idea how to explain in English the nuances of the Russian language and all the formalities associated with the use of his father's name. However, Shane's face shows even greater incomprehension than before, so the man has no choice but to at least try to explain what he means.

"Second as... not as a surname. And not as a second name, like Mary Ann. For example, in Poland, you get a middle name at baptism, usually after a saint. No one uses their middle name except in official situations, maybe in rare cases when they prefer it to their first name, I don't know. In Russia, which is Orthodox, we don't have middle names. But we have something called a patronymic name. It's a name you get from your father. My father's name is Ivan, so formally, according to that, I am Ilya Ivanovich Rozanov. It's a bit like... Johnson. Son of John. And Ivanovich is a son of Ivan. My son's patronymic name would be Ilyich. But Ivanovich and Ilyich do not exist in Russian as separate names, so I improvised. Like you, I decided that using my real name would be too risky."

„So... you want me to call you by your father's name?”

„God, no, never. Don't call me Ilya, nor Ivan. Just Rozanov.”

Ilya's words hurt more than they should.

“Okay.” Shane replies, trying to swallow the piece of glass he felt in his throat when Rozanov stated that his first name is meant for a narrow circle of people he trusts.

Ilya doesn't respond, but pulls a Kinder Surprise Egg from his jacket pocket and places it on the floor between them. Shane doesn't understand at first whether this is a strange olive branch, a joke or a simple act of kindness. He looks questioningly at Rozanov.

“Uh, you know, I turned out to be a *tinder surprise*.”

Shane raises an eyebrow and clenches his teeth. It must be admitted that this joke amused him more than he would like to admit.

“The real reason of my moving to Canada.”

„I beg you pardon?”

„I mean, they’re banned in the US. Chocking hazard and all. And I loved Kinder Surprise too much, so I moved to the country, where it isn’t illegal.”

Shane takes a chocolate egg and rotates it between his fingers.

“Poisoned?”

“*Da.*”

Shane picks it up and begins to methodically, calmly, unroll the silverware. He knows there is a toy inside, and the chocolate itself is delicious, but he never really craved it as a kid. The chocolate cracks under the man's fingers, splitting the egg in two. For a moment he ponders what he should do, until he finally hands half to Ilya.

“Poisoned?” asks Rozanov.

“Sure.”

Ilya tries to drag out the conversation as much as possible. He takes small bites, nibbling on millimeter after millimeter of chocolate to keep quiet for as long as possible. Sure, he himself wanted a conversation, but now he doesn't know what else to add. He put everything he wanted to convey in a text message. Shane has already managed to eat and is drumming his fingers against his own lap. It's distracting, considering they're really, really beautiful hands.

“Are we going to talk?” asks Shane, when Ilya has finally swallowed the last bit.

“You didn't open the toy.”

“Rozanov.”

„Hollander.”

Shane sighs and opens a second, this time plastic, egg. Inside is a leaflet and two plastic parts to assemble - the wheels and body of a small car.

“Too bad I only had one, we could have done toy car races,” Ilya remarks as Shane runs the toy over the concrete.

“Rozanov,” Shane repeats, wanting to finally get to the point.

Ilya lets out a disgruntled sigh. He knows that Shane is tired after the practice and probably this conversation is the last thing he wants to do right now. Ilya knows that he himself wanted this conversation. And now nothing comes to his mind. It's the complete opposite of ripping off a patch quickly. It's a slow decontamination of an old, infected wound.

“Everything I wrote yesterday is true, I don't know what else I could say. I really thought you were an asshole and you didn't mind our banters, I thought that it was fun for you.”

“Did I ever give you the impression that I was having fun?”

“I don't know, okay? Fuck. I'm not an expert at reading people and their emotions. I'm barely able to understand my own. Maybe I should go back to regular therapy.”

“I'm sorry too, but only a little.”

“You don't have to, Hollander,” Ilya replies, lifting the car off the concrete. He begins to turn the wheels involuntarily, as if looking for something to do with his hands. “So, uh, well, other than the things that have been going on the ice it's... I've taken a liking to Sean,” he says.

“You mean me, or...”

“You, of course, Hollander. We may not have had much opportunity for civilized conversation in person, but we've talked for some hours on the phone. Yesterday, while going to the gym, I thought that when I got home I'd call and ask if you'd like to finally meet in person. Maybe it's better that we found out that way, and not during an arranged meeting at some place. It doesn't change the fact that you are you, Shane Hollander the hockey player, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't think of you in a good way, when I was watching you play. God, I wish we were in the same team from the beginning and I wouldn't now have to count on some kind of forgiveness that won't happen.”

“It's not about forgiveness, it's just that I'm talking to you now, to Ilya, and I feel like you're a stranger or still an enemy, and I...”

“And you prefer Ivan you know,” Ilya replies, knowing where Shane is going with this.

“I'm sorry.”

Ilya nods in understanding and rises from the floor, shaking off his pants. He wants to say something, anything, but his throat is clenched in that strange way, as if all it takes is an attempt to speak up and he would start crying.

“I'm not gonna play this season,” Ilya says, standing at the exit. “My lawyer said that since I officially live in Canada and belong to a Canadian team, even if I'm taking a break, we still have to wait for the citizenship process to start. So you know, like I wrote in the message, you don't have to worry about running into me in this building anymore, or when your bladder problem calls. Damn, sorry, I'm a terrible person, why the fuck can't I stop? It was a joke. Not a mockery.”

“It's okay, Rozanov. I know.”

“I'm sorry it came out that way. I wish it had turned out differently.”

Ilya disappears before Shane is able to respond.

In the evening, Rose calls. Shane stares at the ringing phone, but has no conscience to answer. He knows what Rose will say and doesn't want to hear it. He planned the conversation with Ilya differently. He really thought that forgiveness would come easier to him.

However, the girl doesn't give up and calls again and again, until finally Shane, tired of buzzing, answers.

“Finally,” says Rose. “I suspect you didn't answer because you're busy with your new boyfriend?”

“I don't have a boyfriend.”

“You went straight to the engagement stage?”

“Rose,” Shane sighed. “I told him that... Fuck.”

“Shane Hollander, language!” Rose lets out an indignant sigh. “The conversation didn't go your way?”

“That's not the point.”

“Then what is it about?”

“It's just... when he spoke to me, I felt like I was talking to Ilya Rozanov, the captain of an enemy team, a man I know nothing about, besides that he plays dirty and isn't very pleasant. And... Ilya said that he understood that I would not be able to forgive him, and I said that it was not about any forgiveness. And then he said he knows it is about me preferring Ivan. And it's true, so I admitted that I did.”

“Shane fucking Hollander, you're dumber than the puck,” groans Rose. “Ilya is Ivan, and Ivan is Ilya. It's not like he created an alter ego for himself and is fucking Jekyll and Hyde. He's the same person. And you told him that you prefer some other version, which, by the way, doesn't exist, because there is only one version. I don't want to give you a guilt trip now, but I will, because probably now Ilya thinks that he, as he of the real world, is insufficient, or that it's only possible to like him when he's hidden behind a phone.”

“But it's his own fault! He acted like an asshole, so I had the right to dislike him and I had the right to prefer Ivan.”

“Yes, but later he told you honestly why he behaved like that. And you still reiterated that you preferred the internet version.”

Shane remains silent. Only Rose made him realize that indeed, this is how his words could be interpreted.

“Hollander, hellooooo?”

“God, Rose. You're right.”

“I know I am. What are you going to do?”

“I don't know.”

“Listen, I think that you should...”

“I'll speak to you later, okay?”

“Shane...!”

Beep.

Shane puts the phone down and throws it on the couch. He walks nervously around the room, tries to find an activity, opens Tinder, then immediately closes Tinder. He doesn't think he'll be able to date for the foreseeable future. Sure, the situation with Ilya turned out to be messed up, but on the other hand Ivan seemed to be *it* from the beginning. They had common interests (now even more), were able to discuss everything and nothing, banter and joke around. And of course Ilya and Ivan are the same person. Rose was right about the fact that

the man did not create any alter ego, but only the armor of an asshole to protect himself from getting hurt.

Finally, Shane says out loud: *screw it* and reaches for the phone. His plan isn't the best, you could say it's a bit childish, but on the other hand, this way he will let Ilya know that he wants to continue the acquaintance for the purpose for which it started, which is a relationship.

Sean: Hey, Ivan.

Sean: Sorry I didn't call yesterday, strange things have been happening.

Sean: Do you mind if I call you now?

What he didn't anticipate was that Ilya would take the message in a completely different way.

Ivan: Shane I don't know what game you're playing but it's cruel

Ivan: i understood that you don't want me as *me*, fine, but don't write as if Ilya and Ivan are still separate entities

Ivan: so I don't know if it's some form of revenge or some other horseshit, but stop because what you're doing hurts

Ivan: just fuck off

Ilya thought Shane wanted to continue pretending that Ivan existed and was someone other than Rozanov. Once again he did what Rose made him realize.

Shane's hands begin to shake, just like in the elevator. This time, however, he does not let go of the phone, but takes a deep breath and tries to consider all options for action. He can write back that it was about something else. He can call right away, although in this case he assumes Ilya won't answer. He can back off for a few days and try calling again after some time. And then there is the last option, the stupidest of all, which tempts the most.

Shane chooses this very option. He calls Marlow.

“Hollander?” his seems surprised. “Please tell me you’re not getting transfered to us.”

“I need Ilya’s new adress,” Shane interrupts. “No, it has nothing to do with the trading. It's a ... private stuff.”

“Christ,” Shane hears a deafening sound, as if Marlow has dropped whatever he was just doing. “Did Ilya do something?”

“No, this time it was me.”

“Hollander, I don't know what's going on. I know you don't have any sympathy for each other, damn, *I* don't have any sympathy for you, either, but...”

“Give me the address,” Shane presses. “I swear nothing happened.”

“Should I call the coach? Ours or yours?”

“No, fuck, no one's in danger, don't call anybody. Just don't ask stupid questions and give me the address.”

“Um...” Marlow sounds like he still doesn't understand or doesn't believe it. “I'll send you a message with the address. If I find out Rozanov is dead, you'll be in the electric chair even though the death penalty in this country...”

“I'll let him know you care,” Shane replies and hangs up.

Shane gets the address and almost runs to his car. He tries not to exceed the speed limit, even though his leg is itching to add gas. He clamps both hands on the steering wheel to somehow control his nerves and the strange vibration he feels throughout his body from stress. He has never actually felt this way, not even during the playoffs or when they were about to win or lose a Stanley Cup.

He immediately recognizes a big house he has seen in dozens of photos that Ivan has sent to him. He feels nostalgic, as if he is returning home, even though he has never been here before. He walks up to the door and knocks with a bizarre knocker in the shape of a hockey puck.

Ilya - obviously - opens the door. He has red eyes, a T-shirt with a huge hole near his left hip and pants that have seen better days.

“Hollander?” the man asks dumbly.

“Hi, I heard that you have cute dogs in the neighbourhood, and from the roof you can see the sunsets?”

“Oh. I think it's too late to see the dogs. The neighbors usually go for walks around...”

“Christ, Rozanov, I was joking.”

“Oh.”

“You thought I came here to see puppies?”

“I don't know. Did you? I'm shocked, don't blame me. Wait, this is one of those weird fucking dreams I've been having lately, right?”

"You have dreams about me?"

"Uh, am I dreaming or not?"

"Can I go inside?"

"Are you a vampire?"

"What?"

"Vampires always ask before they go in."

"Christ, Rozanov, you're high."

"Oh, that would explain a lot."

Shane pushes into the house and follows Ilya, who looks back every now and then, as if checking to see if Hollander is real.

"You've come to see me," Rozanov states stupidly when they are in the kitchen.

"Yes, but given your condition I don't know if..."

"No!" Ilya pulls himself up as if Shane is about to get up and leave. "I took three tokes, I'll be fine in an hour. Do you want something to eat in the meantime? I can make you a tuna melt. Do you like tuna melt? Or... or do you want a tour?"

"A tour sounds good," Shane interrupts him, noticing that Rozanov is starting to spiral and his English is getting worse every second.

Ilya gives him a cursory tour of the house, then they go outside for a while. Ilya does not own the lake, as Shane does in his private cottage, but he can boast an impressive herb garden and a spacious Italian-style patio.

"It's about to be sunset," mumbles Ilya on the way back. "Do you want to see it from the roof?"

"And isn't that why I came?"

Shane refrains from grabbing Ilya's hand.

They climb to the roof, which is partly to blame for Shane being here at all. Ilya smiles at the memory of the day he got high with Svetlana and lost a bet.

“What's so funny, Rozanov?” asks Shane, sitting down by the edge.

“I downloaded Tinder because one time my friend and I bet that I would hit a rock on a can while standing on a roof of our icerink. I lost.”

“And *you* told *me* the first time we met, that *I* had vision problems.”

“I'm sorry. I really am. I want you to know that...”

“I know.”

Shane really *knows*.

They are silent for a moment, staring only at the setting sun with its pink and purple glow.

“I still don't know why you're here.”

“I'm sorry I said I preferred Ivan, as if you were a different person.”

“That was partly the case.”

“No, I just knew only the version of Ilya that you show to the world when you don't want to be hurt.”

“It doesn't change the fact that I was an asshole. I'm not surprised if you preferred the online version of me.”

“This is the same version of you that you are. You are a mistake I would make a second time, Rozanov.”

Ilya doesn't know if that's a compliment or an insult. Shane pays no attention to the setting sun, the city's skyline, or anything going on around him. He stares straight at Ilya, as if looking for some kind of answer.

“Shane.” The man's name sounds like a sigh in Rozanov's mouth.

“Ilya.”

“Can I kiss you?”

“Please.”

In a split second, Shane's hand finds its place on Ilya's neck and his lips gently touch the other man's lips. A sigh escapes Ilya's lips, something between excitement and relief. He weaves his fingers into Shane's dark hair and pulls him closer, while parting his lips a bit, hinting that tongues might join the kiss.

When they pull away from each other, the sun is already far below the horizon and the sky has darkened to an ink color.

“Will you tell me more about these dreams of yours?” asks Shane with his lips close to Ilya's ear.

“And will I find out why you came all the way here from your home instead of calling?”

“Tinder Surprise, Rozanov.”

Chapter End Notes

It's almost over! All that's left is the epilogue, which briefly wraps up the story and at the same time addresses the issue that Ilya and Shane canonically had the biggest problem with—living in hiding and coming out.

Stay tuned, guys! I appreciate kudos and all your kind comments!

Chapter 7

When Shane opens his eyes, he doesn't know where he is for a few seconds. It still happens to him, although relatively less often.

About seven months have passed since the day Shane first visited Ilya at home. In the meantime, a few things have happened: first, the team accepted Ilya, or at least no longer treated him with hostility and had no problem passing the puck to the ex-Boston Bear. As for Ilya's father's will — or rather, his mother's belongings — little has changed, as Ivan Rozanov is still alive and Ilya is about halfway through his citizenship case. For now, only those closest to them know about Ilya and Shane's relationship — Rose, for obvious reasons, Sventlana for exactly the same reason, as well as Shane's parents, who walked into his flat at the wrong moment, then Hayden Pike and a few other close teammates. However, most of the team is unaware, and even though the men spend a large part of the week together in one or the other's flat, they commute to training separately, at appropriate intervals. Ilya and Shane were considering coming out at a later date, but for now they are in the spotlight for completely different reasons. It is not every day that players from two teams competing as fiercely as Boston and Montreal start playing together, and, as the Voyageurs' coach predicted, it caused quite a scandal. Rozanov tried to cut off all questions about personal matters, explaining his reasons only briefly, but neither the press conference nor the interviews and statements did much good. The paparazzi followed him for a good three weeks, which was hell for the couple, who already had to hide. Hollander and Rozanov had no choice but to meet only at training sessions for almost a month, staying longer under the pretext of going to the gym to make up for lost time with quick sex in the broom closet.

Ilya does not say it out loud, but he is terrified of what will happen in the media if they ever announce their relationship. Because if a simple player transfer, a relatively common occurrence in the world of hockey, caused such a stir, it is hard to imagine what might happen if two former rivals, who are also men, announced that they were together. Besides, Ilya immediately warned Shane that going public with their relationship was out of the question, at least until the inheritance case was settled and he obtained citizenship. Because while he was willing to sacrifice the opportunity to return to Russia for Shane, he could not live without citizenship and did not agree to irretrievably lose what Irina Rozanov had left behind.

Ilya and Shane decided to forget about their arch-rivals phase (or as Rose preferred to call it, *enemies to lovers*, whatever that meant), although they still sometimes use arguments during their fights that come dangerously close to tearing up those wounds. Sometimes Ilya says *yeah, run to the bog*, when Shane tries to stop an argument. Sometimes Shane, in anger, says *at least my team accepts me*. Communication is still something they should work on. But overall it's good. Good enough that Shane is currently where he is — in Ilya's bed.

That day, after Shane has had time to come to his senses and remember why he is in the bright, cozy bedroom, he realizes that it must be very early. Ilya is not lying next to him, so he has probably headed up for a gym or he is on a walk with Anya. On weekdays, he usually got up at five o'clock so he could get to bed around six and cuddle with Shane before the training. On weekends, they both got up later.

It's Sunday, so without checking his watch, Shane assumes it might be seven, maybe eight in the morning at the latest. He wonders whether to wait for Ilya as usual, but he's too warm, uncomfortable, and his body is clamoring for coffee, so he decides to go downstairs and surprise his boyfriend with breakfast. He doesn't bother dressing his pants and imposes only one his flannel shirts on his shoulders.

Once he's downstairs, he hears rustling coming from the kitchen, which means Ilya has managed to return.

“Hey, Ilya... *Jesus, fuck!*”

Sitting at the table is Scott Hunter with a mug of coffee in his hand, with which he is just trying to obscure the view of a half-naked Shane. Even being shocked, his face doesn't betray much emotion.

“For God's sake, Hollander, put something on.”

Shane instantly pulls on his hips the pants he left on the dresser near the kitchen the previous day. Hunter may have seen his naked ass when they were showering after the All-Stars Game, but he shouldn't necessarily see the love bites on Shane's thighs now.

“*Excuse me*, I wasn't expecting visitors at fuck o'clock,” Shane explains half-derisively. After a moment, he realizes that because of Ilya's constant presence, he's starting to refer to Hunter in the same sneering manner.

“I was invited,” he says.

Indeed, Ilya invited Hunter Scott to talk about his coming out, all the difficulties and obstacles involved, the paparazzi, and the potential scandal. Rozanov won't admit it out loud, but Hunter has been in the hockey world longer (at least a hundred thousand years) and has more experience. He can help them choose their narrative when they decide to come out.

“I don't know anything about it,” says Shane, because, *of course*, Ilya forgot to mention they're having a guest.

“In that case, you should watch Ilya and his appointments more. One day he'll forget about his own wedding.”

Shane blushes at this comment, but replies nothing. He sits down across from Scott and grabs a pot of coffee.

“I keep forgetting that you two are dating. Really, Hollander, I might have expected something better from you.”

“What the fuck was that supposed to mean?” Ilya suddenly appears in the doorway.

Shane turns his head and can't hide his smile. Ilya stands with his hand on his hip, waiting for an answer. He is wearing this ridiculous tight pants he wears while running. Scott sighs and puts his mug down on the table.

“It means,” the man explains. “That you are an irresponsible, smug asshole. And Hollander is...”

Shane raises an eyebrow, wanting to know what kind of person he supposedly is.

“Hollander is well-behaved.”

“Mm... no,” Ilya comments. “He's an asshole. A match made in hell.”

“Hollander, if you ever need a good lawyer for your divorce with *this one* then I know a good...”

“Oh, right, Scott, thanks for reminding me, because I forgot. We got engaged.”

Scott whoops and picks his nose, feeling the coffee that, instead of flowing down his throat, flew upward, straight to his sinuses.

“You did *WHAT?*”

Shane hides his face in his hands and tries to hide his amusement.

“Surprise!” shouts Ilya.

“You're not engaged,” Scott states. “Neither of you has a ring on your finger. Besides, you'll kill each other sooner than get married. Six months ago a referee had to separate you two because you were arch-enemies.”

Ilya shrugs his shoulders and sits on Shane's lap.

“Eh, old story. The quarrel of lovers is the renewal of love, or something like that.”

“Hollander, say something, or I'll go apeshit.”

“You're right, we're not engaged,” Shane says, and a smile creeps onto his lips. “Ilya doesn't have the balls to ask.”

“Ouch, right in the heart.” Ilya clutches his chest theatrically.

“Do you want to ask me something, Rozanov?”

Ilya looks at Scott and then at Shane. He knows this is a dare.

“Hollander, will you marry me?”

“Sure.”

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