the boy who blocked his own shot

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the boy who blocked his own shot

by alasse

Summary

Ilya’s dad dies right before the 2017 All-Star Game, so he never learns that Shane and Rose broke up. While he’s in Russia, a threat from his brother makes him ask Svetlana for help and marry her so he can get a US green card—it’s meant to be a discreet, simple thing, but the Boston tabloids get a hold of it and then it’s all over social media. Three months later, Shane Hollander holds a press conference to share two things: he's leaving Montreal to play for the Ottawa Centaurs, and he's gay.

Notes

Title and epigraph from the song of the same name by Brand New.

Thank you, A MILLION TIMES OVER, to M and Y for their cheerleading, epic beta work, and tolerating a lot of questions about hockey.

See the end of the work for more notes

August 2020

Shane is cooling down in the exercise room, doing some stretches, when Bood finally comes in to get him.

"They're ready for you, Hollzy."

Shane nods and gets up, follows Bood through the maze of hallways towards the GM's office.

All Bood told Shane at the end of practice was that the GM and Coach Wiebe wanted to talk to both of them, and he'd asked if Shane didn't mind waiting.

Bood looked pretty calm about it, but then again, Shane has never known Zane Boodram to be anything *but* calm except when he's on the ice, and then he looks like he wants to rip people's heads off.

Shane, on the other hand, has been doing breath counts and staving off a low-level panic attack for about eighteen minutes.

Back before, well, *everything*, back when Shane was still with the Metros and still a captain, talking to the GM and the coach could be a little nerve-wracking, but never panic-inducing.

Now, though.

Now he wonders if the rug is going to be pulled out from under him all over again.

They stop in front of the door, but Bood waves him inside the office, and that's when Shane realizes he's going in there alone.

It feels so much like four years ago, suddenly, when he was walking by himself into the Montreal GM's office, utterly heartbroken and reckless as a result.

The memory makes his breath stutter in his chest, and before he can stop himself he's turning to look at Bood—whatever his face is doing makes Bood's eyes soften a little and put a hand on Shane's shoulder.

"It's all gonna be okay, Hollzy, don't worry."

Shane nods, goes inside, and sits down.

As it turns out, he isn't getting put on waivers or traded.

It's somehow worse.

"Ilya Rozanov's agent reached out to us—he's looking to move from Boston, and the Centaurs are his first choice. They're willing to give us a lot of wiggle room with the cap space, too. We wanted to give you a heads up because of the whole rivalry business, make sure you feel comfortable with it."

And it's just like the Centaurs, really, to put player comfort first, to take the time to talk to an assistant captain about decisions like these.

Shane knows what he has to say, though—the Centaurs are desperate for center depth, and players like Ilya Rozanov aren't exactly beating down Ottawa's doors. If he wants to come, they need to take him.

No matter how Shane feels about it.

So he makes the right noises, says the right words. Hopes against hope the paralyzing fear isn't showing on his face.

He makes it all the way out of the office and out of the rink, all the way to his car, before he lets himself truly feel it.

Ilya Rozanov is coming to the Centaurs.

Ilya Rozanov—the first man Shane ever kissed, the first man Shane ever fucked, the first and only man—only *person*—Shane's ever truly loved.

And the man whose surprise Vegas marriage to his childhood friend shattered Shane's heart to fucking pieces.

Fuck.

January-March 2017

The only reason Ilya answers Alexei's call is because he's ready for *anything*—even his asshole brother—to interrupt the non-stop scrolling he's been doing, reading comment after comment on just how perfect Shane Hollander and Rose Landry are together.

His eyes keep zeroing in on how they're holding hands, on Shane's smile.

Without wanting to, he compares it to the times Shane's smiled at him, over the years, and he feels like shaking himself in the past for not paying enough attention, for pretending to be uninterested.

He knows he made Shane smile—made him laugh, even during sex, before, after.

But he doesn't think he remembers Shane's smiles as well as he wants to, as well as he'd need, to decide if the Shane in the photograph is smiling for real or just pretending—if he's Shane Hollander, happy and in love, or *Shane Hollander*, the perfect brand, the man who wears Rolexes and sells Adidas.

And then he tells himself he shouldn't care either way.

They met up a few times a year, they fucked, that's it.

Whether Shane is truly happy or not isn't any of Ilya's business.

But before he realizes he's doing it, he's back on Instagram, back looking at the photographs of them, looking at that smile again and thinking—the only photograph that *he* has with Shane, Shane looks reluctant, not to mention that he was about two minutes from nearly crying in a bathroom.

So maybe it's better that this isn't any of Ilya's business, because when it was, he didn't do such a great job at it.

Alexei's call doesn't just distract Ilya, though—it devastates him.

"Ilya, papa is dead."

And with those four words, Ilya is flung into the worst week of his life.

He knows without anyone having to say it that he's expected to pay for absolutely everything, and he does. The hearse, the clothes, the coffin, the dinner, the drinks.

He also he's meant to be grieving in a very specific way: upset, certainly, but not unmanned. Sad but not overly so, because grieving too hard is an indulgence not to be afforded.

Ilya's less good, at managing that.

He feels much the way Moscow looks in the raw January winter: dark and barren, inhospitable.

He feels *bereft*.

Not of his father, not exactly. Of who his father might have been, if he'd liked Ilya more, or Ilya had managed to be a better son. Of the possibility of once, just once, hearing him say he was proud.

And in this miasma of feelings he's in, Alexei is his usual self and demands even more.

"I took care of papa every day for the last year, Ilya, I deserve something for it."

Ilya wants to scream *"I have nothing left to give"*, wants to cry *"Is there anything I can do so you won't hate me?"* but what he ends up saying is, "You can have my apartment. Just—never talk to me again."

Alexei stares at him in silence for a moment, something that looks like hurt warring with hatred on his face, but he takes Ilya's keys when he hands them over.

As he walks away, though, Ilya can't help but think of the old tale of the scorpion and the frog that his mama used to tell him.

There's a part of him that's entirely certain that Alexei will strike back at Ilya, somehow, no matter how bad it would make things for himself.

Maybe rumors about drugs or bribes, which would muddy the waters even if nobody would do too much about them—what are drugs and bribes in Russia?

Maybe more; maybe worse. Ilya's always thought Alexei had some suspicions, about Sasha and him.

Nothing concrete, nothing that would make him put it on the record because that would've meant losing Ilya's money and, even if he would've never admitted it, he wouldn't have wanted to do that to their father.

But now? Now, Alexei is likely to get whatever petty revenge on Ilya that gets into his head while he's out of his mind on cocaine, and it'll be too late to take it back when he sobers up.

So Ilya needs an escape plan.

He needs citizenship somewhere else.

Before he can stop himself, his mind offers up the image of Shane Hollander, the ludicrous thought of him and Ilya maybe…

Ilya suppresses it ruthlessly.

There's no room for anything like that, and there never will be.

Not in the MLH, not between the two of them. And anyway, Hollander is probably going to get married to Rose fucking Landry.

"Are you okay?"

Ilya glances up from where he's been staring at his shoes, spiraling in silence, and looks at Sveta.

He loves her, and she loves him. This much is true. But they're not *in* love with each other, even if it would be so much easier for them if they were.

And so he knows exactly what he's doing, asking her what he's going to—what it's going to cost her.

But she was born in the US, has multiple citizenship.

So.

"Will you marry me?" he asks.

Sveta looks at him quietly for a moment, her eyebrows raised. It feels like she's staring into the very depths of him, the scared, rotten parts.

"We can get the green card process started as soon as we marry, and after two years with a temporary green card you can request a ten-year renewal," she answers, finally, decisive. "So let's say—four years? And I get money to finance my own dealership with the divorce."

It both comforts and wounds Ilya, that she's clearly researched.

That she's apparently prepared for this possibility for a while. But then again, she's always been more clear-eyed than him, and maybe more ruthless, because she's had to be.

So Ilya nods.

"Where?"

"Vegas," Sveta promptly responds, and at his raised eyebrow, gives a shrug. "It's a cliché for a reason. We can preregister for a wedding license online or just go pick one up and get married right away. And so many people do it there, easier for nobody to notice."

It makes sense—Ilya isn't the most famous person of all time, but it's unlikely a sudden marriage would go unnoticed in Boston.

So, with a plan in place, Ilya packs up the few things he actually wants from his apartment—mostly papers, the two photographs he has left of his mother, and his first pair of skates—and drops off the keys with Alexei's wife, unwilling to go another round with his brother.

Ilya doesn't let anybody know he's back in the US, not even his team.

He wants to get the marriage out of the way, before anyone can talk him out of it, before *he* can talk himself out of it.

Sveta is all business, arranging for a private plane to take them to Vegas and back the same day, choosing a chapel that is just reputable enough but not one of the too famous ones, and preregistering for their license.

And when the actual thing happens, there's a sense of unreality to it all—the fact that it's in Vegas, that there are people dressed as Elvis Presley and Santa Claus and wearing tuxes and wearing bikinis, that nobody asks whether they're sure, because why would anybody ask that at a Vegas wedding.

There's a split second, just as he's signing the certificate, where Ilya imagines doing this with someone else—where instead of Sveta's determined, fond eyes, he sees desperate, needy brown ones, where he thinks of saying Sh—Hollander's name, instead of Svetlana's.

He swallows the impulse like the bitterest of pills, and signs his name, and says the words, and just like that, he's married to Svetlana Vetrova and one step closer to having US citizenship.

The first couple of days after, there isn't any real change to his day-to-day life.

Svetlana will have to move in, of course, because they have to make *some* semblance of an effort so that the green card process goes well, but they made a mutual decision to give each

other a few days.

Sveta to get her life in order, figure out her lease, and Ilya… well.

He doesn't say it out loud, but both he and Sveta know it's to put away the Jane of it all, emotionally. Not that Sveta knows who Jane is, obviously, though Ilya's aware she knows it's actually a guy.

But then, some asshole gets a hold of a photograph of their wedding license and sends it to Deadspin, and maybe just the news of Ilya being married wouldn't have been a big deal, but Ilya being married to Svetlana Vetrova, daughter of the great Sergei Vetrov—former goaltender for the Raiders—and doing it in Vegas is enough for the Boston Herald to pick it up.

And for it to blow up on social media.

And for at least a fifteen minute digression on *Man in the Crease*.

"Listen, Ilya, this is actually good—we need to lean into the narrative fast," the lawyer his US agent works with tells him, looking serious and intent over Zoom. "You two are childhood best friends, this was a long time coming, and you losing your dad made it feel like there was no time to waste. It's as bulletproof as we can get, so that nobody thinks, well. The other thing."

That's what they've been calling it, *the other thing*.

Because Ilya's US agent, his Russian agent, and the lawyer all know why Ilya really got married, or have very accurate suspicions, anyway, but nobody's going to say it out loud.

"So I have to give fluff interview?" Ilya asks, frowning.

"No, not if you don't want to—we should release a statement, though. We can draft it, if you want, and you give us the green light."

"Yes, please," Ilya says.

He can't bring himself to write a stupid American romantic comedy about him and Sveta when he feels a little more like one of Tolstoy's short stories about dead horses.

Still, the statement does seem to help, much like his agent promised. Once the narrative is set, Ilya doesn't have to do too much outside of saying a couple of times that he doesn't plan to answer questions about his personal life for reporters to leave it alone.

The green card filing also goes off without a hitch.

So life goes back to a somewhat normal equilibrium, with one glaring exception.

For the first time in his professional career, Ilya feels what it's like to play against Shane Hollander as he’s heard him described by everyone else.

The so-called "hockey robot", the far-seeing play-maker who doesn't seem to react to chirps at all because he's just *that* focused, who's seeing the game so far ahead that engaging in the usual back-and-forth between hockey players seems to be a waste of his time.

Ilya always thought people were exaggerating—Hollander never acted anything less than fully engaged and present when playing against him, often incensed, often chirpy, always challenging.

The two games that Boston has against Montreal after his marriage, Hollander is challenging, sure.

But in the way a seamless wall of ice is challenging.

It's like he doesn't register Ilya at all—like Ilya is nothing special, not an arch-rival, not the person against whom everyone has defined Hollander's career, but just one more in the infinite number of faceless, generic obstacles Shane sets himself to conquer all the time, like being the fastest on an exercise bike or improving his face-offs or strengthening his back-hand.

Like Ilya isn't the one person in the entire world he's been measuring himself against for years, the way Ilya has been doing right back.

Ilya doesn't know how to describe the yawning hole that opens in his chest, when he looks into Hollander's eyes at center-ice and sees *nothing* looking back at him.

It's disconcerting enough that Ilya plays a pretty big part in Boston's loss in the first game.

And yet, even as he promises himself to do better the next time and actually does it—chirps his heart out, dogs every slide down the ice Hollander makes, scores two goals and assists on a third—he still comes out of the second game feeling the loser.

Because Shane isn't there.

His Shane isn't there.

It's just Shane Hollander, Prince of Hockey, and he doesn't react to Ilya any more than he reacts to the ice itself.

"Maybe it's for the best, no?" Sveta says, when he tries to talk it through with her, late one night over vodka. "The whole rivalry thing was getting old, I think. It's been, what? Nearly nine years? You two aren't children anymore."

It isn't untrue, but it doesn't take away the unsettled feeling in Ilya's chest.

He resolves to figure out some way to talk to Hollander next time they play—maybe clear the air, maybe somehow force him to throw a punch, because if Scott Hunter managed to make him do it, it really shouldn't be that hard for Ilya.

But then, right before the March trade deadline, Hollander holds a press conference to share two things: he's leaving Montreal to play for the Ottawa Centaurs, and he's gay.

Ilya watches the whole thing open-mouthed, barely believing the words that are coming out of Shane's mouth.

His eyes trace every inch of the face he knows so well—the freckles, the upturned nose, the serious eyebrows—for the slightest fucking hint as to what brought this on, any kind of a sign that Ilya can read and understand.

But it's apparently exactly what it seems: Shane fucking Hollander very seriously and calmly tanking his own career and moving from the team he's won two MLH Cups with to a team that hasn't seen the playoffs in ten seasons and has never won a Cup, and becoming the first out gay player in the entire league.

When the press conference is over and the stream makes way to some inane advertisement, Ilya barely makes it to the bathroom before throwing up everything he's eaten in the last day and a half.

He has to skip that day's game against New York with an undisclosed upper-body injury.

September 2020

The day that Ilya Rozanov is scheduled to start with the Centaurs, Shane makes a deliberate effort to hit every single part of his morning routine just right.

Routine has always been his saving grace.

Starting from when he was around ten or eleven and realized that some of his teammates or his teammates' relatives were maybe more interested in tripping him into a permanent injury so that scouts would stop talking about him, to his first days as an NHL rookie, to those first few weeks after the whole Rozanov Vegas marriage news broke, and the first entire month after he started with the Centaurs, strict routine has been the way Shane’s managed to get from day to day, hour to hour, minute to minute.

Weighing the ingredients for his protein shake so he doesn't think about the way people talk about him.

Measuring the exact depth of each squat he does in his head, so he doesn't have to measure the distance between who he wishes he was and who he is.

Counting each stride as his feet hit the ground, just so he doesn't have to be aware of the text thread that has been silent since around 2018.

And so on the day when Rozanov's press conference before his first morning skate with the team is scheduled, Shane wakes up exactly when his alarm sounds—no snoozing—drinks an entire glass of water without pause for breath, does five sun salutations, showers for exactly

twelve minutes, and takes out his electronic scale to measure every single thing in his smoothie.

He then wears what his mom calls his "lucky sweatshirt", but Shane likes to wear it because it's exactly the right texture and weight for this point in the season—not too cold, not too hot—*not* because he actually believes it's lucky.

When he gets to the practice rink, he knows he's exactly on time to skate alone for about half an hour, work on the corner shots he's been perfecting this month.

Whatever else is going to happen today, Shane has this.

He has a routine, and he has the ice.

"Shane, it's time," Coach Wiebe calls out, and Shane slides to a stop.

He looks towards the tunnel, where Coach Wiebe is standing with Harris, and he nods.

They discussed this, earlier in the week—the GM wants all the leadership there for Rozanov's press conference, including the A's, because this is the Centaurs. They want there to be no questions about the team welcoming Rozanov, they're not interested in reporters re-opening the Hollander-Rozanov can of worms.

And part of it is making sure their social media reflects that welcome, so on top of being there for the press conference, Harris is going to record small videos with some of the key players—Bood as the captain, of course, but also Hazy, Dykstra, and Shane himself.

"So, Shane, it doesn't have to be too much, okay? Just some basic things about how excited we are that Rozanov is coming over to the Centaurs, the usual stuff," Harris tells him, on the way to the locker room. "Be your usual, perfectly well-trained media self—it'll make great contrast with whatever insanity comes out of Hazy's mouth."

Shane nods, because he knows the score.

Harris tends to throw him towards the more traditional hockey outlets, including every single reporter from Montreal, while Bood, Hazy, and Dykstra create chaos with a bunch of podcasters.

"It's a diversity win, okay?" Harris explained to him once, back when he'd first started playing for Ottawa. "Boring gay people also deserve representation."

It had been about the most matter-of-fact reaction to his coming out Shane had gotten at that point—many had been horrified, like Coach Theriault and the Montreal GM, others enthusiastically supportive, like his parents and Rose and Hayden.

But Harris had simply mentioned it like it was one more fact about him, and not something that turned him into a completely different person or some sort of hero. So Shane had decided then and there that he would always do whatever Harris Drover asked him.

And today, that is to make a welcome video for Ilya fucking Rozanov, and then to stand by looking stoically pleased or whatever while he holds a his first press conference as a Centaur.

While he showers and gets dressed, Shane runs through possible things to say in his head, run-of-the-mill platitudes he's said a million times before about Rozanov—stellar competitor, strong north-south game, voice of experience in the locker room.

But when Harris actually presses record, what ends up coming out is mortifyingly sincere.

"I'm thrilled for the team, and I'm thrilled for myself—I've always wondered what it would be like to play on the same team as him," he says.

They were finally going to get that chance back at the 2017 All-Stars Game, but then Ilya's father passed away and, well. Obviously he wasn't showing up for a souped-up skills competition after that.

Harris, to his credit, doesn't miss a beat. "You two on the power play together is bound to be something to see—a real two-headed monster!"

"I like that. Yeah, definitely," Shane agrees. "I think the Centaurs is a pretty fitting place for a two-headed monster."

Harris' eyes shine at that, and Shane knows without having to ask that this is going to become some sort of hashtag, and that the video he just recorded is going to be everywhere.

Before he can decide exactly how to feel about it, though, one of the interns working for Harris tells them the press are arriving—which means it's nearly go time.

Which *also* means Rozanov is already here.

Feeling very much like a moth flying straight toward a bright, burning flame, Shane makes his way to the press room.

His first sight of Ilya wearing the red and black Centaurs jersey feels thrilling and terrifying in equal measure.

That's his teammate, now.

Whatever else he's been to Shane—rival, eternal challenge, lover, unmitigated pest, inescapable desire, utter heartbreak—he's now Shane's teammate.

And that has to come first.

So Shane puts on the calm confidence he wears as a second skin whenever he's within ten meters of anybody with a microphone or a camera, and steps into the room, takes his place next to Bood in the small section at the left of the podium that's been set up for them.

Rozanov glances his way once, and the fleeting eye contact leaves Shane more breathless than he'd like.

"Okay, everyone—I think we're ready," Harris calls out.

The media members—who have been milling around and talking among themselves—take their seats, and Rozanov sits down in the chair at the very center of the podium, flanked by the GM and by Coach Wiebe.

The press conference follows the usual ebb and flow of these things, predictable enough that it gives Shane enough space to breathe in and out and even zone out a bit—he's heard so many versions of all these questions and answers, about team chemistry and point production and building and re-building.

Rozanov answers mostly exactly as he should—he can't quite stop himself from throwing in some of his classic quips—but the press seem pretty much onboard.

It's all smooth sailing, really, until the very end.

"Rozanov, what do you say to the allegations that you decided to move to the Centaurs due to personal reasons?"

The question has a leading tone to it, and Shane can see that Harris is frowning just slightly at the reporter.

"Personal reasons? I mean—yes. Of course I moved for personal reasons. I personally wanted to play for Ottawa," Rozanov replies, deadpan.

Scattered laughter breaks out among the press, lessening the sudden tension, but the reporter presses on.

"I meant because of you splitting up with Svetlana Vetrova—some sources in Boston are saying it was pretty explosive," he says.

And now Harris is looking faintly murderous, so Shane wonders exactly how this guy got past his usual press-who-aren't-tabloid-rumor-chasers filter, which Shane knows very well he fine-tuned as soon as Shane joined the Centaurs, given, well. Everything.

Rozanov keeps his cool, though, and raises his eyebrows. "Are you asking if my ex-wife somehow got city of Boston in divorce settlement?"

More laughter.

"I don't know who these sources are, but Svetlana Vetrova and I made mutual decision to separate," he continues, and to Shane's ear he sounds a little bit like he's remembering his way through a written statement. "We are still very good friends, and I am still allowed to go to Boston. Playing here in Ottawa was simply opportunity I couldn't miss."

"Why's that, Ilya?" another reporter chimes in.

Ilya glances at Shane again, for a split second, before answering.

"Because I've always wanted to play on the same team as Shane Hollander."

It's a compliment that lands like a sudden bullet, in Shane's heart.

It sends him back to 2017, to what it felt like, to hear the news that Rozanov got married in Vegas.

He'd read the name—Svetlana Vetrova—and remembered Ilya talking about her, that day he'd made tuna melts for Shane. How Ilya liked her very much, how she knew everything there was to know about hockey.

It became so clear to him, then, the difference between them.

Ilya clearly did like women, too, and it seemed like he could replace Shane—and he had, in fact. So much so that he'd gotten married to a woman.

And Shane? Shane was faced with the stark, inescapable realization that he would never be able to replace Ilya, at least not unless he came out.

So he'd come out.

He'd come out, and he'd switched teams to do it, because the Centaurs had thrown out a life-saver just as the sheer lack of support from the Metros had made Shane scared he'd lose hockey in the process.

The years between then and now had been messy, in many, many ways, but Shane felt like he'd reached some sort of equilibrium at last.

And now here was Ilya Rozanov, newly a Centaur, apparently newly divorced, and happy—as always—to blow up Shane's house of cards.

Morning skate afterwards is an exercise in willful dissociation.

Shane uses every trick he's ever learned to keep focus, to skate hard, to do the drills Coach Wiebe and the staff had set up as perfectly as possible.

To treat Rozanov like just another teammate.

It's easier than it should be because Ilya is centering the second line and, at least for today, they don't focus on the power play.

When skate is over and they're back in the locker room, though, Shane notices *something*—a shift in Ilya's shoulders, a hesitant step forward—and he knows it means Rozanov intends to come over, say something to him.

Maybe have a moment.

But if Shane's routine has carried him this far, he really doesn't think it can carry him through a fucking *moment* with Ilya Rozanov.

Not while he's half-naked, not with the entire locker room watching.

So Shane does something completely outside of his usual practice day routine: he goes home without showering.

On the drive back to his house, though, he can't help but think that having an entirely successful morning practice has never quite felt more like defeat.

Fucking Rozanov.

October 2017-January 2018

The first time Ilya has sex with Shane Hollander after his marriage to Sveta, he swears to himself it will never happen again.

He just—he can't help himself.

The yawning distance between him and Hollander had stuck around for the remainder of last season, but at least then Ilya could more or less chalk it up to the fact that, post-trade, Hollander had apparently decided to drag the Centaurs towards playoff contention nearly single-handed.

It hadn't worked, not really, but once the season was over and the Centaurs were literally just two points away from the wildcard spot and Shane had ended up with a 1.5 point per game average, most people stopped talking about how he had ruined his career.

Which Ilya guesses had been the whole point.

And then, of course, Scott Hunter had also come out as gay, even more explosively than Hollander, by making out with his boyfriend after winning the MLH Cup, so Shane Hollander being gay stopped being the only thing people were talking about.

The distance during the summer had also made sense, even if Ilya had missed the texting back and forth.

But with the new season underway, the idea of only ever facing hockey robot Shane Hollander itches under his skin in the worst way.

It's apparently bad enough that when he's in New York City playing the Admirals, Sveta sends him clear instructions to go to a gay club and fuck *anyone*, because he's becoming unbearable, according to her.

It's true that, contrary to what he'd expected when signing on the dotted line, his and Sveta's sex life has been more off than on. And despite getting a clear go ahead from her, he hasn't really gone looking for anyone else.

He rationalizes it as being careful because of the green card process, but, well.

With a *very* unsuccessful night at a gay club under his belt, and his dick finally looking like it was coming back to life when he was watching Hollander highlights to prep for their first game with the Centaurs, Ilya admits to himself that it's more likely than not a Shane Hollander thing.

Which is why, the next time they're playing Ottawa, he gets himself a room at the Four Seasons, tells Connors he'll have a solo room for the night, and opens up a text thread he archived for his own sanity a few months ago.

Four Seasons, Room 1221

No reply comes through before the actual game, but for the first time in a while, Ilya feels like he's playing his arch-rival again.

Hollander is a beast on the ice, forechecking Ilya like nobody's business, and glaring at him across the face-off circle instead of the blank stare that had become his usual.

It's exhilarating.

And when the knock on the door to his room comes later that night, Ilya feels every nerve ending in his body take notice.

He opens the door and doesn't get a word in before Hollander is shoving him back inside and towards the nearest wall, kissing him deeply—brutally—before going to his knees and shoving Ilya's pants and underwear down so he can start sucking his dick.

"Fuck, *Hollander*," Ilya gasps, almost immediately feeling like any rational thought is deserting him. "Wait—I need to—"

He needs to explain why he texted, why it's *okay* that he texted.

He needs Shane to know he isn't cheating on Sveta, because their marriage isn't real.

But Hollander grips his hips, hard, and glares up at him.

"What you need to do is shut the fuck up and not say another word if you want me to keep sucking your dick," he says.

Ilya opens his mouth, and Hollander starts leaning back, telegraphing that he's standing up.

"No, no—shutting up, I promise," Ilya tells him, reaching out to run a hand through Hollander's soft, silky hair.

Hollander gives him one more piercing look, and then nods, getting back to Ilya's dick like it's his only purpose in life.

Ilya stares down at him, biting his lip hard whenever more than moans threaten to come out, and thinks that for all the years they've done this, the sight of Shane Hollander on his knees never fails to astonish him.

"Hollander, wait—I'm—uh, I'm about to come," he gasps out, hoping this isn't against the rules, but unwilling to just come down Hollander's throat without a warning.

Shane just swallows him down a bit further, nearly all the way down, and it's so insanely hot that Ilya's eyes roll back into his head and he feels himself come.

It takes him a moment to come back to himself, and when he glances down, he sees that Hollander is taking matters into his own hands, jerking himself off.

"No," Ilya says, going down to his knees so he can straddle Hollander. "Let me, let me."

And he takes Shane's dick into his hand, jerking him off and kissing his neck and the side of his face and every other part his mouth can reach, the taste and heat of him addictive.

It doesn't take Hollander long until he comes, too, and they both collapse on the floor, Ilya's body blanketing Hollander's as they gasp for breath.

It takes a few minutes, but eventually the cool marble of the floor starts feeling uncomfortable, and Ilya becomes uncomfortably aware of the fact that he's still half-dressed when the zipper of his jeans starts digging into his upper thigh.

He also thinks that, whatever Hollander says, they really do need to talk.

But Hollander puts his formidable core strength to use and shifts Ilya away from him with his hips and thighs before getting up and buttoning up his jeans.

It's so unexpected—Ilya knows that Shane hates the sensation of bodily fluids on his skin, he always cleans up in the bathroom before leaving—that Ilya doesn't really react until Hollander is practically out of the door.

There are so many things Ilya wants to say, before Shane goes—about his own marriage, but also about how much he admires Hollander for coming out, how he's been worried about whether players are giving him too much shit for it, even about his backhand.

But what he ends up saying is, "Hollander, are you okay?"

It stops Hollander in his tracks right before he reaches the door, and he turns just slightly back to meet Ilya's eyes.

He looks—he looks so *young*, somehow.

Almost like he looked back on the rooftop in Vegas, after their rookie season, the slightest glint of what could be tears in his eyes.

"See you later, Rozanov," he answers, blinking away whatever vulnerability Ilya saw in a split second.

And just like that, Hollander's gone, and Ilya promises himself they won't do this again.

They do it again, of course.

For the next four months, they have sex whenever their teams play against each other.

It's always at a hotel—Ilya never gets to see whatever real estate wonder Shane has gotten himself in Ottawa, and it would obviously be awkward for them to meet at Ilya's place in Boston—and it's always rough and basically wordless.

In fact, the one time Ilya persists in trying to talk, Shane walks out mid-blowjob, leaving Ilya with his pants open on the bed.

As time goes on, though, whatever itch-scratching this thing between them is achieving gives way to something Ilya can only describe as an *ache*.

He misses how it used to be. He misses—he misses the moments of tenderness, of laughter. The way it felt to discover that the Prince of Hockey was a sweet, funny man who folded his clothes before sex and always forgot to take off his socks. The way it felt to just hold each other.

And so the next time they see each other—an Ottawa home game—Ilya has to say it.

"I don't think we should do this anymore."

Hollander pauses with his sweatshirt half-on, then finishes putting it on with one jerky movement before turning to glare at Ilya.

"Oh, so now I'm not even good enough to fuck?" he asks, raising his eyebrows.

"No, no, Hollander, that's not it," Ilya replies quickly, before pausing for a moment. He tries to think through how to say it, how to explain. "It's just that this—it doesn't make either of us feel good in the end, I don't think. It feels—it feels like agony, no?"

Shane just looks at him in silence for a long moment, and Ilya can see his eyes redden, the slightest trembling of his lower lip.

He forces himself to sit still, swallows down the words that want to come out desperately—*never mind, it's okay, let's keep doing this forever if it's all we can do*—and eventually Shane just lets out a sigh that sounds exhausted.

"Let's stop, then, Rozanov," he says quietly, his face a mask again, his dark brown eyes remote. "I guess I'll see you around."

And Ilya has never been more grateful that he has a hotel room to himself because he thinks that if he has to talk to another person in the next eight hours, he won't be able to keep himself from bursting into tears.

As it is, he wakes up to a pretty damp pillow.

By the time the next All-Star Game rolls around, Shane Hollander is very publicly dating some architect called Ben from Ottawa, who sounds incredibly boring and perfect for him.

And Ilya?

Ilya never thought he'd be grateful to the MLH for splitting them into North America vs. Europe again. Regardless of how many Finns he has to talk to about their fucking cousins.

October-December 2020

A few weeks after Rozanov starts with the Centaurs, Shane's routines stop working.

His passes don't connect as well, he's missing shots he hasn't missed in years, and he's starting to lose face-offs to the rookies during practice.

Bood doesn't say anything immediately, but he sends Shane looks that are more and more concerned, and Hazy starts to leave fun-sized Snickers in his stall.

Rozanov—he's not even a little bit bothered about it.

He focuses on his own game, acts like the kind of leader in the locker room Shane has heard of for years: funny, demanding, inspiring. But he's also respectful of Bood's leadership, even of Shane's. Despite having been a captain for years, he doesn't seem to resent having to take a step back.

Still, Shane knows it's only a matter of time before Coach Wiebe offers Rozanov an A. And, frankly, with the way Shane's playing, he doesn't think it's out of the realm of possibility for Coach to offer him *Shane's* A.

Which is why he's absolutely expecting it, when Coach Wiebe asks him to stay back after another lackluster practice where their power play was an absolute shitshow.

"Shane—" Coach Wiebe starts.

"I know, I'm sorry," Shane interrupts. "I promise I'll get it together. I've been stepping up my off-ice training regime, and I'm going to be much more careful with my diet, and—"

"Wait, wait, Shane, stop," Coach Wiebe says. "I have no doubt you're already being as mindful as it's possible to be, I know you. I wanted to ask, well. I wanted to ask if you're okay?"

And it doesn't matter that Shane's been on the Centaurs for a little over three seasons. It still takes Shane aback, every time he's treated as a person first and a player second.

"I—I could be better," he admits. "It's, um. It's been a little more destabilizing than I thought it would be, you know…"

"Rozanov," Coach Wiebe offers.

"Yeah," Shane says faintly, breathing out. He can't let Wiebe get the wrong idea, though, not when Ilya isn't at fault, at least not directly. "But, Coach—it's on me, not on him. He's been, um. He's been putting in the work."

"So have you, Shane," Coach Wiebe says. "I hope this isn't a surprise to hear, but you at eighty percent is like most people's one hundred and ten. And I do understand that getting used to a new team dynamic—a new dominant center like Rozanov—well. It's not the easiest thing, to tame a double-headed monster, is it?"

Shane huffs out a laugh.

As expected, Harris has made that phrase the tagline for the *new era of the Centaurs.* The only reason Shane's mom hasn't gotten him to do an advertising campaign with Rozanov that plays on the theme is because he's been very selective about picking up calls lately.

"No, it isn't, but I promise I'll get through this," Shane says.

"I'm sure you will," Coach Wiebe says. "But, here's a thought—maybe you and Rozanov can get through it together?"

And Wiebe doesn't need to know the images that immediately flash to Shane's mind, all the myriad ways Rozanov and him have been, and have gotten through things, together.

It takes Shane a moment to reply. "Yeah. Yeah, uh, you're right, of course. I'll talk to him."

"Good man, Hollander," Coach Wiebe says, standing up from his chair and clapping Shane on the back. "Now get out of here, I have to go home because I promised my wife I'd make her some roast chicken tonight."

Shane steps out of the office and makes his way to the locker room, expecting to find it completely empty.

But of course, because it's been that kind of day, Rozanov is there.

Kind of like the universe wants to make sure Shane keeps his word to Coach Wiebe.

Shane nods at Rozanov before crossing over to his stall where he fiddles with his clothes, making sure they haven't inexplicably creased in the hanger, while he tries to figure out how to ask for a private conversation when he's mostly avoided being alone with Ilya since he started with the team.

"Everything was okay?" Ilya asks, breaking the silence and startling Shane slightly.

He turns, and sees that Rozanov is a little closer and looking at him with slightly furrowed eyebrows and with poorly concealed concern.

"Okay?" Shane echoes, confused.

"With Coach. Are you okay?" Ilya repeats.

"Oh," Shane says. "Yeah—I mean, no, not entirely. You and I both know I haven't been playing at my best, so—"

"You and I both do not know this," Rozanov interrupts, frowning slightly. "You are point per game average so far, Hollander, top five in assists… I score more goals because I always score more goals, but that's it."

"Fuck you, you do not," Shane says reflexively. Then he sighs, shakes his head slightly. "Come on, Rozanov, I know you can see it, too. I'm—I'm not as focused as I need to be. And I need to get it together before the season goes much further."

Rozanov looks at him quietly for a moment.

"Okay, so what you need?" he says.

And if ever there was a better opening…

"I need—*we* need to talk. Properly. I know it's on me, that we haven't, but," Shane pauses, tries to think of how to put it. Doesn't come up with anything that won't sound ridiculously over-dramatic. How do you even soften something like *I feel like my heart is in a million pieces because of you but only you can fix it*? "Anyway. It's not working, clearly, so. Can we talk?"

Rozanov nods immediately. "Yes. Where?"

Shane opens his mouth, about to suggest one of the conference rooms, but stops himself. If they're really going to clear the air, they can't worry about being overheard. And he can't quite bring himself to offer his own place—isn't sure he'll be able to deal with the phantom presence of Ilya Rozanov in his living room and his kitchen, considering how hard it was to do that back in Montreal.

So he looks at Rozanov, stumped.

"We can talk at my place. Today? Early dinner?" Rozanov suggests, looking as determined as he always has when he has a plan to execute.

"Yeah, that's. That's perfect. Thank you," Shane says.

"I text you address," Rozanov says.

Neither of them acknowledges why exactly Rozanov already has his phone number—there's enough plausible deniability given all the random group chats the team has—but Shane can't help but wonder if he's still *Jane* in Ilya's contacts.

He remembers how it felt like, when he switched the name from *Lily* to *Ilya Rozanov* in his own phone before deleting everything they'd ever exchanged between them. He'd done it right after that night when Rozanov told him they needed to stop, that it felt like agony, what they were doing while he was married.

He'd been right, of course.

But stopping entirely, losing years of messages between Jane and Lily, that had been a new kind of agony.

On the drive to Rozanov's place, Shane tries to make a plan. Of exactly what to say, how to say it. There's so much, between them, so much history and hurt, that it feels like one word said wrong could send them spiraling out of control.

He figures—just, apologize for being weird. Promise to do better. Call a truce? Even though they aren't exactly in a fight?

Before he can come up with anything more solid, though, he's arrived, and he figures stalling in his car is definitely not the way to start whatever this is going to be.

He rings the doorbell, and Rozanov opens the door and—Shane is thrown back to that bright afternoon, back in Boston. Where they had a little more time than usual, and sunlight, and tuna melts.

Where everything kind of went wrong.

He blinks quickly, forcing himself back into the present.

"Uh, hi. Thanks for having me," he says.

"Welcome," Rozanov says, stepping back to let Shane inside. "I made big salad with pasta and chicken for dinner, is okay?"

It's unexpected enough that it stops Shane in his tracks.

"Salad?"

Rozanov shrugs. "You told Dykstra two days ago you talked to team nutritionist about diet, so I figured salad, pasta, and protein would work?"

It's so thoughtful, so kind, it feels like it pierces through Shane. And, god, he needs to keep it together. He can't cry over *salad*.

"It's perfect," he says.

Rozanov beckons him towards the kitchen, where their places are set side by side on the bar.

There's a can of ginger ale and a glass of water waiting for Shane, and if it was crazy to cry over salad, tearing up over ginger ale isn't much better.

They start eating, exchanging appreciative hums, and about halfway through, Rozanov angles towards him slightly, gives him a considering look.

"So. Assistant Captain Hollander. What did you want to talk about?"

Shane takes a deep breath, tries to remember his game plan.

"I wanted to clear the air, mostly," he says. "I *am* an A, and it's part of my responsibility to be welcoming to any new players we get—to foster a good environment. And I know I haven't done that, with you, like I should've. Because, well. Because of everything."

Rozanov looks at him for a moment, then spears another piece of chicken from his salad and chews it thoughtfully.

"I know it was probably a shock," he says, after he swallows. "I should have called, texted, maybe, before it was official, but I was—we didn't leave in the best of terms, last time we saw each other. I'm not sorry I came to Ottawa, but I'm sorry it's been hard for you."

"No, I'm the one who's sorry. I—I was a mess, back then," Shane says, raising a shoulder slightly. "I was broken-hearted, and a mess. But it's not on you, to deal with that. It's my responsibility."

Rozanov looks at him for a moment. "Well, it's a *little* bit my fault, no?" he says, eyes squinting slightly and gesturing with one of his hands.

It's so unexpected—so *Ilya*—that Shane snorts out a laugh.

He'd forgotten, how even in the most awkward of situations, Rozanov could make him laugh.

"Also, I had broken heart, too," Ilya continues, voice serious, his incredibly mobile face suddenly solemn. "So I understand."

Shane tilts his head, curious. "You did?"

Ilya nods. "Of course. I—I married Sveta because after my father died, I needed a way out of Russia that was permanent, needed passport, and she was good friend. She *is* good friend. But it wasn't true love, it wasn't any of the things the reporters said. It was just one friend helping another," he says.

It brings Shane up short, somewhat.

"I thought—I mean, I remembered, when you talked about her. How she was beautiful and knew everything about hockey," he says. "When I heard the news, I just figured…"

"Yes, I can see why you would," Ilya says, nodding a bit. "But she's only ever been good friend. And later, when I saw your press conference…"

Ilya trails off, then, glancing away and rubbing a rough hand across his cheek.

"When you saw my press conference, what?" Shane presses, because he has to know.

Because after all these years, these misunderstandings, he has to know.

Ilya looks back at Shane, and his eyes are shiny with unshed tears. "I was so angry that I hadn't waited. You were there, being so brave, telling the world who you are, and I—I married someone I shouldn't have because I was scared."

And, *oh*. Oh, it feels like Shane's heart is breaking all over again.

"Ilya, you—you were trying to find safety," Shane says, emphatic. "You were being *smart*."

"Maybe. Maybe," Ilya says. "But it was still—it hurt. And I couldn't stop thinking about you, missing you, so I texted, and…"

He trails off, and Shane grimaces a bit.

Neither of them were exactly at their best, during those last months of 2017.

The sex was great, because that's never been a problem with them, but. Everything else was a mess.

Shane remembers being so terribly, deeply hurt.

Thinking he could somehow fuck Ilya out of his heart, even though every time they saw each other again had made it worse. The horror of doing something so utterly against what he thought his own character was—consciously letting himself be the “other”, condoning Ilya while he was cheating on Svetlana—but powerless to stop showing up every time Ilya sent a text, because having any part of Ilya was better than nothing at all.

Until Ilya forced them to stop.

And then Shane tried dating someone else. Ben had been lovely, the son of a friend of his dad’s, and just… completely wrong for Shane. Quiet, accommodating, not really interested in hockey. It had been a disaster. It had only made him miss Ilya more.

"Agony," Shane finally says, breaking the fragile silence. "Yeah. That—that wasn't the smartest thing we've ever done."

"It wasn't," Ilya agrees. "But we're—we can be better now, yes? Better to each other, better to ourselves. Maybe we can even be friends. We're older, we're on the same team…"

Shane isn't sure can actually be just friends with Ilya Rozanov. Not when sitting next to him for the amount of time he already has makes him feel electrified.

But he can try—he has to. He promised Coach Wiebe, promised himself.

"We can, absolutely," he says.

"Good," Ilya says, with a decisive nod. He turns back to his salad, picking through the spinach until he can find another piece of chicken. "You know, I thought it was crazy, when you decided to leave Montreal for Ottawa. But I see the potential now."

"I didn't—I didn't actually want to leave Montreal," Shane says softly.

He's never really told this to anyone—his mom and dad and his agent know, of course, but Shane hasn't talked about the shitshow of those days with anyone, has stuck to the palatable media narrative. But he feels safe, telling Ilya the truth.

"What do you mean?" Ilya asks.

"I—I called their bluff," Shane says. "When I decided to come out, they more or less told me that if I was determined to come out publicly, they'd be trading me to another team to do it, and I. Well, I called their bluff. Only it turned out it wasn't a bluff."

Ilya looks flabbergasted.

"People have told me all my life to relax, to stop planning so much, and you know what?"

"What?"

"It's fucking terrible advice," Shane says, with a sad laugh. "I went in there without my agent, without my mom, without any semblance of a plan, so certain that the GM and Coach Theriault would have my back, and—and they just didn't."

"What did they say?" Ilya asks, frowning.

"Basically that while they were *okay* with me being gay, they saw no need for me to come out and make a spectacle of myself, distract from hockey," Shane replies. "They also basically said that they'd already put a lot on the line, drafting me, making me captain, since I wasn't the traditional kind of hockey player."

"Tradition—what does that mean?" Ilya looks genuinely mystified, the way he'd look in some of the early pressers of his rookie season.

And Shane understands why it wouldn't be that obvious to him, but, well. It's been part of the daily pressure of his life since he decided he wanted to play hockey for a living.

"It means I'm not white, Ilya," Shane says, with a small shrug.

It's something to see, the way Shane can see the sheer offense—the rage, almost—make its way through Ilya's face and body.

"Those—those—*mudak*—I will kill them, Hollander," he says, seething. "Kill them right now if you want."

"I don't want," Shane says, even though he feels a sharp zing of satisfaction over Ilya's offense on his behalf. The thought of that anger unleashed against Theriault is pretty satisfying, but not really productive. "What I want is for us to beat them where it hurts the most—win the Cup."

Ilya nods immediately. "We will win the most Cups. You won two for them in Montreal? Here, together we win at least three."

Shane grins, and Ilya grins back, and for a moment they just look at each other, smiling.

It feels like more than a promise—it feels like a vow.

And after that evening, their game clicks into place in the most unbelievable way.

To keep stretching the metaphor that Shane is now convinced will haunt him forever, it's like they've finally tamed the two-headed monster and it's eating every team they play against.

In a good way. For Ottawa, anyway.

Shane can see how opposing coaches keep yelling and talking to each other because they have to decide which D-pair they match with Shane and then with Ilya—there's no breathing space because the Centaurs basically have a first line twice over.

Things get better on a more personal level, too.

The locker room is lighter, Rozanov starts chirping Shane the way he chirps Bood and Dykstra and Bennett—although Shane doesn't think he's imagining the fact that the chirping Ilya sends his way sounds a tiny bit fonder.

Harris is thrilled, too, making them do videos for social media that become increasingly ridiculous as time goes on.

Ilya and Shane just *talk* now, too. And text. And go get lunch, or smoothies, or dinner.

It makes Shane feel a little crazy, the fact that they've had sex in every possible way but it's only now that they're very much not having sex that they do all the sorts of things that people tend to do when they're dating.

And they're also very much not dating.

Not because Shane wouldn't want to—he can admit that much, at least to himself.

But this truce, this new relationship they're building, Ilya playing with him on the Centaurs, it all feels a little too fragile. A little too good to be true.

Shane's waiting for the other shoe to drop, constantly terrified that the other shoe may in fact turn out to be him. Seeing things that aren't there, reaching for Ilya's hand or leaning in for a kiss, and finding that whatever they were is fully in the past, for Ilya.

So he tries to be content with what they have, and he also tries to do some damage control.

"Why did you tell Harris to stop joint videos, Hollander? Am I harshing your buzz?" Ilya asks, and it's playful, but Shane can detect an edge of real hurt in his tone.

"No, no, uh—no harshing," Shane says quickly. "It's just, um. Well, since I'm out, there's often a lot of speculation when I interact with any guys, especially hockey players? Like, people somehow found old pictures of Scott Hunter and me in Sochi and started saying we'd dated before. And when Barrett joined the team and we did some one-on-one videos, there was a lot of talk about the team trading around to get me a boyfriend… stuff like that."

"So you're worried people will say we might be together?"

Shane's actually worried about how much he'd *like* it if they thought that, if it was real, but that's not something he can say.

"No, it's not that at all. I'm not worried for me, Ilya," he says. "I just don't want you to feel pressured, you know?"

Ilya nods, a little thoughtful but also frowning slightly, and then Bood calls him over to talk about something, so Shane thinks that's pretty much it.

And then Ilya shows up to the team's Pride Night game with pride tape—in the bisexual flag colors.

The thing is, Shane loves Pride Night. A few years ago the mere idea of Pride Night would've probably given him a panic attack, thinking about what it would mean to wear the jersey and use the tape and what it would mean *not* to wear it, but now it feels like a night of vindication.

It's gotten real traction in the MLH as a result of Scott Hunter's grand romantic gesture, but Shane likes to think he had something to do with it, too.

The Centaurs go all out and the fans are really amazing about it, showing up with glittery banners and painted faces and breaking records for donating to 2SLGBTQ+ organizations in Ottawa every year.

But he also knows that, given his own "notoriety", it gets a lot of coverage, more than any other team's Pride Night except maybe New York's.

So when he sees Ilya taping up his stick before warm-ups, he goes over to him.

"Ilya, are you sure?"

"Sure about what?" Ilya asks, tongue sticking out a bit as he focuses on his taping.

"Everyone uses pride tape on the team, obviously, so using it isn't a big deal—not here in Ottawa, anyway. But, um. If you use the bi tape I think it'll be pretty clear you're making a statement?" Shane says, a little tentative.

Ilya looks up then, and his face is determined.

"Yes. I know."

Shane just stares at him, a little overwhelmed. Coming out for Shane was rough, but mostly because the Metros turned out to be assholes about it—his family, his friends, they were really there for him.

But Ilya coming out, it means… it means maybe never being able to go back to Russia.

Which is why him having US citizenship was important, of course. But still. It's a huge choice to make.

"Okay," Shane finally says. "We've got your back. *I've* got your back."

Ilya looks at him for a long moment, nods decisively, and then it's time for warm-ups to start, so the team skates out into the rink.

It’s an experience Shane never takes for granted, the fact that he's playing in the MLH, that he's skating out into a rink to do what he loves most, in front of people who are so invested, and he always pauses for a moment to take it all in.

But tonight, Shane can't look away from Ilya—the sheer awe on his face as he takes in the flags, the colors, the glitter.

"This—it's thanks to you," he says, skating closer to Shane, and his voice is more than a little choked up, his eyes shiny with unshed tears.

"Well, the whole Hockey For Everyone thing was started by Scott Hunter—" Shane starts to say.

"No, not Scott Hunter," Ilya interrupts. "You were the first one to stand up in front of people and say who you were, and. And I'm so grateful that I can share who I am, too."

Shane can't do anything but smile, then, and Ilya smiles back, and Harris takes a picture of them and uploads it to the Centaurs Instagram.

It gets shared and re-shared by what feels like a million people: Shane and Ilya smiling at each other so widely their eyes were crinkled, a stick with rainbow tape and a stick with magenta, lilac, and blue tape in their respective hands.

Shane posts it to his own Instagram, and tries to calm his racing heart when Ilya comments with a purple heart a few seconds later.

He doesn't really succeed.

January-July 2020

Ilya stares down at the envelope on the table in front of him, his US passport and certificate of citizenship spilling out.

It's finally done.

He's a US citizen, and he holds a US passport, and he's safe.

He has what he planned for, what Sveta helped him achieve. What he can acknowledge now, at least to himself, he tore his own heart out of his chest to get.

He hasn't spoken to Shane Hollander in almost two years.

He's seen him, obviously, played against him—no way not to in the division they're in.

But there's been nothing beyond professional interactions between them. Ilya hasn't even had it in himself to properly chirp Hollander—Marly has looked increasingly confused about

having to pick up the slack.

It wasn't until every thread between them was cut that Ilya really came to terms with how much his measuring of the months and years had been shaped along the fault lines of those days and nights he'd see Hollander.

The texting, the anticipation, the way those hours with him—in hotel rooms, in Hollander's ridiculous Montreal bed with too many pillows, in Ilya's place back in Boston—they felt like they were happening outside of Ilya's real life at the time. And now, now they feel like the only thing that was real.

It's not that Ilya has a bad life. His mama would chastise him for spitting up at the heavens just to hear him say it, and she'd be right.

He gets to play hockey at the highest professional level for a living and gets paid a ridiculous amount of money for it—money that is finally, entirely, his, now that he doesn't have to give so much of it to his asshole of a brother and the rest of his family.

He lives with his best friend, who basically sacrificed four years of finding someone she actually really wanted to marry or of having orgies every weekend or whatever she wanted to do just so he could be safe.

He's healthy, even if his shoulder twinges a little too much on cold days.

But the near-total absence of Shane Hollander in his life still feels like an abyss.

And Ilya feels like he deserves it.

Deserves the howling, cold emptiness of it, the nearly unbearable hurt he feels every time he thinks of everything they used to be, everything they *could* have been, and the nothing they are now.

This is where Sveta finds him, hours later, sitting in the dark of the kitchen staring at his US documents.

"Have you eaten?" she asks.

Ilya shakes his head slightly.

He's been aware of distant hunger for some time, but he's just as sure he'll probably throw up if he eats, so it seemed best not to risk it.

Sveta nods, and then turns the lights on.

"If I make some pasta, will you have some?"

"Mac and cheese?"

It's become a strange comfort food, for him. A bit like tuna melts used to be, but he can't really stomach them these days.

Sveta usually indulges him, and they've experimented with all sorts of fancy cheeses, truffle oil, garlic-infused breadcrumbs, pumpkin puree… but tonight, Ilya's pretty sure she'll make it as traditional as it can be.

He's not feeling too experimental.

Still, he forces himself to get up once Sveta starts puttering around in the kitchen—his mama always told him the cook shouldn't have to get the table ready *or* clean. She said it softly, of course, almost like a secret between her and him, because if his papa had ever heard her say it…

He feels her gentle presence, sometimes, when he's putting down plates and cutlery, when he gets lost in thought while hand-washing glasses.

It's not a bad thing.

Sveta brings over the food, Ilya pours them both a glass of white wine, and life starts feeling a little less dark.

Of course, Sveta being who she is, lets him get through about half a plate of mac and cheese before she gives him a serious look.

"We need to get a divorce."

Ilya chokes a bit on his wine, clears his throat.

"What—what do you mean?"

Sveta rolls her eyes, and gives him a look that is part exasperated, part fond. "Ilyusha… you know exactly what I mean. You've been staring at your passport for about a week now, without taking it out of the envelope. They're not taking it back. And that means it's time for you to take your life back. And for me to take back mine."

Ilya sits up straight, concerned.

"Sveta, if you've found someone, of course we can get divorced right now," he says. "I—you've done so much for me, I don't want to hold you back."

Sveta stretches out a hand across the table, waits until Ilya offers his own hand, and squeezes it gently.

"You could never hold me back, that's not it at all," she says, vehement. "I've loved our life together, Ilyusha, and I am so, so happy we could make sure you're safe for good. But—we've also been biding our time, a bit, you and I. I have a convenient excuse to not look for something real, and you… you seem to think that being lonely and hurt is a way to atone for the sin of not being single when Shane Hollander came out of the closet."

Sveta knows about Shane—that he's Jane.

Ilya broke down one particularly bad night, told her all about it. She was pretty great about it, except for the part where every once in a while Ilya would hear her mutter *"Shit, those hands"* and wanted to kill her, a little, because *yes* those hands, and Ilya missed them desperately, along with everything else that went with those hands.

"So we need to divorce?"

"We need to divorce," Sveta confirms. "And we need to come up with a plan so you can go get Hollander back."

Which is how Ilya's agent ends up reaching out to the Ottawa Centaurs.

You are calm and reposed, let your beauty unfold
Pale white, like the skin stretched over your bones
Spring keeps you ever close, you are second-hand smoke
You are so fragile and thin, standing trial for your sins
Holding onto yourself the best you can
You are the smell before rain, you are the blood in my veins

January 2021-forever

Ilya is hosting a New Year's Party for the team.

He tells them it's only fair, because he was forced to go to two different Thanksgiving events and a couple of Christmas parties and he celebrates none of them, but Shane can tell it's more than that.

It's an offering—it's a promise to the Centaurs that he's not here just for one season, but that he really intends to stay, help them get the Cup and then some.

Shane also thinks that it's, maybe, a promise to him.

He hopes.

"You all come—I have a big house, too big for just me, help me fill it up, okay?" Ilya had said, and it was to the whole team, sure, but he'd been looking right at Shane when he'd said it.

It sent Shane down a research spiral, to learn more about Russian New Year, what he could expect, what he should bring. But it also made him think, long and hard, about what *he* wants.

He’s been holding on to so much anger since Ilya married Svetlana.

There’s a part of him that knows he needed that anger to carry him through—to help him survive the lack of support from Montreal after coming out, help him change teams and start again from scratch.

He also needed the anger because if he let himself hurt, let himself *really* feel the loss, he wouldn't have had room for anything else—not even hockey.

But Ilya's finally explained why he got married, and he got a divorce, and he came to Ottawa *to play with Shane*. To be here with Shane.

Shane just needs to decide if he's going to trust it, if he's finally going to put the anger down and reach out and take what he's pretty sure is on offer instead.

He thinks New Year's Eve is a good day to do it. He wants to start 2021 finally looking forward, and not just looking behind and aching.

He wants to start it with Ilya.

So here he is, standing outside Ilya's house in the bitter cold of New Year's Eve and holding a glass container of *pryaniki*. He found the recipe for the Russian spice cookies while googling what he could bring, and it seemed achievable.

It wasn't—he ruined four different batches and went through about five YouTube tutorials before managing the one's he's brought tonight, and part of him is still a little scared Ilya will take one bite and spit them out, but.

Well. He wanted to do something more than bringing a bottle of wine or vodka.

Wanted to *offer* something, the same way Ilya was offering something by having them over to his house. Shane knew he hadn't really done that, in Boston, at least not in all the time they'd been together, and he was pretty sure it hadn't changed afterwards.

The door opens before he can ring the bell, and Ilya's ushering him inside.

"Why are you out here in the cold, Hollander?" he says, shaking his head. "Look at your poor freckles, they must be frozen."

"So you only care that my freckles aren't cold?" Shane asks, smiling a bit.

"Sure, they're my favorite," Ilya replies with a shrug.

"Favorite what?"

"Just favorite," Ilya says. He seems to realize Shane is carrying a container, and frowns a little. "What is that? If you brought your weird bird food…"

Shane snorts out a laugh.

Hayden would die if he knew just how often his opinions match Ilya's—he makes a note to mention it, next time they talk, just to hear his offended squawk.

"No, I promised I'd only eat Russian food tonight, remember? It's, um. It's *pryaniki*? I'm not sure if I made them right, but I followed the recipe exactly," Shane says, offering the

container closer for Ilya's inspection. He doesn't mention he'd followed it five times, of course.

Ilya stares at him, slightly open-mouthed.

"Is—is it okay I brought something? Was I not supposed to?" Shane asks, tentatively, as the silence lengthens. "I did some research about Russian New Year's, but it didn't say—"

"It's perfect, Shane," Ilya interrupts, putting a hand over one of Shane's where he's holding the container. With his other hand, shaking just slightly, he takes one of the cookies and bites into it. He makes a soft *hmmm* sound that Shane feels in his chest. "They're perfect."

"I'm. I'm glad," Shane says softly. "If you have a plate we can put them out for the whole team, or…"

"Or," Ilya says, decisively. "Want them just for me. Maybe you get one, too, if you're good. But just one, yes?"

"I made them, you asshole," Shane complains, but he's laughing, feeling so incredibly pleased that Ilya likes what he brought.

The doorbell rings, then, and Shane sees that Ilya is a little torn between opening it and potentially having to surrender the cookies, so he waves him off and goes to open himself.

It's Harris and Troy, and they look confused for just a split second before Harris gives a small, knowing nod, as if it makes perfect sense for Shane to be opening Ilya's door.

And it hits Shane, with the deepest, most acute longing—that's what he wants.

To always open Ilya's door, to be so much a part of his life and his house that it's what everyone learns to expect.

He can't let go of the thought for the rest of the party, even as the entire team arrives and they drink and they eat copious amounts of food and Bood decides he wants to lead them in some sort of communal "Russian" dance that has Ilya literally howling with laughter.

Much later in the night, after Ilya distributes sparklers and herds them all to the backyard, he sidles up next to Shane.

"You okay?" he asks softly. "You seem a bit. Distracted."

And Shane looks at him, the way the intermittent light of the sparklers reflects off his beautiful face, and he wants him so much it feels like all the years of his life he's spent wanting Ilya Rozanov are only a drop in the ocean.

"Can I stay here tonight? After everyone leaves, I mean," Shane says.

Ilya's eyes go a little molten.

"Yes. Yes, of course," he says.

Which means Shane is even *more* distracted for the rest of the night.

Eventually, Ilya herds the final Centaurs out—Dykstra, which isn't a surprise, and Haas, which is—and Shane starts picking up dirty plates and glasses and taking them to the kitchen.

"Hollander, you don't have to do that," Ilya tells him, when he comes back from the entrance hall.

"It's okay, I won't take long," Shane says, scraping food off some of the plates into the organic waste basket before opening the faucet—he wants to soak them a bit before they go into the dishwasher

He feels the heat of Ilya behind him before he hears him, and his breath catches in his throat when Ilya grabs him by the hips.

"But *I* want to take long," Ilya whispers in his ear. "I want to take forever."

Shane shuts his eyes, lets his head drop back and rest on Ilya's shoulder.

"Fuck, Ilya," he says. He's immediately hard, his dick straining against his pants, and he can feel Ilya's dick like a line of heat against his ass.

Ilya starts kissing the side of his neck, one of his hands moving from Shane's hip up to his side, and then to his chest, squeezing it hard.

Shane moans, he can't help himself, and suddenly it's not enough—he needs to grab on to Ilya, needs to be facing him. Needs to make sure this is real.

So he turns in Ilya's arms and grabs onto his shoulders, hard, and leans in to kiss him.

Ilya brings a hand up to Shane's jaw before their lips can connect and just stares at him, eyes such a deep blue-green that Shane feels like he's drowning in them.

"Shane," Ilya says, a little reverent and a little like *he* needs to make sure this is real, too.

Shane nods slightly and it seems to be reassurance enough for Ilya, who finally lets their lips meet, the kiss immediately deep and overpowering.

Shane feels electric, like every single nerve ending in his body is suddenly awake after years of sleep. He runs his hands across Ilya's strong shoulders, his perfect back, up to his hair and holds on, his mind a litany of *Ilya, Ilya, Ilya*.

God, he missed this.

He knew he had, and yet, with Ilya back in his arms, Shane realizes just how much he was compartmentalizing—realizes that he missed him so much more than he let himself feel, because if he had, he wouldn't have been able to fucking *move*.

Ilya pulls back just slightly and Shane can see tears in the corners of his eyes.

"Shane, I'm so sorry," he says, and it sounds solemn as a confession. "I'm so sorry for not waiting, for marrying Svetlana, for—for all the time we lost."

Shane brings a hand up to his face, runs his thumb gently across the sharp cheekbone. He's so heartbreakingly beautiful, so achingly *open*.

"I have an idea," Shane tells him, his private New Year's resolution bright in his mind. "We just—we agree to forgive each other. To let go. To just. Let ourselves have this, have a future, without always feeling like we need to say sorry about the past."

"This is what you want? A future with me?" Ilya asks.

Shane takes a deep breath, lets it out. "I want it more than I've ever wanted anything," he says, and means it.

He has two Cups—he wants more, of course.

And still, he'd give them up if it meant having Ilya and call it a bargain.

Ilya grabs his face with both hands and kisses him again, even more deeply.

"Shane, I need to fuck you. I need to be inside you," Ilya says against Shane's lips.

Shane nods and Ilya steps back, taking him by the hand and leading him through the house and towards his bedroom. It's a miracle they don't break any furniture or themselves—they keep stopping every few steps and kissing, Ilya grabbing Shane's ass, Shane gripping his arms.

They slow down once they're in the bedroom, though, and they undress looking at each other.

Shane suddenly thinks of the very first time—Ilya undressing on the bed, Shane standing in front of him, Ilya telling him he wanted to see him. It feels a little bit like that, suddenly—like it's brand new all over again. It's only been two years, but it feels so much longer.

Ilya steps close once he's naked and takes Shane's jeans from him, folds them carefully over the side of a chair, and, fuck.

It would be really stupid to cry over folded jeans right now. So Shane pushes Ilya back gently until he's on the bed and lets himself *look*.

Ilya's body is familiar—he's traced every muscle and joint, kissed nearly every inch of the skin stretched across them—but there are a couple of new scars he's never seen before, and it makes him furious, suddenly, the idea that he isn't the person who knows the body below him best.

"It's yours, Shane," Ilya says, in response to whatever his face is doing. "I'm yours."

And Shane has to lean down and kiss him about it, getting lost in the heat of their mouths and tongues.

Ilya's hips are moving against his, almost helplessly, and after a few minutes Ilya curses and flips them so he's on top, a possessive hand gripping Shane's thighs hard and opening them so he can fit between them.

"I'm going to fuck you now," he says, leaning across the bed to fumble open the bedside drawer and taking out a few condoms.

Shane had forgotten—or tried to forget, anyway, to stay somewhat sane—just how it felt, to have the full force of Ilya Rozanov's attention, how it felt to have his fingers inside him, the hot grip of his hands on Shane's ass, the nearly unbearable pleasure of his dick inside Shane.

"Fuck, *Shane*. You're so tight," he says.

Shane can't reply, lost in the sensation, his hips meeting Ilya movement for movement as the rhythm builds and builds.

Shane feels like he could spend the rest of his life exactly like this, being fucked to within an inch of his life by Ilya Rozanov.

Neither of them last long—it's been too long, it's too much—and Ilya collapses on top of Shane, his weight warm and reassuring.

Shane runs a hand softly through Ilya's curls, for once not caring about the sweat or the stickiness between them. It's a reminder that this is happening, that it's not one more painful dream he's going to wake up from.

"Was it okay? Are you okay?" Ilya asks into Shane's chest, one of his hands running gently up and down Shane's left hip.

Shane sits up just slightly, moves his hand from Ilya's hair to his chin to coax his face up, meeting his eyes.

"It was perfect," he says. "You were perfect."

He leans in for a soft kiss, trying to put everything he's feeling into it.

"*Ya tebya lyublyu,*" Ilya whispers into the narrow space between their lips, his voice shaking a little.

"God, Ilya, I love you, too," Shane says, because he does. Because he has for such a long fucking time now.

"You—you speak Russian now?" Ilya asks, pulling back a bit, his eyes wide and surprised. He looks so much like he had when he asked Shane that question years ago that it feels like time is collapsing into itself.

"Not really, not, um. Properly," Shane replies. "But I tried to learn a bit, over the last few years. I wanted—I wanted to understand some of the things you'd said to me, back when… you know. It felt—it felt like maybe it could help me understand."

Understand why Ilya had chosen him, all those years ago, but also why he'd pulled back and then pushed forward, over and over again.

Shane had felt, as he'd struggled through Duolingo during longer plane rides, that maybe he could find a word or a phrase, *something* that Ilya had accidentally said to him in Russian in all the years they'd spent together, that could make them make sense.

He'd hoped, too, that if they made sense, Shane could finally somehow let them go, let *Ilya* go—stop wishing for something that would never happen.

But he hadn't found it, or hadn't remembered right, anyway, and all that had happened is that he had a new way to miss Ilya Rozanov every time the stupid Duolingo owl harassed him to do a lesson. So he deleted the app.

Ilya looks at him so tenderly it makes Shane's heart start racing.

"*Moya lyubov*," he says softly. "I didn't dare say what you meant to me, back then. Not even in Russian. You are—you are everything. Air I breathe, blood in my veins. Everything."

Shane swallows and he feels his eyes grow hot with tears.

"You're everything, too," he says.

He leans in to kiss Ilya again, and that's how they greet the new year—and the rest of their lives.

End Notes

Well, here I go with my first fic in this fandom and as usual my brain went "hey, how about we make it a little worse?".

SORRY, and thank you so much for reading! Fic is rebloggable here in case you feel like sharing <3

Works inspired by this one

Cover for the boy who blocked his own shot by alasse by Strangemagpie

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