

(We Could Be) Something Great

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(We Could Be) Something Great

by Anonymous

Summary

Hockey is a rough sport. Everyone knows that. You go down, you get back up. That's the game. When Ilya Rozanov goes down on the ice, the Boston Bears are already moving to defend their captain. No one expects Shane Hollander, captain of the Montreal Voyageurs, to be the one who throws the first punch.

Ilya Rozanov loved playing against Shane Hollander almost as much as he loved fucking him.

Not that anyone in the arena would ever know that—not with the way Ilya drove Shane shoulder-first into the boards now. His weight crashed in behind him a moment later, pinning him there as the plexiglass shuddered from the impact. The vibration climbed all the way up Ilya's arms and rattled against his *teeth*.

Shane's breath left him in a sharp burst of white, fogging across the glass where his visor pressed flush against it. His mouth fell open on a broken sound that never quite escaped, swallowed whole by the crowd as they surged to their feet, hungry and gleeful as they turned toward the collision. Ilya felt it anyway. Felt the way Shane's body tensed first, instinct flaring hot and defensive, then yielded when recognition set in. When his body understood exactly *who* had him pinned to the boards.

Ilya felt Shane's spine arch, ribs expanding under the pressure of his forearm, a helpless, involuntary offering that sent something low and dangerous coiling tight in Ilya's gut. For a heartbeat, the world narrowed to that single point of contact. Blades biting into the ice. Pads creaking beneath the fabric of their opposing jerseys—eighty-one and twenty-four. Shane was unyielding even when he was pinned, even when his weight subtly pressed back instead of away.

Ilya stayed there a fraction too long. Long enough to memorize the exact moment Shane's resistance softened without ever breaking. Long enough to feel the way Shane leaned into him, like a promise instead of a warning.

Somewhere in the crowd, the cameras whined as they zoomed in, greedy to catch the moment for the viewers at home. In the booths, surrounded by those same unblinking lenses that caught every possible angle of the collision, Ilya knew the commentators had already leaned forward in their comfortable chairs. He knew they would already be dissecting yet *another* brutal meeting between the captains of the Montreal Voyageurs and the Boston Bears.

“Oh—Rozanov's been hunting that matchup all night,” one of the commentators said, delighted. “The captains of these two teams have a long history of rivalry on the ice. Hardly surprising to find them—”

“It's a clean hit,” the other commentator cut in. “Hollander's not known for losing his head, but Rozanov has a way of getting under even the most level-headed guy's skin. You can feel the tension every time these two share the ice—neither one of them ever backs down.”

“Hell of a show they're putting on for us tonight.”

But on the ice, none of that mattered.

The boards were bleeding cold through the layers of their padding, seeping into Shane's shoulder, his ribs, his spine. Ilya could feel him shivering. The crowd was still on its feet, a wall of sound that blurred the edges of everything else, but the heat between them ignored it

completely. Ilya's body kept Shane pressed to the boards, unyielding even as helmets knocked together, cages scraping with a thin metallic rasp that felt far too intimate for how hard they were supposed to be hitting.

It almost—almost—landed like a kiss when Shane twisted, trying to throw him off. Ilya felt every taut line of Shane's body straining beneath him, muscles coiled and familiar in a way that loosened something dangerous in his chest even as they fought for possession over the puck.

Ilya leaned in, just enough that Shane could feel his breath through the vents of his helmet. He smiled where only Shane could see it. "You skate slow today, *captain*," he murmured, his accent thicker, softer. "Maybe tired from last night." His grin turned sharp. "Should I take it easy on you?"

Shane huffed a laugh that scraped out of him, rough and breathless. His shoulders shifted, instinctively angling closer even as the linesman started toward them. "Fuck off, Rozanov," he muttered, dragging in a sharp breath through clenched teeth.

The sound went straight through Ilya. And before he could stop himself, his gloved hand slid to Shane's hip and squeezed—hard. Something reckless and private pressed into the narrow space between their pads and the noise and the regulation rules they both lived by. It shouldn't have meant anything to anyone who noticed the touch lingered too long. It was for balance. It was instinct. A dozen excuses flared and died in Ilya's head, because—fuck it—he wanted Shane closer. Wanted to lean in and kiss him stupid, right there against the glass. Wanted the world to finally understand what it was cheering for.

Shane Hollander was *his*.

Ilya knew his touch was too possessive. He knew he should probably pull back, create distance, or the *illusion* of it. But his fingers dug in harder instead, lingering too close to something that could never be explained away as incidental contact.

Shane's dark eyes snapped up, catching Ilya's, sharp and furious and lit with something that made Ilya's pulse stutter, like he'd misjudging a step and felt the drop a heartbeat too late.

"Make me," Ilya murmured, the words soft behind his grin.

Then he slammed Shane back into the plexiglass again—just to feel it. The jolt. The way Shane's body reacted before his pride could catch up. The involuntary sound punched out of him as their skates stuttered beneath them, blades biting and chattering against the ice as the puck bounced uselessly between their skates.

Shane's grunt slid low in his throat, a sound he only made when he was fighting for something he refused to lose. And all Ilya could think of—hot and unbidden—was *last night*. This exact angle. This exact body. This exact resistance that wasn't resistance at all.

Only it had been skin between them instead of gear. Hands instead of gloves. The heat of Shane's breath breaking apart under him. The way Shane's thighs had trembled as Ilya took his cock into his mouth. The way Shane had clung to him, arching into every thrust like he

couldn't help it. The way Shane had looked half-wrecked on the sheets, breath caught high in his throat, eyes glassy with need. The way Shane had glanced over his shoulder like he knew exactly what he was asking for.

One of the best fucking players of their generation, of the entire fucking the league, mouth falling open around Ilya's name—the sound bitten off, swallowed, dragged back up with a sob and a moan. Whispering, "*Harder, please—*"

Now—here—Shane grunted again, deeper, as he pushed against the glass. Dropped his weight. Braced all that coiled power through his thighs. His core twisted, already angling away—and then Shane broke free. Because of course he fucking did. He twisted out with the puck hooked onto his blade like it fucking belonged there, and then he was *gone*.

Ilya chased him. Because it was always like this. Shane pulling ahead. Ilya catching up. On the ice. In bed. In memory. In every goddamn way that had ever fucking mattered. So Ilya pushed himself harder—lungs burning, legs seizing as his skates carved deeper into the ice. Like if he dug in far enough, brutal enough, he could catch him. Like if he was fast enough, he could reach out and drag Shane under him the way he had last night.

He closed the gap in four hard strides, legs burning, lungs tight, stick sliding in from behind to lift Shane's clean off the puck with an arrogant little flick. The blade sang. The puck jumped. A sharp, vicious spark of triumph lit in Ilya's chest—*it's mine now*, he thought, *it's your turn to chase me, Hollander*—but the thought barely finished forming before Shane slammed back into him. Shane's hip crashed into his own, his shoulder driving into Ilya's ribs with all that careful control collapsing into pure impact.

The air ripped out of Ilya's lungs in a sound he couldn't stop.

"Too fucking slow," Shane breathed, low and pleased, close enough that Ilya felt it against his throat.

And then the puck was gone—*again*—and Shane was already spinning free, weight shifting like he'd planned it three moves ago. He was flying up the ice before Ilya could even swear properly, because Shane was the fastest skater in the league—even with his weak backhand. No one caught him unless Shane wanted them to.

But then—Shane glanced back, throwing a look over his shoulder that almost knocked Ilya flat on his arse. His dark eyes were bright under the cage, grin curling at the corner of his mouth.

"*You're doing this on purpose, pretty boy,*" Ilya hissed in Russian as he pushed off hard, legs screaming in protest as he tore after Shane. Because that look alone should have cost Shane Hollander a fucking penalty.

It was unsportsmanlike conduct, surely—intent to distract the opposing captain in the middle of a goddamn match. A calculated, illegal use of those eyelashes and that damn mouth, all of it tucked beneath the infuriating calm of Captain Hollander's near-perfect mask. The restraint was the crime. The composure. The way Shane kept his face neutral while his eyes kept

shining like that. It was a flagrant violation of Ilya's ability to think straight that he was almost impressed.

Almost.

"Fucking Hollander," someone barked from behind them, skates biting hard into the ice as bodies scrambled to close the gap, sticks slashing at empty space. But everything else had already dissolved into white noise. The boards rattling under the weight of the crowd. The jumbotron flashing their names in block letters, replaying the hit from three angles, slow and merciless, glass shuddering on impact. The other players lunged into the chase, legs pumping, breaths tearing out of them as they tried and failed to match Shane and Ilya's stride.

The puck slid ahead of Shane's stick. His stride lengthened, smooth and merciless, edges biting clean as he cut through the ice. He didn't look back. And that, more than anything else, made Ilya want to catch him. Get his teeth in him. Maybe bite him.

All Ilya could see was Shane. Shane. Shane. He was still pulling ahead, but all that perfect, practiced precision was gone now. This wasn't the pristine, textbook glide the analysts loved to freeze and break down frame by frame. He carved too deep into his turns, edges biting harder than necessary, shoulders dropped low as his jersey snapped wild behind him.

Shane Hollander was beautiful like this. No, really. He was so fucking beautiful that Ilya's breath kept snagging in his chest, sharp and useless. Because when Shane lost control, it wasn't a mistake. It was surrender. And Ilya loved him most right here. When Shane stopped pretending to be perfect. When he stopped hiding behind systems and structure and let himself *feel* it. When he skated like he wanted to burn the rink down to bare concrete. Like he didn't care who saw. Like he wasn't trying so damn hard to be calm and composed and acceptable anymore.

Like the cage he'd built around himself had finally cracked wide open.

And maybe Ilya should've seen it coming. Maybe he should've felt the warning of it under the skin. But that familiar instinct came too late. Because Cliff Marlow was coming in hot from the left, outside the narrow tunnel of Shane's vision as he cut hard toward Patrick Marleau defending the Boston's net in front of him.

Cliff always played like he was one bad decision away from suspension. Tonight was no different. His jaw was locked tight, grim, like he already knew was going to be a nasty hit as he aim toward Shane. From across the blue line, Gilbert Comeau saw it too. He turned sharply, blades cutting into the ice as he accelerated, eyes narrowed with all the telltale signs of a defenseman about to do something reckless.

There was no time to call out. And he wasn't supposed to anyway. They were opposite teams. Opposing captains. Enemies in every way that mattered on paper. But fuck—*Shane*. Ilya moved without thinking. Dropped his shoulder and drove into Shane from behind, harder than he meant to, hard enough to knock both of them off balance. The puck kicked free between their skates, sticks clashing, ice groaning beneath the sudden chaos. Shane staggered but stayed upright. Ilya caught himself a moment after—

And everything was fine. It *was*.

—until Comeau hit him at full speed.

The boards cracked as they collided, the sound sharp and sickening. Ilya had just enough time to angle his head away, to brace himself to take the hit along his side, hoping his pads would eat the worst of it. They didn't. White-hot pain tore through his ribs as his body folded and hit the ice. The impact drove the air clean out of him. He lay there, motionless, the lights overhead burning white and distant as black spots swam through his vision, the world spinning too wide, too slow.

Ilya blinked. Once. Twice.

Fucking Comeau.

His chest tried to pull air back in and failed, lungs stuttering uselessly, a sharp, panicked ache clawing up his throat. His fingers twitched inside his gloves, a small betrayal that proved he was still there even as his body refused to answer the rest of him. The ice leached cold straight through his pads, seeping into his ribs, his spine, anchoring him to the spot.

“Oh—” one of the commentators said, the word stretching thin and ugly. “Rozanov is down. He just didn't see that hit coming.”

The replay hadn't even finished when the other commentator cut in. “That was a truly nasty hit by Comeau. Rozanov didn't even have possession.”

“And Rozanov is—still down. He's not moving. Play's been halted,” the other commentator went on, softer now, reverent in that way commentators got when something turned serious. “Even Hollander looks concerned. Say what you will about their rivalry, but there's a lot of admiration between these players.” A pause, weighted. “Hollander's a regular recipient of sportsmanship awards—he's known for playing a fair game.”

“Yeah. That hit isn't going to sit well with him,” the other commentator said. “Especially coming from one of his own players.”

On the ice, everything felt suddenly too loud and too far away.

Ilya tried to breathe. He dragged in a shallow breath through clenched teeth. His ears were still ringing, a high, needling whine that made the world feel thin and wrong. He didn't try to move. Not yet. Maybe the ice would numb the pain in his ribs enough for his body to sort itself out, take inventory, decide whether this was real damage or just the echo of impact still burning through him. Maybe he just needed one moment to figure out if he'd broken or just bruised his ribs, then he could—

“Fucking asshole,” Comeau's voice came from above him, smug and low. Ilya's head lolled to the side. Comeau was skating backward just so he could look down at Ilya on the ice, smirk curling around a split lip, blood already staining his teeth. “Stay down where you fucking belong, bitch.”

The ice pressed cold and unforgiving against Ilya's cheek as he tried to say *fuck you*. It came out in Russian. Or maybe it was just another sound his body tore loose without permission.

It was a dirty hit. Probably illegal.

The Boston crowd certainly seemed to think so, boos rolling in thick and angry even as Montreal fans cheered, laughing at the sight of Ilya Rozanov sprawled on the ice—laid out by one of their own. But it was an away game. Ilya hadn't expected mercy. And the ref was from Montreal too, so there was no arm in the air, no whistle cutting clean through the noise, no pause to let him breathe. Not that he'd expected one.

A sound ripped through the air then, low and guttural—more roar than word—as Cliff barreled toward Comeau, skates carving deep. A flash of red and black to Ilya's right signaled Bred Carmichael and Ryan Hammersmith already vaulting over the boards, the Bears' response as automatic as it was instinctive, inevitable.

Everyone in the league knew hockey was a brutal game. They all got their bell rung sooner or later. They learned to live with the knowledge that a career-ending injury waited out there on the open ice. And—*fuck*. Ilya had been hit a hundred times before. He'd been hit a hundred times worse than this, and he knew how to breathe through it. Slow in. Slower out. Let the pain settle instead of fighting it. Let the body catch up. Let the world slide back into place.

He knew how to push himself upright before anyone thought to worry. Before the medics leaned forward on the bench. Before the crowd went quiet in that particular way that meant sympathy instead of bloodlust. Because hockey players always got back up. They were either born stubborn or trained into it. Conditioned to bleed quietly. To hide injuries beneath tape pulled too tight, to play through the pain just to stay off the bench. Just to stay on the ice where they belonged.

But the world wouldn't steady. It just—kept spinning. Or maybe it had flown off its fucking axis entirely, and no amount of controlled breathing could drag it back. Ilya's vision stuttered, blinking black at the edges, the rink warping and tilting like bad ice under his skates.

He just needed a second.

Just one fucking second.

Then he'd get up and punch Comeau himself. Because everyone expected Comeau to get hit by *someone*. You didn't take out one of the Bears. You definitely didn't take out Ilya fucking Rozanov, captain of the Boston Bears, without someone dropping their gloves.

But no one expected it to be Shane Hollander. Captain of the Montreal Voyageurs.

The whistle came too late to stop him.

Ilya felt it before he really saw it. The way the air shifted. The way the sound in the building spiked sharp and wrong, panic threading through the noise on the ice like a crack running through glass. His vision was still smeared at the edges, pulse thundering in his ears, but he

knew that body language. Knew that posture. Knew the exact way Shane moved when something inside him finally tore loose.

Shane crossed the ice in three brutal strides. There was no hesitation. No checking with the refs for a penalty to be called. No thought for the consequences that would come after. Just heat and momentum and a fury Ilya had only ever seen aimed at himself.

Shane came to a stop with one glove fisted in Comeau's jersey, the other slamming into his jaw with a sick, meaty crack. Comeau didn't even have time to square up. His head snapped sideways, the smug curve of his mouth erased in an instant. His body staggered, skates tangling on nothing, and then he went down hard—collapsing in a messy sprawl not far from where Ilya still lay, the breath punched out of him.

Comeau stared up at his captain standing over him, eyes wide and shining with something that looked a lot like betrayal.

“What the fuck is your problem, Comeau?” Shane snarled. The words seemed torn out of him, raw and unmeasured, ripped loose by the sight of Ilya still on the ice. And his eyes—fuck, his eyes—were *burning*.

“*Fuck*—did Hollander just hit one of his own players?” One of the commentators blurted out, the words tumbling out before he could stop them.

There was a beat of stunned silence. Then the other commentator, voice dry and strained, trying desperately to grab control of something already gone, said: “I’m—not sure we’re allowed to swear on air, Dave.”

“Who gives a fuck about that?” Dave snapped, all composure gone now. “Shane Hollander just hit his own player!”

On the ice, everything had fractured.

Hands grabbed at Shane from behind as Voyageurs linesmen surged in, gloves locking around his arms, fingers biting into his jersey. Skates scraped uselessly as they tried to haul him back. Shane didn't fight them off. Didn't flail. Didn't thrash. He simply didn't move. His blades stayed locked to the ice like they'd been driven in. His body coiled tight, all the violence in him held back by something thinner than breath. His chest rose and fell hard, sharp pulls of air cutting against the mouthguard clenched between his teeth.

His eyes never left Comeau.

“Shane, man—c'mon,” one of the linesmen said, voice strained, pleading, but the words barely seemed to register.

“*No*.” Shane's voice came out low and cracked, and it hit Ilya like a blow to the chest.

He'd only ever heard Shane sound like that in the dark. Low and cracked. In bed, in *his* bed, when Shane's grip on control finally slipped and something raw broke through all his careful restraint. When his hands were on Ilya's hips, fingers digging in like he was afraid of losing

him. When his breath went hot and uneven at Ilya's throat, voice breaking around Ilya's name like it hurt to say it and worse not to. When the edge of fury tipped into something that felt dangerously close to hunger. When Shane sounded *afraid* of how much he wanted—and chose it anyway.

Now that sound tore through the rink, raw and un-contained. Laid bare for thirty thousand people who had no idea what they were hearing. It echoed off the boards, rang against the glass, cut straight through the noise and the rules and the lie of rivalry everyone else believed in. And still, somehow, unmistakably—*his*.

Shane Hollander was *his*. Every messy, unguarded version of him. His.

"You don't touch him," Shane said, quieter this time, and somehow worse for it. He spat his mouthguard into his hand, top lip curling back into a snarl that showed teeth. His chest heaved, breath shaking, eyes still locked on Comeau. "Not like that."

Comeau coughed blood onto the ice.

It sprayed dark against the white before he staggered, trying to get his feet under him, one glove pressed flat to his mouth as his blades slipped out from under him. "The *fuck* is wrong with you?" He spat at Shane, blood bubbling at the corner of his mouth. "You down that bad for Rozanov you're throwing punches for him now?" He laughed, wet and ugly. "Too fucking busy sitting on his *dick* to remember what team you play for, Hollander?"

Something inside Ilya jerked hard as the words ripped through the lower bowl. Through the ice. Through *him*. Anger surged up his chest, sudden and violent, and the world tilted—not from the hit, not from the ringing in his ears, but from hearing Shane's teammate talk to him like that. He tried to rise, because of out the two of them—Ilya was more prone to impulsive decisions, more likely to start a fight. And he was better at it, built for it, maybe. But his muscles misfired, his vision swam—

But Shane didn't flinch. He just hit Comeau again—faster this time, a little sloppier. The linesmen surged forward, but the sound of Shane's fist meeting Comeau's cheekbone landed first. Comeau crumpled back to the ice with a groan, limbs folding under him like they'd been cut loose.

"You're a fucking asshole," Shane snarled, finally stepping back. Not in restraint. Just recalibrating in that still, lethal way of his. His shoulders stayed coiled, his hands flexing like he wasn't finished yet. "Stay the fuck down before I put you there again," he spat over his shoulder.

Then Shane shoved past the linesmen.

He didn't head for the penalty box. Didn't look at the ref screaming from across the ice, whistle shrill and useless. Didn't look at coach Murdock on the Montreal bench, face white with fury, shouting his name like it might physically drag him back. No, Shane turned toward Ilya—and skated straight for him.

The Bears didn't stop him. Maybe they were too stunned to process what they were seeing. Montreal's bench surged to its feet in a wall of noise, voices overlapping each together—but no one moved to hold Shane back. The refs didn't touch him. His coach had gone from pale fury to red-faced apoplexy, veins standing out in his neck as he shouted himself hoarse.

For one suspended second, the entire arena seemed to inhale at once.

Then Shane dropped into a crouch beside Ilya on the ice.

He balanced on the blades of his skates, knees bent, gloved hands braced against his own thighs. He was close enough that Ilya could feel the heat rolling off him through layers of gear. Close enough to smell the sharp tang of sweat and cold air and adrenaline. Close enough that Shane's shadow fell over his face, blocking out the glare of the lights.

Ilya watched Shane's fingers curl against the pads, instinctive and restrained, like he was physically stopping himself from reaching out. Like every muscle in his body was screaming to touch, to check, to haul Ilya upright and into him. But he didn't. Because there were thousands of people watching. Red camera lights blinked as lenses zoomed in. Analysts murmuring urgently into headsets. The crowd humming with confusion. The whole game had stalled, frozen mid-play, but they were still live.

Ilya had never been good at pretending to care when he didn't. And none of the noise around them mattered right now. How could it? When Shane had chosen to come to him like this. Like they weren't on national television. Like it wasn't suicidal to care this much. And besides—Ilya was too distracted by Shane's thighs to pretend he cared about anything else right now.

Those thighs, his dazed brain supplied helpfully, *should be fucking illegal*.

The thought arrived fully formed, his mind latching onto it with single-minded focus as the ice melted into his jersey. Shane's thighs were thick and solid and so fucking unfair, hidden beneath the ugliest uniform in the league. And all Ilya could think about was how they'd look wrapped around his waist. How they'd feel, heavy and trembling under his hands. How he wanted to drag his teeth along the skin where those thighs met Shane's hips and leave bruises where no one else would ever see.

Shane shifted slightly, his weight rocking forward, and Ilya's pulse kicked hard in his throat. *Or maybe it's time we stopped hiding those marks*, he thought. *Maybe next time he'd press a bruise high enough on those thighs for Shane's entire fucking team to notice*.

"You good, Rozanov?" Shane asked, tugging one glove off with his teeth, then the other, eyes never leaving Ilya's face.

Ilya's mouth twitched into a grin as he dragged in a sharp breath. Yeah, his ribs were still screaming with every inhale, hot and insistent, but it didn't matter. Not when Shane was right here. Frowning down at him like Ilya was the only thing in the world that existed.

And yeah. Okay. Ilya could—probably—get up now. The dizziness had ebbed. The rink had stopped its sick tilt. The black spots had blinked out of his vision. He could hear the Montreal

crowd buzzing, unsettled. The Boston side was louder, cheering blood, chanting Shane's name like he belonged to them for one beautiful, traitorous moment.

But Ilya didn't move.

Because all he could see was Shane crouched in front of him. Shane with that fire still smoldering behind his eyes. Shane staying too close. Shane looking too concerned. Shane—who was *his* and no one fucking knew it. So yeah. Sue him. Maybe Ilya wanted the excuse to keep Shane right there, with him, just a little longer. Maybe he was tired of pretending he didn't want the world to know he was in love with Shane Hollander.

"Ilyusha," Shane said softly.

And Ilya smiled. It hit slow and crooked, unguarded, slipping free before he could stop it. "Miss me, *solnyshko*?" He murmured, voice low, pitched just for them. Just for this impossible moment, curled tight between danger and want.

Shane exhaled like something had just loosened in his chest. His lips twitched into a familiar, irritated line as he rolled his eyes. "You're such a dick," he muttered, but his voice was softer now. And his shoulders—finally—dropped. That rigid coil of worry unspooled just slightly beneath the weight of his gear and that perfect, practiced mask—cool command, clean lines, unshakable Captain Hollander—slid neatly back into place.

Ilya let him wear it. Let him have the illusion of that safety. It was okay. What *wasn't* okay was the moment Shane's hands left his thighs. The shift was subtle at first—his body angling to rise, hands bracing on the ice, legs tensing beneath those thick, beautiful thighs.

Then he started to push up, thighs flexing, heat pulling away, all that impossible closeness beginning to retreat—and it felt like a loss. Like absence. Like Ilya had made a mistake letting him retreat back behind that mask, even for a second.

Ilya's hand shot out before he thought it through, closing hard around Shane's the ankle of Shanes skate, the curve of the boot locking up beneath his grip. "Stay," he whispered.

Shane stilled—body locked mid-motion, breath caught somewhere between exasperation and hesitation.

"I am dying, no?" Ilya said, tilting his head with exaggerated pain. "You must defend me from the bloodthirsty pirates. That *is* your job, isn't it—captain?"

His smile curved slow and dangerous. All teeth beneath the lazy drawl as he tugged on Shane's skate—not hard, but enough that Shane huffed. A breath punched out of Shane like a laugh he didn't want anyone to hear, and he dropped down onto the ice beside Ilya with a shake of his head.

This time, Shane stayed. Sat there. One leg bent. His left skate pressed firm against the outside of Ilya's thigh, the contact deliberate and unmistakable. Heat bled through fabric and padding, the kind that would linger later. The kind that would follow them both down the

tunnel, into separate locker rooms, clinging to skin while they pretended nothing had happened.

“Hm.” Ilya let his eyes fall shut. Just for a second. Just to feel it. “Better.”

“Keep those eyes open, Rozanov,” Shane said quickly. “You close them, they’ll call concussion protocol,” he muttered, tone rough with forced casualness. “They’ll bench you. Which—fine. I hear the bench is pretty comfortable this time of year. Lots of warm towels. No pirates.” His words were light. But his voice cracked at the edges.

And Ilya—God, Ilya could feel how close Shane had come to a panic attack. Could taste it in the air between them. A Montreal jersey in a sea of Boston red. One gloved hand still resting on the ice near Ilya’s, like Shane couldn’t bring himself to pull away. And Ilya stayed where he was, spine against the ice, body aching, pulse too fast—but smiling. Eyes open now. Watching *him*.

“You looked so good out there,” Ilya murmured in Russian, the words rough and breathless as he dragged one arm over his eyes to block the overhead lights. They were too bright. They always were after a hit like that. *“Though maybe you should leave the fighting to me if either of us wants to get out of bed tomorrow.”*

“You know it’s not fair when you talk Russian to me,” Shane murmured.

“Hm,” Ilya agreed. Then, in English this time, he added: “You have no chance of benching me this season, Hollander.” His lips curved against his forearm. “Like fuck I’m letting you take the Stanley Cup home for a third year running.”

Shane snorted, the sound quick and helpless.

“Hollander!” Cliff called, his voice cutting across the ice as he skated the rest of the distance, eyes narrowed, brows drawn tight. “You realize you’re not supposed to hit your own players, right?”

Shane didn’t answer immediately, but his eyes flicked toward Comeau, who was now being hauled upright by Hayden Pike and J.J. Boozier—both of them visibly annoyed, though their scowls were leveled at Comeau, not Shane. At least, not yet.

Shane’s jaw flexed as he looked away, finally answering through gritted teeth. “It was a dirty fucking hit.”

“Dunno,” Victor St-Simon said, amusement curling in his voice as he glided to a stop. “I thought that hit of yours was pretty damn good.” His eyes dropped to Shane’s hand, his where his knuckles were already swelling. “That why you don’t get into scrums, Hollzy? Saving them until it really counts?” He snorted. “You’ve been holding out on us, man.”

Shane shot him a flat look, all deadpan. No heat. No apology.

Victor snorted again as he turned to Ilya. “You good, Rozy?”

“Hm. Yes,” Ilya said, though his fingers tightened subtly on the ankle of Shane’s skate—quiet, claiming. His body ached like hell, his pride was bleeding out somewhere near center ice, but he was content to stay right where he was. Laid out flat in front of thirty thousand people—but with Shane at his side, touching him. In the open. Even just this much, it was enough to keep him where he was.

Hayden came up next, shoulders squared like he was still ready to throw down. “What the fuck, man,” he barked as he reached Cliff’s side, eyes flicking from Shane to Ilya like his brain refused to accept what it was seeing. “Are we forgetting we *hate* him?”

The temperature dropped as the Boston’s players bristled in response, red jerseys tightening into a rough semicircle, sharp looks traded as shoulders rolled and gloves flexed. Maybe there *would* be a team fight after all. The kind everyone pretended wasn’t inevitable in games like this.

Shane sighed from where he sat in the middle of it. A single blue jersey surrounded by red, the C on his chest catching the light, glinting like a challenge. He didn’t blink. Didn’t rush to stand. Instead, he leaned back into Ilya’s hip. Like they didn’t all have blood in their mouths from clenching their teeth too hard.

“I’ve known him since I was seventeen,” Shane said, rolling his eyes.

“Eighteen,” Ilya interrupted from the ice, voice casual, almost bored—except it wasn’t. Not even close.

“I was seventeen,” Shane repeated flatly. “He was an old man who should’ve been sitting on the bench with Scott Hunter, if the three months between our birthdays counts for anything.”

There was a beat of silence.

Then Ilya huffed a laugh, sharp and pleased, and the tension around them didn’t ease so much as tilt.

“Look,” Shane went on, shrugging. “I’ve known him since before the Pirates. Before the draft. Before the fucking grudge match of the century.” He dragged a hand over the back of his neck, fingers catching in the damp hair beneath his helmet. “We’re friends. Fucking hell, he’s probably my best friend—”

“Rude,” Hayden muttered.

Shane shot him a narrowed look, jaw already setting, muscle jumping once beneath the skin. “We’ve been competing against each other for a fucking decade,” he said, voice climbing, then catching. “And everyone’s so lost in the rivalry narrative. In the story the media and the league built for us. Like it’s the only way this makes sense.” He swallowed. His chest hitched once before he could stop it. “They forget we’re allowed to like each other. That we’re allowed to be friends.”

The word *allowed* cracked—barely—on the way out. But Ilya felt it anyway. His hand tightened reflexively around Shane’s ankle, thumb pressing into the hard plastic of the skate

like he could physically anchor him there. Like he could keep the fracture in Shane's voice from spreading any deeper.

Friends, Ilya thought. They *were* friends, he supposed.

Friends who had fallen into bed the moment Shane turned eighteen, when Ilya's hands had trembled with how long he'd waited. When he'd asked "Is this okay?" again and again as he fucked into Shane for the first time, needing to hear it, needing permission even when it had already been given.

Friends who had spent four years finding each other whenever schedules and cities and locked hotel doors allowed it. Friends who sexted under different names and then over Skype when the desperation to be closer became too sharp to hold on their own. Friends who had spent the four years after that falling into a love so deep the rest of the world had stopped making sense entirely. Because how could a world that refused to accept them ever make any sense at all?

But sure, Ilya thought, his grip still firm. They were *friends*.

"And—fuck it," Shane went on, heat bleeding back in, anger easier to hold than anything else. "Comeau isn't even close to good enough to knock Rozanov on his ass." His jaw clenched so hard it clicked. "Fucking Comeau. Guy's an asshole anyway."

Hayden snorted, shaking his head. "No, really?" He rolled his eyes, exaggerated, but his gaze was still sharp. "Like I haven't spent all season trying to keep you two from fighting. Or one of your fights spilling onto the ice." His eyes flicked pointedly toward the red smear on the white. "Oh—wait."

"Fuck off," Shane said, already leaning further into Ilya.

Victor laughed under his breath. "Oh, this is gonna be fun," he murmured, grinning.

"You forget to tell us you were friends with *Hollander*, brother?" Cliff asked.

"Hm. No," Ilya murmured. "But he's mine—my friend, no?" His thumb brushed once, absent and grounding, across Shane's lower back. "And Shane didn't want the lines between personal and professional to, ah—what is the word?"

"Blurring," Shane said automatically. His breath caught just slightly on the word. "And that's not what I said." He shifted, spine straightening a fraction even as his weight stayed pressed into Ilya. "I just don't want anyone thinking they get to target us because they think it's part of the fucking game."

Ilya hummed, just enough to be felt where Shane leaned into him. His thumb stilled, then pressed more firmly, a quiet anchor. "People see what they want," he said, voice mild, almost bored. "They think rivalry means permission." He glanced up, eyes flicking once toward the ice, toward the smear of red and the other player's skating too close. "They forget we are still captains," he added. "Still the best in the league. Won all those awards, didn't we? Though I still won MVP this year."

Shane's shoulders eased a fraction at that, tension bleeding off in a way only Ilya ever seemed to notice. "Didn't win the Stanley cup last year though, did you? Or the year before." He snorted before he could stop himself, a short, breathy sound that scraped out of his chest. His knee nudged into Ilya's, a warning disguised as balance. "Jesus Christ," he muttered. "You can't help yourself."

Ilya's mouth curved, slow and smug, the kind of smile that only ever surfaced like this. "Is fact," he said mildly. "I help team. I help league. I help narrative."

"Their narrative," Shane shot back. He tipped his head, dark eyes cutting sideways, sharp with heat. "You still bring that up every time."

"Every time it is relevant," Ilya said, unbothered. His thumb drew a small, unconscious circle against Shane's back, grounding and possessive all at once. "Which is often."

Cliff made a low noise in the back of his throat. "You two are exhausting."

Victor grinned. "No, no. This is educational."

Shane inhaled, slow and controlled, like he was steadying himself before a faceoff. When he spoke again, his voice was lighter, teasing, but there was an edge under it. "You realize if you keep talking like that, someone's going to start asking questions."

Ilya leaned closer, just enough that only Shane could hear him over the room. "Let them," he murmured, accent softening around the words. "They ask wrong questions anyway."

Shane's jaw tightened. But Ilya's hand stayed exactly where it was, warm and solid at Shane's back, thumb pressed into the groove beside his spine like he was holding a place only the two of them knew existed. If anything, Shane's posture settled. Broader. Calmer. A wall.

"For fuck's sake, Shane," Hayden muttered, voice thick with exasperation. "We are not calling this—this blatant show of territorial bullshit—*professionalism*." He jabbed a finger toward Ilya's hand, which had very clearly found its way back to Shane's spine. "He's a Boston Bear."

"And?" Ilya said mildly.

"See!" Hayden snapped.

"Since when are *you* professional?" Shane shot back, one eyebrow lifting as he finally leaned away from Ilya, just enough to look at him. The space barely existed. "And your wife's from Boston. You don't get to pretend you hate the city like it personally wronged you." He paused, head tilting, something sly and pleased curving his mouth. "I'm telling Jackie you said that."

Hayden winced immediately. "Please don't."

Victor laughed outright this time, sharp and delighted. Cliff shook his head, amused, like this was exactly the kind of chaos he'd expected from putting all of them in the same open space.

And through it all, Ilya stayed exactly where he was, solid at Shane's back, thumb still warm against his spine. Saying *mine* in a language only Shane ever seemed to hear.

"*Shane*," Hayden groaned. "I thought we all agreed not to *acknowledge* you were friends with *him*."

Shane blinked, innocent. "I don't remember agreeing to that."

"For fuck's sake, Shane," Hayden muttered, voice thick with exasperation.

"This is fun," Ilya said, finally dropping his arm and grinning up at them all, teeth flashing. "We should stay here, listen to Hollander talk about what *great friends* we are, yes?"

"Fuck off," Shane muttered again, but his hand was already reaching out, fingers curling around Ilya's forearm. Firm. Familiar. He pulled without asking. "Come on. Sit up before your coach has a stroke."

Ilya groaned as he let himself be hauled upright, ribs flaring in protest, body complaining even as it leaned into the contact like it needed it more than air. "You usually say please before you start bossing me around," he muttered under his breath.

Shane didn't answer. Didn't even flinch.

His grip stayed exactly where it was, steady and unyielding, thumb pressing once against Ilya's skin like punctuation. But across from them, Cliff and Victor exchanged a look—the kind that said they understood just a little too much. And maybe Ilya felt a low thrill curl in his chest at the thought of being seen like that. Of people looking at them now and wondering what kind of history lived in the touches they'd never bothered to notice before.

Shane kept his grip on Ilya's arm as they rose together, only letting go when Ilya was steady on his skates. His voice dropped again—low, private. "You good to play with those ribs?" There was something in his eyes now—a tension not quite hidden. Like he didn't believe the answer he was about to get. Like it cost him something to even ask.

"*Da*," Ilya said, clearing his throat, voice catching in the space between languages. "Yes." He turned toward the Boston crowd, raising one gloved hand. And the arena *erupted* in a wall of sound. His name tearing from their throats as they watched him rise from the ice. They loved him harder for the blood. For staying down, then getting back up.

Shane stepped back. "Good," he said, voice low—almost gentle. "It's not as fun to beat the Bears if you're stuck on the bench." His gaze swept across Cliff, then Victor, meeting both their eyes like he wasn't even slightly sorry for the insult. There was no apology in his posture, no shame in the words that followed. Just a shrug. "Try and keep him on his feet this time, yeah?" He added, and Ilya had to bite down on a grin, the edge of it threatening to split his already bruised mouth.

Victor snorted, and Cliff rolled his eyes, but neither of them argued. The tension cracked a little, enough to let the air shift around them. Not relief exactly, but something close. Something temporary. Then Hayden cursed—low, sharp—and grabbed a fistful of Shane's

jersey, yanking him toward their bench like a misbehaving rookie instead of the goddamn captain of the Montreal Voyageurs.

“You’re a fucking menace,” Hayden muttered under his breath. “We’ve *talked* about this, Shane—”

But Shane wasn’t listening.

Not really.

His eyes had already flicked back—just once—over his shoulder. Back to where Ilya still stood, soaked in the roar of the crowd, lit up by the floodlights like something mythic. Ilya grinned at him—wide, reckless, far too pleased with himself—and called out, loud enough to carry.

“Don’t be jealous, Pike,” Ilya called after them, voice dripping with mock sympathy, “You’ll find a man who fights for you someday.”

Hayden’s head snapped back with a glare, and Shane—God, Shane—almost tripped under the pull of Hayden’s fist. It was nothing anyone else would notice, unless they were looking for it. Not unless they knew how precisely Shane usually moved, how easily his body read the ice, how instinct and momentum rarely ever fought for dominance in him. But Ilya caught that tiny, dangerous pause. The way Shane’s shoulders shifted like he might turn. Like the tension in his jersey was the only thing tugging him backward. Like some reckless part of him wanted to go the other way entirely.

Ilya’s pulse kicked, sharp and stupid. His hand tightened at his side before he caught himself, fingers curling hard enough that his glove creaked. For a breathless instant, the space between them stretched thin as ice under too much weight, a fragile, dangerous span that could split if either of them moved wrong.

Then Shane recovered. Of course he did.

His skates bit clean again. Edges sharp. Posture snapping back into place like nothing had ever faltered. Captain. Controlled. Unshakeable. He didn’t look back, letting Hayden drag him the rest of the way toward the Montreal bench, jaw set, spine straight, like the moment hadn’t almost tipped him off balance.

Coach Murdock was already shouting—red-faced and furious, gesturing wildly between Shane and Ilya like he couldn’t decide which one had betrayed him more. The Montreal bench was tight with motion, bodies leaning forward, eyes narrowed, gloves yanked off and shoved back on. Confusion bleeding into frustration, into something close to panic.

Ilya barely registered it. He didn’t care about Shane’s coach, or the glares, or even about the fallout they were both about to drown in—the speculation already loading itself into the mouths of every reporter with a mic waiting in the tunnels. All Ilya cared about was the way Shane’s head had turned. The way those eyes had found him. Locked. Held. Like Ilya was the only thing on the ice worth watching. Like the rest of it—the game, the crowd, the rules—was static.

“What the fuck just happened?” Victor muttered, leaning into his stick with his arms crossed over the shaft, chin resting on the taped top. His eyes stayed locked on Shane as he was hauled away, something unreadable flickering there—surprise, maybe, or admiration he hadn’t decided how to feel about yet.

Ilya laughed.

The sound came out too loud even under the roar of the crowd, jagged at the edges like it hadn’t asked permission. His mouth curled—teeth flashing beneath something messier than a smile, something too bright, too wild, too real to smooth into a smirk. And, okay—maybe his ribs ached. Maybe the pain curled in with every breath, humming low in his lungs like it was waiting for him to slip, to give it an excuse to bite deeper. But he moved anyway. Slow. Methodical. Arms twisting side to side, shoulders rolling as he tested the damage with the careful precision of someone who knew exactly how much he could take.

He he didn’t look away from Shane Hollander.

Ilya didn’t give the ice, the bench, or the watching world even a fraction of his attention. “The next time Comeau’s on the ice,” he said calmly, almost sweetly, voice pitched just loud enough to carry, “I’m going to put him into the boards so hard he forgets which team he plays for. And when he finally remembers how to breathe again,” his grin sharpened, dangerous and bright, “when he tries to get up—because he will—I’ll make sure he can’t.”

Victor choked on a snort, shaking his head like he couldn’t believe any of this was real. “Oh my god,” he muttered, half-laughing. “Even your threats sound like Hollander’s now.” He pitched his voice into a terrible impression of Ilya’s Russian accent. “Stay the fuck down before I put you there again.”

Ilya smirked, no heat behind it. But something glittered in his eyes—something possessive. He bumped Victor’s stick with his own. “Careful,” he said, gaze flicking to Shane. “You make fun of him too much, and I’ll have to start defending *his* honor, too.” His grin pulled wider, teeth flashing. “I don’t like to share my *friends*. Especially not Hollander.”

Victor blinked. And yeah—he laughed, because that was the safest option. But something in his posture shifted, just slightly. The weight of meaning in the air now was different. Not heavy, not yet—but enough to draw a line. Enough to make him wonder if maybe he hadn’t been joking about Hollander after all.

Victor raised his brows, one sharp and skeptical. “Christ,” he muttered, almost under his breath. “You’re both gonna get me killed.”

Cliff, finally breaking his silence, snorted. “We’re just gonna brush past what Hollander did out here?”

“Yes,” Ilya said, clean and immediate, his gaze still locked across the ice like the rest of them weren’t even there. “We are.”

Victor hummed, low in his throat, thoughtful. His eyes hadn’t left Shane, either—who had slipped into the penalty box with his head ducked low, shoulders tight, bruised knuckles

twitching on his thighs like his body still hadn't calmed down, like his fists were still echoing with the contact. Alone. No protest. No words. No glance toward his team.

Victor watched him for a beat longer, eyes narrowing like he was lining up pieces that didn't quite want to fit. Then he spoke, slow, thoughtful. "Okay," he said. "But I gotta say—Hollander has no right looking that fucking hot when he fights." He rolled his eyes, exaggerated. "Someone needs to tell him this is hockey, not a fucking GQ cover."

Ilya's stick darted sideways without warning, cracking hard into Victor's. Sharp enough to jolt him off balance, but not quite enough to count as a check.

"*Fuck—*" Victor swore, grip slipping as his skates scraped for purchase.

But Ilya just grinned—sharp and smooth—every inch of him composed now, like the last few minutes hadn't burned through him under stadium lights and thirty thousand eyes. Like his ribs didn't throb. Like his lungs weren't still clawing for air. Like Shane Hollander hadn't just chosen *him* in front of the whole fucking world.

"Come," Ilya said as the whistle screamed again, shrill and insistent, snapping the moment clean in half. "We have Pirates to beat, no?" He nodded toward the Boston bench only then, turning as his teammates surged in around him. Gloves slapped his back. Someone laughed. Someone yelled his name like he'd earned it. Their coach waved him over with short, clipped gestures, jaw tight, a storm brewing behind his eyes. The team medic was already waiting, hands gloved, gaze sharp and searching.

"I'm fine," Ilya said as he drifted toward the divider, that same unbothered grace clinging to him even now. One gloved hand braced against the boards, weight leaning forward just enough that the contact grounded him. "Just winded."

"That was a dirty hit," Coach LeClaire muttered, eyes never leaving Ilya, like he didn't trust him not to fold the second he looked away.

Ilya shrugged, easy. "Clean enough."

"Yeah," Ryan Carmichael said quietly. He'd shifted forward on his stick, elbows resting on his knees at the edge of the bench. His gaze was still out on the ice, unfocused, like he was replaying it in his head frame by frame. "And that was one hell of a hit from Hollander, too."

Ilya's smile didn't change. But something warm and dangerous curled low in his chest all the same. He followed Ryan's line of sight, just for a second. Across the ice. To where Shane sat on the Montreal side of the penalty box, helmet still on, jaw set, eyes bright and furious and alive. He looked like caged light. Contained violence. All that heat locked behind glass.

"Yes," Ilya said mildly. "Though his backhand is still weak."

Ryan snorted. "Good thing his punch isn't, then," he said. "Fuck, did you see how Comeau went down?" He whistled, low and appreciative, like he was still feeling the echo of it in his own bones.

Ilya hummed, barely audible. His grip tightened on his stick, knuckles firm beneath the tape. “*Da*,” he murmured, because yes, of course he’d fucking seen it. He always saw Shane.

“Right,” LeClaire said. “The refs aren’t gonna wait for you to recover, but they’re resetting the ice. You good enough to play, Rozanov?”

“*Da*,” Ilya said again, already rolling his shoulders, already feeling his breath steady.

“Okay.” LeClaire nodded once. “Hollander’s gonna be back out there. No way Murdock misses the chance to use his best asset tonight, not with tensions already this high.” He paused, eyes narrowing slightly as he looked Ilya over. “You good to play against him? We’re down by two points, and Hollander’ll be off the ice until the penalty clock sends him back out. That gives us, what? Fifteen minutes to even the score.”

His mouth twisted, sharp and knowing. “That’s enough time for you to score a hat trick, right? Because you know damn well Hollander’s gonna come back rested and ready to claw every one of those points back for fuckin’ Montreal.” LeClaire muttered something under his breath then, sharp and sour, something that sounded suspiciously like, “Fuckin’ Murdock. We should’ve snapped Hollander up when we had the chance—kid’s wasted on that shitty team.”

Ilya rolled his eyes, a flicker of teeth flashing beneath his smile. “Always,” he said, a little mulish despite himself. Because this—this exact reaction—was why Shane was always so careful. Why they kept everything closeted where no one could reach in and use their relationship against them. “Besides,” Ilya added, tapping the blade of his stick once against the ice, the sound clean and decisive, “I don’t need fifteen minutes. Is plenty of time to score, yes?”

LeClaire snorted despite himself. “Cocky bastard.”

Ilya’s mouth curved, brief and unapologetic. Because this was the part he was built for. The noise. The eyes. The pressure curling tight in his chest. The knowledge of Shane Hollander sitting in the penalty box, coiled and counting the seconds.

“Hockey is good,” Ilya said lightly. “But boring if he’s not there to stop me.”

Cliff barked out a laugh from farther down the bench. Someone clapped Ilya’s shoulder, hard enough to jolt him forward. The medic stepped back, satisfied, already turning away. Across the ice, Shane still hadn’t looked over. The whistle screamed again, shrill and demanding. And Ilya pushed off the divider, muscles aching, ready to meet Shane again when the clock ran out.

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