

I'd Choose Us Every Time

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/78304181) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/78304181>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid , Heated Rivalry (TV)
Relationship:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Shane Hollander , Ilya Rozanov , Ottawa Centaurs Team Ensemble (Game Changers) , Ottawa Centaurs WAGs Ensemble (Game Changers)
Additional Tags:	Spoilers for Book 6: The Long Game (Game Changers) , Emotional Hurt/Comfort , Retelling , Light Angst , lots of fluff , Shane Hollander Loves Ilya Rozanov , Ilya Rozanov Loves Shane Hollander , Shane decides to be brave , Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence , The Centaurs are the best , Supportive Ottawa Centaurs (Game Changers) , Minor hint at suicidal thoughts , it's very brief , this is mostly just fluff , Coming Out , Soft launching Hollanov , Team as Family , Found Family
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of What if... Shane didn't leave after the argument on Boxing Day
Collections:	HR
Stats:	Published: 2026-01-25 Words: 7,538 Chapters: 1/1

I'd Choose Us Every Time

by [Ihaveaskedyouthrice](#)

Summary

“What is this?” Ilya asked.

“Ah.” Shane couldn’t quite meet his eyes as a faint blush crept across his cheeks. “Well, I wasn’t sure what the dress code would be for the party, so I laid out some options for us.”

Ilya’s heart fucking stopped.

“The... what is this, what is happening?” Ilya asked, wanting to be sure that he understood correctly.

Shane’s blush intensified as he gave Ilya a small, unsure smile.

“I don’t know Boodram very well, so I had to guess what the vibe would be. You were... you were in the shower for a long time and I was feeling anxious so I... Sorry, it’s so stupid but I just wanted to... I don’t know, show you I’m in?”

Or, what if Shane didn't leave after their fight on Boxing Day?

Notes

What's this, a non-text fic?!

I love The Long Game, it is a strong contender for my favourite book of all time. With that in mind, this is not a "fix it" because I don't think it needs fixing, but I couldn't stop thinking about how things might have been different if Shane hadn't left after their fight on Boxing day, and this was the result. Thanks to [Silver_Snippets](#) for hyping me up and cheer reading this! You should definitely go and check out her excellent memory loss fic - Take It Slow, Take It Easy On Me

This has not been beta read, so if anyone notices any glaring mistakes please let me know!

Title is from Carry You Home by Alex Warren.

My writer policies can be found on my profile.

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

“Go Home,” Ilya said. “Please.” Then he turned and walked quickly upstairs.

The ringing in Shane’s ears was deafening, but it was not enough to stop Ilya’s words from repeating on a loop in his head.

I already chose you, Hollander.

He flinched as a door slammed upstairs, the sound going through him like a physical blow. His body felt wrong, blood too hot, skin too tight, head caught up in an overwhelming jumble of confusion, anger and shame. Mostly shame.

He had fucked up.

Somewhere along the way he had missed something important. He had known for a while that something was wrong with Ilya, but he hadn’t guessed there was something wrong with *them*. He wasn’t the most perceptive man in the world, but the thought that Ilya had been hurting so badly without Shane noticing hollowed him out.

He couldn’t stop replaying Ilya’s expression before he had turned away. It was... broken. There was no other word for it. And Shane had been the one to put it there. He knew the comment about losses had been a low blow, but he had been so confused and overwhelmed and he had lashed out. His gut churned as he rubbed his hands over his face before collapsing forwards against the kitchen island.

Shane knew three things for certain: (1) he loved Ilya and would choose him over anything else, (2) Ilya, for whatever reason, didn’t believe that, and (3) the lack of belief was unacceptable, so Shane was going to fix it.

He mentally replayed their conversation, then went back further over the times Ilya had seemed sad or distant lately. There was no real pattern that Shane could identify, except that Ilya seemed restless and tired of hiding. Shane was too, but Ilya seemed to feel it more acutely than he did, and shut down completely when Shane had suggested he get some help. Shane had tried to respect his request for space, trusting that Ilya would tell him what was wrong when he was ready, but space clearly hadn’t been helping. Which meant Shane certainly wasn’t going to give it to him now.

A party. Ilya wanted to take him to a party, and it clearly meant a lot to him. Shane had been so blindsided by the request that he hadn’t taken a moment to consider the guarded hope and naked fear that had been alternating in Ilya’s expression, or to think about what it meant for him to have asked. Ilya wanted them to do something normal together, something most other couples wouldn’t even think twice about, and Shane had been... dismissive. He didn’t think his reaction had been entirely unwarranted - going out together in public was not something they did unless it could plausibly be linked to their duties for the Irina Foundation - but he could see now that Ilya was reading Shane’s abundance of caution for lack of care. And Ilya certainly had a point about how Shane had more people he could speak to about them. Shane had, naively, thought that he and his parents were enough, but he tried to imagine dealing

with this secret without Rose or Hayden, and his stomach twisted into knots at the thought of the support Ilya was missing out on. It wasn't fair, and Shane knew it.

Shane's heart galloped as he pulled his phone from his pocket and opened Instagram. What he was planning was risky, but Ilya trusted his teammates and Shane trusted Ilya's judgement on social situations more than his own. If Ilya said it wouldn't be weird for him to bring Shane, then Shane would believe him. It was a little scary, but nothing compared to the thought of losing Ilya. Of hurting him any more than he already had.

He opened the app and found Boodram's profile. Before he could think too hard about it he typed out a message and pressed send.

Hey man, hope you're good. Sorry if it's weird to message out of the blue like this, but I'm home in Ottawa for the holidays and Ilya mentioned it would be cool if I come to yours with him. Just wanted to check if that's all okay with you? Shane.

To his surprise, Boodram responded straight away.

Shane Hollander! Of course, Roz mentioned he might be seeing you about Foundation stuff over the holidays and I told him to bring you if you're around! The more the merrier!

Well. That was easier than expected, and it had even been Boodram's idea. Fresh guilt surged through Shane, but he pushed it down. He needed to talk to his boyfriend, and figure out a way to fix what he had broken.

Ilya turned the water temperature in the shower up as hot as he could stand it. He needed something to ground him in his body, because he was at risk of floating away. Needed something to remind him he was alive when there was a small but insistent voice in his head telling him he didn't want to be. He knew it wasn't true, but it still terrified him.

He felt... empty, with an aching kind of numbness that seeped through his soul, lowering his defences against the ever present suspicion that his father had been right, and that he was in fact weak and worthless. That his boyfriend was ashamed of him, that their careers and the threat of Ilya not being able to return to Russia were just convenient excuses for a simpler fact: Shane simply didn't care as much as Ilya did.

Ilya knew he wasn't being entirely fair, but the slow breaking of his heart didn't allow much room for fairness. His movements were clumsy as he made his way out of the shower, like a puppet with someone else pulling the strings. He stared at the floor as he dried himself, determined not to risk looking in the mirror. It was probably steamed up, but he didn't want to catch even a glimpse of his own reflection. He couldn't stand the sight of himself.

He wrapped a towel around his waist before walking into his bedroom, thinking he might just go to bed. It was only 2.30pm, but he was exhausted in a way he knew, deep down, sleep wouldn't fix. It therefore took a few seconds for him to register the sight that greeted him in his room, and another few to believe it.

Shane was lying on the bed, typing something on his phone. He jumped to his feet when he saw Ilya, throwing his phone down in a very un-Shane like move, and just stared at Ilya with tears in his eyes.

Ilya was stunned. Shane was there. He hadn't left. Ilya's heart felt as though it was being squeezed in a vice as a surge of hurt, joy, anger and several other, less easily definable things rushed through him, overwhelming him. Against his will, Ilya's face crumpled and he dropped to his knees, body wracked by heaving sobs he couldn't contain.

"Ilya!" Shane half shouted as he crossed the space between them and dropped to the ground before pulling Ilya into his arms. "I'm so sorry, Ilya, so fucking sorry. I choose you, of course I do. I'd choose you - choose us - over anything, every time!" he cried, pressing kisses to Ilya's hair between words.

Ilya cried harder, eyes squeezed tightly together as he fell apart completely.

"I'm so sorry I ever made you doubt that you are the most important thing in my life. You are everything to me, *moy lyubimyy*," Shane whispered, voice cracking with emotion as he wrapped himself tightly around Ilya as though trying to fuse them together.

Ilya didn't know how long he stayed on the floor like that, releasing all of his pent up heartache as Shane rocked him and pressed kisses against every part of him he could reach while whispering endearments in a mixture of English and Russian.

Eventually, Ilya had no more tears left. He sat up and accepted the tissue that Shane handed him, using it to dry his face as he tried to summon the words he needed to say.

"You came back?" he asked, voice breaking on the last word.

"I never left. Ilya, I will never leave you, do you understand that?" said Shane, cupping Ilya's face. "Fuck, I am so sorry about what I said. I was being an asshole, of course I know what you've sacrificed for me."

Ilya sniffed as he finally met Shane's eyes. They were glassy with unshed tears of his own, and Ilya reached up to gently brush his thumb across Shane's cheek, words still mostly beyond him.

"You've been alone in this, I can see that now. I'm sorry I didn't see it before." Shane sounded so defeated, and Ilya couldn't stand the pain in his voice. It was enough for him to finally find his own.

"No, Shane that's not... I understand that I am not alone. I love your parents, and they support me as well as you. I know this."

"It's not the same as having friends who know."

Ilya gave him a small, sad smile, but pressed a kiss to his lips.

"I am glad you are here. I'm sorry I told you to leave. Thank you for not listening to me."

Shane stood and held out a hand to Ilya, who took it and pretended to need Shane's help getting to his feet. He looked around the room and noticed for the first time that there were two piles of clothes laid out on the bed, one made up of his own clothes and one of Shane's.

"What is this?" Ilya asked.

"Ah." Shane couldn't quite meet his eyes as a faint blush crept across his cheeks. "Well, I wasn't sure what the dress code would be for the party, so I laid out some options for us."

Ilya's heart fucking stopped.

"The... what is this, what is happening?" Ilya asked, wanting to be sure that he understood correctly.

Shane's blush intensified as he gave Ilya a small, unsure smile.

"I don't know Boodram very well, so I had to guess what the vibe would be. You were... you were in the shower for a long time and I was feeling anxious so I... Sorry, it's so stupid but I just wanted to... I don't know, show you I'm in?"

Ilya had Shane pinned against the wall in seconds, one hand next to Shane's head and the other cupping his jaw gently as he angled Shane's chin up and crashed their mouths together. It was sloppy and wet, but Ilya didn't care. Joy blossomed in his chest where before there had been emptiness, leaving Ilya feeling slightly giddy. He ran his tongue along the seam of Shane's lips, groaning as they parted and Shane kissed him back with the same intensity, as though trying to climb inside Ilya.

"You do not have to do this, Shane," gasped Ilya, momentarily breaking the kiss to say what needed to be said. "It was not fair of me to bring this up without warning. I do not want to pressure you to do something you are not comfortable with."

"I know I don't have to but I... I want to. The team means a lot to you, so I want to meet them," replied Shane, voice breathless as he chased Ilya's lips, trying to resume the kiss.

Instead of letting him, Ilya pressed open mouth kisses down Shane's neck, nibbling at the sensitive spot underneath his jaw and breathing in the scent of him, letting it ground him in a way the shower hadn't managed.

"I want to," Shane repeated, reminding Ilya that he hadn't actually replied when Shane had spoken before.

Ilya simply hummed, too overwhelmed to find the words to tell Shane what it meant to him that he wanted to meet his team.

"Plus," Shane gasped as Ilya nipped at his earlobe, "I already told Boodram I'll be there, so it will be weird if I don't go now."

Ilya pulled back and frowned slightly, going over Shane's words to make sure he had understood correctly.

“You... you spoke to Bood?” he asked.

Shane gave him another sheepish smile and nodded. “I messaged him on Instagram, just to check it’s definitely cool for me to crash the party.”

Ilya chuckled, because of course Shane would do that. Warmth spread through him at the fact that Shane was there, still with him despite Ilya’s attempt to push him away, and that he was trusting Ilya with this. Trusting Ilya’s friends with *them*, even if they weren’t going to share the full truth. It was still a start, and Ilya treasured it for the gift that it was.

“That... is very sexy,” whispered Ilya against Shane’s lips.

“What, me talking to Boodram?” Shane huffed.

Ilya smiled, pulling back slightly to admire the glazed look in Shane’s eyes as he pressed the evidence of just how sexy he found Shane’s actions against Shane’s stomach. “No, *moy lyubimyy*, well not exactly. Just... that you stayed. That you did this. It means...” Ilya trailed off, but he didn’t need to say anything else. Shane knew.

Shane trailed his hands down Ilya’s naked torso, brushing his fingers across Ilya’s stomach before wrapping them around his cock and giving a few gentle strokes, just enough to make Ilya groan.

“What time do we need to be at the party?” Shane asked, reaching out for the lube in the bedside table and squeezing some into his hand. Ilya saw stars as Shane resumed his stroking, words escaping him.

“Do we have time to spare, or do we need to leave now?” Shane insisted, letting go of Ilya and stepping to the side. His tone was serious, but Ilya recognised the teasing glint in his eyes as he took a step towards the pile of his own clothes he had laid out on the bed. With a growl, Ilya pounced on him, tackling him to the bed and pinning him there.

Shane smiled up at him, love shining from every pore as he cupped Ilya’s jaw. Ilya turned his head to the side and kissed the inside of his wrist. “The time is more of a suggestion,” he purred as he reached down between them and got to work showing Shane just how much it meant to him that he had stayed.

Shane picked at the skin around his thumb as he stood behind Ilya at Boodram’s front door. He felt weird, as though the space between his shoulder blades was buzzing. He had no idea what to expect, and no precedent for how he and Ilya should behave around each other here. Ilya had reassured him that the Centaurs would see this as nothing more than Ilya bringing a friend to a party, but Shane’s mind was racing trying to anticipate questions people might ask him and planning how he might respond to them. It was making him antsy, but one look at the delighted grin that Ilya shot him over his shoulder as the door opened was enough to remind Shane that this was worth it.

“Roz! Hollander! Good to see you guys, come on in!” Shouted Wyatt Hayes, stepping aside to let them pass.

“Hazy,” Ilya nodded and clapped Wyatt on the shoulder as he swept past, gesturing for Shane to follow him.

“Wyatt, hi, erm... thanks for having me.”

Wyatt laughed and Shane blushed as he realised he had just thanked someone who didn’t live there. Wyatt, however, just clapped him on the back and said “We’re all pretty stoked, not gonna lie.”

And that was it. No suspicious glances, no speculative whispers as they walked through the house, just cheerful greetings from people who promptly went back to their own conversations (apart from Luca Haas who choked on his drink when he saw Shane, but Ilya had already warned him the kid might be a bit star struck). It was... nice, but it also made Shane feel a bit strange. He couldn’t help but think about how his own team would react if Shane brought Ilya to a party, even just as friends. The Voyageurs did not hold up well in the comparison, but he pushed down the sadness threatening to grip him at the thought. Today was about meeting Ilya’s team, not fretting about his own.

Ilya was clearly familiar with the layout of Boodram’s house as he guided Shane through the spacious open plan kitchen and out onto a covered deck. Shane had been shocked when Ilya had casually mentioned that Boodram would be grilling, but he finally understood as he looked around the space. Heaters were spaced around the large decking area, their flames providing warm light to compliment the fairy lights weaved between the wooden beams of the roof that stretched across the entire space. There was a fire pit at the very edge of the deck, just beyond the reach of the roof, and assorted outdoor furniture in small clusters. A large table laden with food had been pushed up against the side of the house, and next to it Zane Boodram was standing at the fanciest grill Shane had ever seen.

“Bood, look who’s here!” shouted Wyatt, startling Shane who hadn’t realised the goalie had followed them.

“Shane Hollander, as I live and breathe!” shouted Bood, as he handed his grilling tongs to a rookie with a stern warning to watch but not touch.

“Bood, is very rude to ignore a guest! And I am much more interesting than Hollander!” cried Ilya as Bood shook Shane’s hand. Ilya winked at Shane before turning to pout at his team mate who pulled him into a bone crushing hug.

“Roz, hate to break it to you but Hollander is *way* more interesting than you right now!” laughed Bood, ignoring Ilya’s indignant huff as he turned his full attention back to Shane.

“Beers are in the fridge over there, and food is on the table. Grab a plate and help yourself!” Bood smiled warmly at him before turning back to the grill in time to see the rookie poking at something with the tongs.

Shane barely noticed the scolding Bood was giving the unfortunate kid as he turned to the table, anxiety forming like a knot in his throat. He was hungry, but hadn't even thought about whether or not he would be able to eat here. He really, really didn't have the energy to deal with Ilya quipping at him about his nutrition plan right now. Just as he was resigning himself to an evening spent ignoring his grumbling stomach, Ilya handed him a paper plate already full of food. He must have read the panic in Shane's expression, because his eyes softened.

"Is all food that you can eat. Some of the guys on the team follow plans, and Bood cooks for everyone, is not a big deal. And look," Ilya showed Shane his own plate, "I have the same." Ilya smiled at him and gestured to a small cluster of chairs around a table. "Let's go sit."

It took every last bit of self-control Shane had in him not to kiss Ilya then and there, audience be damned. His eyes stung slightly at the gesture, and he blinked rapidly to stop them from falling. He appreciated it more than he could say - not only the support, but the casual way in which Ilya anticipated what he needed and subtly assured Shane that others would not find his diet weird.

"Harris! How is Chiron?" Ilya shouted at an attractive blond man as they sat down. Shane noticed a beat too late that the man Ilya had greeted as Harris was not the only other person at the table, and Shane had accidentally sat down between Ilya and Troy fucking Barrett. Shane tensed up immediately at the sight of the man who, until recently, had been one of his least favourite players in the league.

Harris laughed, a loud, booming sound that distracted Shane from his discomfort.

"Chiron is great, Ilya, you don't need to worry about him. And I'm doing well too, thanks for asking!"

Ilya made a dismissive gesture as he leaned forwards and looked very seriously at Harris. "Did he have a good Christmas? I do not like to think he was lonely there."

Harris's eyes crinkled, but he leaned around Ilya to roll his eyes at Shane and extend his hand.

"Nice to meet you, I'm Harris."

"Shane," he replied, shaking the offered hand. Before he could think better of it, he continued "and I think what Ilya meant to ask was whether you had a nice Christmas?"

Harris cackled, Ilya huffed and there was even a snort that Shane suspected came from Barrett. Before Shane could fall back into discomfort at Barrett's proximity, Harris replied "No, he didn't, but it's fine I'm used to it. My Christmas was great, thanks, how was yours?"

The conversation flowed easily from there, and Shane would probably have relaxed into it - Harris was very easy to talk to - had it not been for the silent form of Troy Barrett sitting next to him. Shane tried to ignore the other man, who had so far not said a single word to him, and remind himself that Barrett was gay, and therefore probably not uncomfortable with Shane's sexuality, but it was difficult. He knew Barrett by reputation only, and up until recently his reputation was as a homophobic prick.

Ilya picked up on Shane's discomfort, and decided to address it in true Ilya style - by making it weird.

"Barrett, why are you not speaking? Are you speechless with how sexy I am?"

Harris, who had just taken a sip of cider, spat out his drink and promptly started choking. Ilya thumped him on the back while still staring pointedly at Barrett, a smug smile tugging at his lips.

"Ilya!" Shane scolded, because no matter how uncomfortable Barrett was making him, Shane did not approve of Ilya making Barrett uncomfortable in retaliation.

"What? Is common reaction, I am very sexy!" Ilya said, winking at Troy, then at Harris, who had his hand pressed over his mouth, whether because of the dripping cider or to stop himself from giggling, Shane couldn't tell. Barrett surprised Shane by scoffing.

"Please, you aren't even in the top two in this group."

Shane quickly turned to look at Barrett directly for the first time while Ilya roared with laughter. A flush was creeping up Barrett's neck and his eyes were wide as though he couldn't believe what he had just said.

"I mean," Barrett cleared his throat, took a sip of his own cider, shook his head and then turned to Shane. "Sorry for being rude. I'm Troy." He held out his hand, and Shane shook it. "Shane, nice to meet you," he said automatically.

"Is me you need to apologise to," said Ilya, wiping tears of mirth from his eyes, "for saying I am not sexy. It is a lie."

Troy looked as though he wanted the ground to swallow him up as Ilya and Harris started debating who was the sexiest in the group, so Shane took pity on him.

"How are you finding Ottawa?" he asked, taking the opportunity to scoot closer to Ilya while looking like he was simply trying to make more space for comfortable conversation with Troy.

"It's... very different from Toronto," said Barrett, not quite looking at Shane.

"Oh," replied Shane, unsure of what to say to that.

"In a good way," Troy said hurriedly, as though he didn't want Shane to misunderstand. Then he gave a short, humourless laugh before continuing. "Well, mostly good. It was nice playing for a team that, you know, actually won games, but I'd still rather be here. This team is better in the ways that matter."

Shane just stared at him as he processed the words. He couldn't imagine being okay with being on a team that lost all the time, but Toronto had a reputation for being horrible, and most of Shane's experiences with the team only confirmed it.

As though he could sense where Shane's thoughts had gone, Troy let out a long breath, clearly steeling himself to say something.

"Look... I'm..." he started, rubbing the back of his neck with the hand that wasn't holding his drink and looking extremely uncomfortable. He tried again. "I'm not proud of what I was like when I played for Toronto. I wish I could take it back, and I'm sorry."

Shane just stared at the floor between his own feet, unable to meet Troy's eyes. He honestly had no idea what to say to the man. Troy had never personally used any slurs against Shane, so it seemed odd that he would apologise to him directly.

The silence stretched, but Shane's mind was blank and he couldn't think of a single thing to say. Luckily, Ilya used his powers of perception for good this time and came to Shane's rescue. He stood, moving to stand between Shane and Troy, clapping Troy on the back.

"Ah, Barrett, you're here now and that is what matters. Barrett 2.0, new and improved."

Troy shot Ilya a grateful look, but Ilya had turned his attention back to Shane and didn't see it.

"Come on, Hollander, let's go see the fire pit."

An hour later, Shane couldn't believe how natural it felt hanging out with the Centaurs and their partners. He and Ilya had been waylaid on their way to the fire pit, chatting to various people who drifted over to them. Even Shane could tell that people were happy to see him, and not once did anyone say anything that would indicate they found his presence strange.

It also could not have been clearer to Shane that Ilya was loving every second of having him there. Ilya didn't seem to be able to stop grinning, and his eyes went soft every time he caught Shane laughing with one of his team mates. The giddy expression on Ilya's face was infectious, prompting a sappy smile from Shane every time he saw it.

It was probably obvious to anyone watching how they felt about each other. Shane had caught a look between Cassie and Lisa at one point, when Ilya had been entertaining everyone with his (terrible) impression of a loon and Shane couldn't stop himself from brushing his hip gently against Ilya's, causing Ilya to look down at him with what Hayden called Ilya's heart eyes. Shane had looked away, only to see the two women smile at each other with their eyebrows slightly raised. Shane didn't have time to panic before Lisa gave him a warm smile followed by a conspiratorial wink.

And that was it.

No snark, no judgement, no comments. Shane couldn't help but feel slightly jealous as he looked around the space and soaked in the easy friendship and obvious affection these people all felt for each other. He had been a Voyageur for over a decade, and had never seen his team act like this. He loved them, they were his brothers, but there was always an edge to the Voyageurs that made it hard to fully relax at team functions.

“What about you, Shane?” asked Cassie, snapping Shane out of the slightly depressing train of thought.

“Sorry, what was the question?” he asked, feeling his cheeks heating.

“Awwww Holzy’s so star struck by me that he lost track of the conversation!” joked Bood, which earned him a few chirps from the rest of the team, mostly asking him to remind them of his name and team.

“We were each saying what advice we would give our ten year old selves. Mine was to write things down! I’ve been keeping a pregnancy journal and I’m loving it, so I wish I had started sooner,” said Cassie, rubbing at the swell of her belly.

“Mine was to make time for friends and family,” said Lisa, smiling at Wyatt who squeezed her against his side. “I kind of lost track of a lot of people when I was in med school. I was so focused on doing well that it didn’t leave space for anything else in my life, which really wasn’t healthy.”

Shane smiled at her, and ignored the slight tugging sensation in his chest at her words.

Ilya gave him a soft smile, before saying “I said I would tell my ten year old self that it will all be worth it one day.”

Shane’s heart stuttered at the emotion in Ilya’s voice.

“And he declined to elaborate, which I think is cheating but I’ve been overruled,” complained Dykstra. Wyatt elbowed Dykstra gently as Dykstra’s wife, whose name Shane hadn’t caught and was now too embarrassed to ask for, rolled her eyes at him.

“No one has to elaborate if they don’t want to,” Cassie said, looking back at Shane for his answer.

While the scrutiny of a group he barely knew was not comfortable for Shane, it also wasn’t awful. He could feel, somewhere deep in his gut, that no one here felt any ill will towards him, and it was just a fun party topic. He took a moment to consider his answer, his mind still full of Ilya’s advice to his ten year old self.

“Give Hollander a break,” said Ilya, incorrectly interpreting Shane’s silence for unwillingness to answer, “I know his answer. Is to accept that he will only ever be the second greatest hockey player in the league.”

Ilya’s statement was greeted by a predictable chorus of chirps, so Shane waited for an opening to speak, heart pounding as he prepared to answer honestly.

“I would tell my ten year old self to recognise when it is time to be brave,” he said, glancing up at Ilya, then taking a small step closer and resting his hand against Ilya’s lower back.

Shane's touch froze Ilya to the spot, even as heat radiated through his whole body from the point of contact. Before anyone seemed to notice what Shane had done, Haas spoke, having joined the circle a few moments earlier.

"You seem very brave, H-Hollander," said Haas, but Ilya had no brain space left to enjoy how star struck his rookie was by his boyfriend, because all of his attention was on Shane. Shane, who still had his hand pressed against Ilya's lower back and was gently rubbing his thumb over the dip of Ilya's spine.

"Thanks, Luca, it's nice to meet you properly," said Shane, holding out the hand that wasn't touching Ilya for the rookie to shake.

"Um, I got this, for your drink," said Luca, holding out a small plate with a wedge of lime on it and flushing a brilliant shade of red. Ilya was too stunned by the fact that *Shane's hand was still on his back in front of his team* to comment on how adorably awkward Haas was being. Ilya made a mental note to do something nice for Haas at the next practice, which the kid would probably appreciate more than a chirp, anyway.

"Thanks, that's very nice of you," said Shane, taking the offered lime wedge and squeezing it into his sparkling water.

Haas blushed, if possible, even harder which set off a chorus of good natured ribbing from the rest of the group. Needing a moment alone with Shane, Ilya downed the rest of his coke then gestured to the others to show he was getting another drink. Catching Shane's eye, he tilted his head slightly to communicate that he wanted Shane to join him.

"Is everything okay?" asked Shane as soon as they were out of easy earshot of the others.

"I am fine, more than fine, but I want to be sure you are okay," Ilya replied in Russian. Shane frowned at the switch in languages, but replied almost instantly, eyes crinkling and freckles bunching as he smiled up at Ilya. If Ilya could see only that sight for the rest of his life he would die a happy man.

"I'm good. I am very glad I came here tonight," Shane said slowly as he took his time with the language he still wasn't completely familiar with. Ilya's stomach did a little swoop as his heart danced with happiness. He had thought about Shane meeting his team more often than was probably healthy over the past year or so, but it was going better than he had ever dared let himself imagine.

"They mean a lot to you?" said Shane, switching back to English and giving a subtle nod to the people behind them.

"Of course, the team is the best. We have great vibes."

"Do you trust them?" Shane asked, eyes flickering between Ilya and the decking area as he started wringing his hands together. Ilya wasn't sure exactly what was happening, but he could tell the question was important to Shane, so he answered it seriously.

"Yes. They are like third family, you know?"

“Third?” Shane asked, face scrunching into the confused expression Ilya loved so much.

“Yes. The first I lost when my mother died. Second is the one you gifted me. Third is one I found for myself, here with these people.”

Shane was silent for a few moments, so Ilya took the opportunity to grab a fresh coke from the fridge and pass Shane another bottle of sparkling water which he accepted with a distracted smile, clearly lost in thought. When he couldn’t stand it any longer, Ilya tapped his shoe against Shane’s, snapping his boyfriend out of whatever place his mind had taken him.

“Sorry, I was just thinking.”

“Looked like it was difficult for you,” jibed Ilya, because he couldn’t resist.

“Fuck off, asshole,” said Shane through a fond smile.

“What were you thinking, *moy zanaves*?” It was a testament to how distracted Shane was that he didn’t even try to work out the meaning of the random noun Ilya had used.

“Do you trust them with us?” Shane asked quietly after a few more moments of silence.

Ilya couldn’t stop his eyes from rolling at that, assuming that Shane was freaking out over the causal touch he displayed. They had been at the edge of the group, with their backs facing the fence, so Ilya highly doubted anyone would have noticed, and he was sure no one present would care even if they had. “Relax Hollander, they are not going to figure it out. They know we are friends, and I am very physical with the people I care about. Is not a big deal, okay?”

To Ilya’s surprise, Shane huffed impatiently at him.

“That's not what I asked, Ilya. Would you trust them to know about us?”

For the second time that day, Ilya’s heart fucking stopped. He stared at Shane, whose eyes were glassy and flickering between Ilya’s own eyes and his lips, as though he couldn’t quite maintain eye contact but didn’t want to look too far away.

“Yes. I know they would be safe, and I know they would guard our secret. But, sweetheart, we do not have to tell them. It means so much to me that you are here, I do not expect anything.”

Shane took a deep breath and squared his shoulders as he met Ilya’s gaze and held it.

“I can’t say anything to my ten year old self, but I can take the advice I would give him. It is time to be brave,” said Shane, smiling and weaving his fingers through Ilya’s before stepping backwards and pulling Ilya back towards the party.

Fifteen minutes later, Ilya was still largely speechless but, despite his inability to form words, he was practically glowing with happiness. Shane had sat them down on one of the low sofas surrounding the fire pit and, in full view of Harris, Troy, Wyatt and Lisa, snuggled into Ilya’s side, keeping their fingers intertwined. No one had commented, but everyone apart from Troy

had looked surprised, and Ilya had been amusing himself by trying to decide who would be the first to break and ask them about it.

Ilya was not surprised when it was Harris. He had been watching his friend practically vibrate with the need to ask questions, and couldn't help but laugh as he interrupted Wyatt's detailed explanation about an upcoming superhero movie that no one other than Lisa seemed to be interested in.

"Sooooo," said Harris, leaning backwards and spreading his arms across the back of the sofa, "Ilya, I have a question."

Wyatt shot him a scowl, but otherwise didn't comment on the interruption.

"Of course, Harris. I am very wise and sexy, I will be happy to answer your questions."

Ilya yelped as Shane poked him in the side.

"See! There, right there!" shouted Harris, pointing between Ilya and Shane. "My question is this: did you or did you not attend this party with Shane to soft launch your relationship to the team?"

Ilya snorted, then forced a frown as he looked down at Shane, faking ignorance of the phrase to let Shane decide how to respond. "'Soft launch', what is this?"

Shane tilted his head back into the crook of Ilya's shoulder to smile up at him. "Harris is asking if this is our way of telling the team we are together."

"Ah, okay," said Ilya, fighting the urge to kiss Shane's freckles. He gave Shane's hand a little squeeze, hoping to communicate that it was up to Shane how much they would tell. A small part of Ilya wanted to keep messing with the team, but mostly he was excited to possibly tell them. It had to be Shane's decision, though.

"Yes," said Shane, which was met with silence. Ilya looked around and laughed at the fact that Harris' question had drawn the attention of every other person present.

"Just to be clear," said Wyatt slowly, "yes what?"

"Yes, Ilya and I are together. Have been for years."

Ilya thought he might burst with happiness. Not only at telling the team, but at the bold, unapologetic way Shane claimed him in front of everyone.

By Ilya's count, the stunned silence lasted for five seconds before Troy wolf whistled, triggering a chorus of whoops and cheers from the rest of the people crowding around the small fire pit. Predictably, Ilya and Shane were then hit with a barrage of questions from all directions.

"Wait a minute," laughed Ilya, holding up a hand and trying to use his captain's voice to bring some order to the proceedings, "you can each ask us one question tonight, so choose wisely."

There was a great deal of muttering as the team conferred, but Ilya wasn't listening. Instead, he was smiling down at Shane who was looking much more relaxed than Ilya would have guessed after coming out to the team.

"Are you ok?" he asked, kissing Shane's temple because he could now.

Shane's answering smile was dazzling.

"They cheered, Ilya. They actually cheered for us!"

"Of course they did, sweetheart. This team is the best."

Shane looked like he was going to say something, but at that moment Wyatt, to Ilya's great amusement, put his hand up as though he had been elected speaker for the group. Ilya nodded at his goalie, squeezing Shane tighter against his side.

"Okay, first of all, we all want to say that we support you, your secret is safe with us and we are thrilled for you guys."

Another chorus of cheers rang out, causing Shane to bury his face in Ilya's chest.

"That being said, and again I am speaking for all of us, what the fuck?" Wyatt's eyes were crinkled with a smile, taking any sting out of the words. Not that Ilya would have interpreted them as anything other than surprised, but Shane didn't know these people as well as Ilya did so Ilya was grateful for the clear body language.

"Is that your question," asked Shane, amusement plain in his voice.

"No. My question is, how long has this been going on for?"

Ilya decided to take that one.

"We have been in a committed relationship for three years. Before then it is more difficult to explain."

"Three years... So, Hollander, we've got you to thank for Roz transferring to Ottawa and becoming our problem?" said Bood, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

Shane shrugged and said "Yeah, sorry." He didn't sound even slightly sorry, and Ilya pressed another kiss to the top of his head.

"You guys are so fucking cute, how did no one see this before?" said Harris.

"People are stupid," said Ilya, "and that was a waste of a question, Harris."

"No! That wasn't my question!" wailed Harris.

"Too late," grinned Ilya, "you asked and I answered. It counts."

Harris slumped back in his chair, and Barrett immediately leaned in to whisper something to him. Ilya would bet a lot of money that Barrett was offering to ask Harris's question for him. Sure enough, after a quick conversation, Barrett sat forwards.

"Does anyone else know?" he asked, shooting a questioning glance at Harris, who nodded encouragingly before turning to poke his tongue out at Ilya.

"Only my parents, Hayden and Rose," said Shane.

"Rose Landry? Isn't she your ex?" asked Dykstra.

"She is," said Shane, slowly, "but to borrow Ilya's favourite phrase, I'm super gay so we were never going to be compatible. We are good friends, though."

Dykstra let out a long whistle through his teeth. "Yeah, I mean if you can't make it work with her, then you are definitely gay," he said, earning himself an elbow to the ribs and quiet chastisement from Caitlin.

"So the Voyageurs don't know? Except Pike?" asked Haas in a quiet voice.

"No," said Shane, voice slightly clipped.

"And we do not want them to know yet. Or anyone else, okay?" Ilya said, staring at each of them in turn until they nodded.

"Of course, Roz, we got you!" said Bood, to nods and general sounds of agreement from the rest of the team.

"Is there anything we can do to support you?" asked Lisa, peering at them intently.

"Honestly, just having you guys be so nice about it is enough," said Shane. "We've kept this secret for so long... it made it easy to believe that no one would accept us, you know?"

"Of course we accept you!" said Cassie, as though the suggestion that they might have done anything else was offensive. "Okay, my question now. Do you have a plan for telling the world about your relationship?"

Ilya opened his mouth to answer, but Shane beat him to it.

"Our only real plan at the moment is to keep going as we have been. It sucks, but we don't think most people would take the news as well as you guys have. We don't want to jeopardize our careers, and we need to be careful since Ilya is Russian."

Ilya just nodded, reveling in the fact that their plan to continue hiding didn't feel as heavy now that Ilya's friends knew. The silence that followed Shane's words was loaded with sadness on their behalf.

"Shane, can we add you to the Centaurs WAGs group chat?" asked Caitlin suddenly, breaking the tension.

“THAT is your question?” Dykstra blurted out before Shane could answer.

“YOURS was about Rose Landry, so get off your high horse, mister!” she replied, rolling her eyes and looking expectantly at Shane.

“Um, thanks, but I-”

“No pressure,” Caitlin cut in, “but the offer stands if you want to!”

“Can I ask another question if it is not about your relationship?” asked Haas, his quiet voice almost getting lost in the general boisterous energy that had fallen on the group.

Ilya barked out a laugh. “No, Haas, you were only allowed one question about anything for the whole evening.” Ilya cupped one hand around his mouth, “That goes for all of you. No more questions about anything for the whole night!”

“Ilya!” chastised Shane, as Bood and Dykstra fell about laughing. Haas, to Ilya’s surprise, smirked at him.

“This is why Hollander is my favourite hockey player.”

“What!” shouted Ilya, actually a little offended, “Haasy, you do not mean it. Tell them you do not mean it!”

“No, Hollander is my favourite.”

Ilya grumbled indistinctly as Haas asked Shane a question about his wrist shot that Ilya could absolutely have answered better, but he couldn’t keep it up for long. He was too happy to be grumpy about anything, and seeing his team embrace Shane warmed his heart.

The conversation moved on after that, and Ilya basked in the good feelings that came from snuggling with his boyfriend at a party, surrounded by people he cared about. It felt amazing to have his friends know about and accept them, but it was the trust that Shane placed in him, and in his team, as well as the certainty that it represented, that made Ilya feel as though a heavy weight had been lifted from his chest.

Shane chose him, and Ilya could finally breathe again.

End Notes

I do not speak Russian, but I believe the translation for the nonsense pet name Ilya calls him here is "my curtain".

Thank you so much for reading, I hope you enjoyed it! 😊

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!